"I Had A Weird Dream:" *Atlanta* and Afro-Surrealism as Alternative Narrativization

By Emily Scroggins

ABSTRACT

Characterized by a feeling of unease, weirdness, or outright absurdity, the television show *Atlanta* utilizes Afro-Surrealist storytelling to depict everyday experiences of minoritized individuals. By relying on the extraordinary, Afro-Surrealism emphasizes the unusualness of Black lives in the United States and highlights the limitations of narrative in representing the voices and stories of marginalized individuals. These limitations have pushed media makers to adopt alternative narratives for those who cannot identify with traditional televisual narratives.

Keywords: Television, Narrative, Afro-Surrealism, Alternative Storytelling

"Tuve un sueño extraño:" Atlanta y el afrosurrealismo como narrativa alternativa

RESUMEN

Caracterizado por una sensación de inquietud, rareza o absurdo absoluto, el programa de televisión Atlanta utiliza la narración afrosurrealista para representar las experiencias cotidianas de las personas minoritarias. Al basarse en lo extraordinario, el afrosurrealismo enfatiza lo inusual de la vida de los negros en los Estados Unidos y destaca las limitaciones de la narrativa para representar las voces y las historias de las

personas marginadas. Estas limitaciones han empujado a los creadores de medios a adoptar narrativas alternativas para aquellos que no pueden identificarse con las narrativas televisivas tradicionales.

Palabras clave: Televisión, Narrativa, Afro-Surrealismo, Narrativa Alternativa

文章标题：“我做了一个奇怪的梦”：《亚特兰大》与作为另类叙事化的非洲超现实主义

摘要

电视节目《亚特兰大》以一种不安、怪异或彻头彻尾的荒谬感为特征，利用非洲超现实主义的叙事法来描述少数群体的日常经历。通过依靠非凡事物，非洲超现实主义强调了美国黑人生活的不寻常性，并强调了叙事在代表边缘化个体的言论和故事方面的局限性。这些限制促使媒体制作者采用另类叙事来描述那些无法认同传统电视叙事的群体。

关键词：电视，叙事，非洲超现实主义，另类叙事

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, hip-hop artist Childish Gambino (also known as Donald Glover) released a mixtape titled *STN MTN*, whose title comes from a devoweled version of his hometown in Stone Mountain, Georgia. In the opening track, he states, “I had a dream I ran Atlanta” and continues with a discussion on the changes he would make to the city including reopening an infamous club, firing all the cops in the county,

and bringing back music staples that the town was built upon (Gambino, "Dream/Southern Hospitality/Partna Dem"). Two years later, the premiere of Glover's television show *Atlanta* (FX; 2016–2022) begins with his character stating that he "had a weird dream" ("The Big Bang" 2:45). Often characterized by a feeling of unease, weirdness, or outright absurdity, *Atlanta* has garnered much interest from critics and audiences over its four seasons. Dreams and dream-like surrealism run throughout the show, altering the narrative to represent and explain the absurdity of everyday experiences of being Black in America. The program utilizes Afro-Surrealist storytelling to depict these experiences and provide an alternative narrative style for marginalized individuals who cannot identify with traditional televisual narratives.

While the term "Afro-Surreal Expressionism" was initially applied to literature by Amiri Baraka, it has spread to reference art, music, film, and television. Given the current social climate surrounding racial violence in the United States, the utilization of Afro-Surrealism in film and television seems to be growing. The rise of Afro-Surrealist media like *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *Random Acts of Flyness* (HBO; 2018), and *Us* (2019) prompts a need for understanding how this narrative form is utilized in visual media and to what ends. Audience members, critics, and scholars alike have turned to Afro-Surrealism to explain the unexpected universality of the messages of these shows and films in representing Black experiences. The television show *Atlanta* utilizes Afro-Surrealism as an alternative narrative structure to represent the everyday experiences of its Black characters and further comment on the absurdity of racism and classism in the United States. Utilizing *Atlanta* as an example of Afro-Surrealism emphasizes the limitations of narrative in representing the voices and stories of marginalized individuals. These limita-

tions have pushed media makers to adopt alternative means of narrativization which, in turn, have proven that television is the most promising and effective medium to explore and articulate those alternative narrative structures. What follows is a brief overview of the relevant literature of television form and narrative. It is also necessary to define and characterize Afro-Surrealism and contextualize it within the current popular culture and television programming landscape.

NARRATIVE AND AFRO-SURREALISM

Television itself provides specific allowances for a heavy utilization of narrative and promotes alternative narrativization. Aspects such as the routine nature of the programming, the longer time allotted to cover various topics more in depth, and the direct link to audiences within their homes are unique to the medium itself and contribute to the power of television in representing the everyday. Television's power lies in the fact that it utilizes those aspects specific to the medium to "not only [show] us a world around us, but [it] creates many of the parameters for our subsequent interactions with that world" (Gray 156). Rather than solely reflect social norms and occurrences, television helps create those norms as well as defines what does not fit inside them. Julie D'Acci articulates this influence and power further by stating that "television's electronic sounds and images, its programs and its regular schedules, … gather viewers … and give them a sense of who and what they are… [television programs] therefore, have active roles in shaping the ways TV viewers think about themselves as … human[s]" (373). Medium-specific elements drive the influence of television as well as how audiences interact with and learn from the messages portrayed on screen. Narratives are one of the most effective ways that audiences can identify with television programs.

