

Triple Consciousness in Jasmine Murrell's *Immortal Uterus*

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Jasmine Murrell's *Immortal Uterus* (2010–17) is a site-specific sculptural installation constructed from thousands of yards of VHS tape hand-woven into sheets. Murrell affixes the sheets, like skin, onto a wire skeleton that is connected to the ceiling. Because of the mutable nature of the wire foundation, the work takes on a different form each time it is installed. The iteration in *Between Nothingness and Infinity* occupied a volume measuring twenty by twenty square feet from floor to ceiling, making it the largest work in the exhibition. A massive, shimmering, black, amorphous sculptural presence, *Immortal Uterus* entices viewers to enter its cavernous environment. Inside, among forms resembling stalactites and stalagmites, funnel-like protrusions enclosing speakers play a soundtrack of a woman speaking in monologue while soft blue lights permeate the space. *Immortal Uterus* is a totalizing, immersive experience in which the viewer moves through a massive, anonymous black womb, as though entering another world.

Murrell created *Immortal Uterus* as a “gesture of experience”¹ that describes the inexorable burden that has historically faced black women. She drew upon W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of “double consciousness” for inspiration in re-creating a fragmented self-awareness. Du Bois, the scholar, poet, and civil rights activist, initially introduced this concept in an article in *The Atlantic* entitled “Strivings of the Negro People” (1897). Republished six years later in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the article articulated the division of identity Du Bois saw as inherent to the black American experience. He defined double consciousness as:

[A] peculiar sensation [. . .], this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world

that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—
an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;
two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it
from being torn asunder.²

Du Bois set up a theory of a bifurcated self-consciousness defined by race and nationality. One consequence of this fragmentation is the impossibility of perceiving oneself as a whole being, simultaneously possessing colored skin and belonging to a historically white culture. “The tape of a world,” with which Du Bois’s black subject is measured according to cultural standards of whiteness, is a perspective that equates blackness with “otherness” by pointing out and problematizing difference.

In the wake of Du Bois’s articulation of double consciousness, various scholars have used his framework to describe the psychosocial effects of racism. Several writers have expanded the idea of double consciousness into “triple consciousness” by introducing another factor of identity, whether it be gender, sexuality, class, or ethnicity.³ Artist Jasmine Murrell employs triple consciousness in *Immortal Uterus* by evoking the uniquely fraught experience of being black, American, and female.

In the early 2000s, Murrell became fascinated by the story of Henrietta Lacks, a black woman whose cervical cancer cells were used without her permission to create the first “immortalized cell line” in the 1950s. Subsequently, doctors and drug companies used her cells to make vaccines for polio and in other medical breakthroughs that earned them millions of dollars in profit. Sadly, neither Lacks nor her family ever earned a penny from the use of her stolen cells.

Murrell specifically chose to include the word ‘immortal’ in the title to reference Lacks’ immortal cell lines and to illuminate the reality that the backbone of the American capitalist system is often the black body. Similarly, Murrell’s decision to use VHS tape as her primary

medium is a nod to the exploitation of black women in film. She views Hollywood as the main source of myth-making about both blackness and femininity; it has both propagated the gaze of white male directors and upheld white privilege. *Immortal Uterus*' massive black womb symbolizes a reclamation of elements of black female sexuality that have historically been exploited for profit. Murrell aimed to capture this texture of oppression in her work—she sees the installation like a jazz improvisation, its irrational, erratic, illogical form and structure reflecting the complex burden of blackness that is passed down through generations, via the womb.

Around the same time she learned of Henrietta Lacks' story, Murrell began taking trips to Ethiopia where she learned the craft of weaving from local women. She then taught the skill to her friends and colleagues in the United States including members of the Yams Collective, who assisted her in weaving the VHS tape sheets for *Immortal Uterus*.⁴ She also worked with professional women weavers in South America to assist in the creation of hundreds of VHS sheets. To honor the process of the making of the uterus, Murrell conducted interviews with some of the women who helped create the sculpture. One of these recorded interviews, with a young Ethiopian woman who had spent time in the United States, played in the sound pod portion of *Immortal Uterus* for *Between Nothingness and Infinity*. The recording recounts her experience of displacement and loss of self when immigrating to the U.S. Although not religious in her home country, while living abroad she was overwhelmed by the vapid and sensationalism of American culture, which prompted her to turn back to her native religion. Although in the installation the woman remains nameless and is present only via her voice, the autobiographical nature of the monologue serves to concretize the abstracted experience of being

within *Immortal Uterus*. It is a reminder of the real women who both physically constructed the artwork and whose stories are represented by it.

Although *Immortal Uterus* primarily confronts issues of blackness, it is important to the artist that her installation also speaks to a broad audience. When one stands within *Immortal Uterus*, listening to the woman's monologue emanating from its black folds, one can imagine being inside a womb and hearing the voice of a mother figure. A soft blue light penetrates the near-darkness as though one is far beneath the surface of an interior realm. The outside world fades away inside the contours of the space. The experience happens in partial consciousness—inside the womb, one cannot see its boundaries and so experiences it as a totalizing environment, while from the outside one perceives the structure as an art object in relation to the rest of the exhibition.

In *Immortal Uterus* Murrell positions the viewer within the triple consciousness of black subjects like Henrietta Lacks. She does this by creating a phenomenological experience of sensory perception, emotive response, and intellectual analysis. The impossibility of seeing the uterus *and* being inside it simultaneously leads to an uncertainty of perception and a constant oscillation between sensing and cognition. The *Immortal Uterus* is an enigma that seduces the viewer into the lived experience of an othered female body. Immersed in the shiny black film of Murrell's undulating cavern, one can feel the potentiality, fertility, and creative force of the sculptural womb.

¹ Allison Littrell, phone interview with Jasmine Murrell, Los Angeles, March 29, 2018.

² Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999, 2.

³ For example, post-colonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Cuban poet Regino Pedroso, among others, have used this term.

⁴ HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? Is a collective of artists, writers, composers, academics, filmmakers and performers from around the world who collaborate across disciplines and cities.