These elements ensure that television "assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people … they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues" (hooks 2). Television teaches its audience how to live and act in the world around them. In so doing, "television entertainment often holds the power to dictate—to represent—which people, ideas, and behaviors are 'normal,' and which are decidedly abnormal" (Gray 157). This typically leads to the privileging of hegemonic ideas and viewpoints (i.e., heteronormativity, patriarchy, whiteness) as well as the silencing or misrepresentation of marginalized individuals or those who act and/or think in other ways. This privileging often occurs through traditional narrative structures which are more suited to representing hegemonic experiences. Television's influence can not only marginalize individuals and ways of thinking, but its pedagogical nature can also construct identity through the representations of them. The power television has as a medium cannot be understated; thus, it is imperative that attention be paid to how those typically marginalized by television narratives are reclaiming the medium to represent themselves and their everyday lives.

The term narrative is used here to describe the structure and process with which stories are told in television, both the linear (where episodes are connected, and memory of previous events is necessary) and serial (where episodes are more contained within themselves) (García). Jason Mittell argues that "[t]elevision's narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the series structure that sets television apart from film and distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms (29); thus, because of its seriality and ability to utilize long-form narrative structures, television is able to produce more

complex stories and utilize unique methods of storytelling in comparison to film and literature. Additionally, television narratives are ongoing, by nature, and therefore include "formal characteristics, such as a lack of definitive closure, the occurrence of cliff-hangers, and a tendency towards minimal exposition" (Allrath et al. 3). These elements are specific to the televisual medium and are essential in understanding the efficacy of alternative narrative structures. If an alternative narrative structure utilizes these elements, it is more likely to be successful on television; additionally, because these characteristics allow for more nuance and sustained engagement with television audiences, complex alternative narratives that require these elements can thrive on the medium.

However, bell hooks argues that minoritized groups, especially Black individuals, tend to not identify with traditional forms of media and storytelling as they do not represent their reality or experiences. Thus, a nontraditional form of narrative must be utilized in order to convey their experiences. Rather than purely existing as a serial or episodic narrative form, Afro-Surrealist narrative structure in television aligns with Mittell's discussion of narrative complexity where programs use various storytelling devices, spectacles, and "an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling" (33). Afro-Surrealist television narrative attempts to harness the medium's pedagogical power along with the formal characteristics afforded to television narratives to highlight the absurdity of the everyday experiences of Black individuals in the United States.

Popularized by Baraka and D. Scot Miller (in a now deleted blog), Afro-Surrealism is the act of "creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one … [and] stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential

themes is clear" (Baraka 164). While there are many characteristics that define Afro-Surrealist art, including reliance on the whimsical and excessive, most notably "the Afro-Surrealist seeks definition in the absurdity of a 'post-racial' world" (Miller). This absurdity and uneasiness are both created through "the narrative choices themselves, such as a simple act of taking the main character out of their element and putting them in a series of uncomfortable situations" (Smyk 122). By emphasizing the extraordinary, Afro-Surrealism is often heralded as the one of the most effective ways of explaining the reality of life for Black individuals in the United States. Although Baraka originally applied the term "Afro-Surreal Expressionism" to literature, the term has spread to reference art, music, film, and television. Within a novel, "AfroSurrealism often focuses on the storytelling process and the *mise en abyme*, the story within the story, to reveal how narratives help people cope with the pain of daily life. Stories, the Afro-Surreal novel suggest, serve as sources of resilience, as a means of surviving and resisting a racially oppressive society" (Spencer 18). The Afro-Surrealist novel focuses on the imaginary and absurd as a method of coping with everyday life; whereas, currently, Afro-Surrealism in film and television has shifted from absurdity solely as a coping mechanism to representing the absurd in the extreme to highlight the unusualness of Black lives in the United States. Afro-Surrealism serves as a *narrative structure* that emphasizes the absurdity of racial violence and discrimination.

Afro-Surrealism is not "a style, a set of criteria, an ideology, a genre, or even a coherent exploration … [nor] a movement. It is an imaginary, magnetizing loosely related sensibilities" (Francis 97). However, given the shift from literature to film and television, common characteristics are necessary to differentiate the narrative structures from other genres and

forms. Dawid Smyk states that Afro-Surrealist film and television includes the following elements:

> bouts of the dreamlike, hallucinatory, and the fantastical passing into a generally realistic setting; an atmosphere of unease and paranoia, often supported by tonal dissonances, ambivalence of the genre and features of the grotesque; an experimental, eclectic form; elements of satire and parody; a significant role of hip-hop; a specific kind of intertextuality, often referencing staples of Black popular culture and history; anti-capitalist and anti-institutional messages; a complex exploration of Black identity and subversion of its traditional archetypes. (117)

While this is neither a definitive list nor a strict set of guidelines by which Afro-Surrealist media makers must abide, the characteristics described above allow critics to distinguish Afro-Surrealism more easily from other narrative forms like traditional Surrealism, Afro-Futurism, and magical realism, to name a few.

These distinctions are essential to understanding the formulation and impact of Afro-Surrealism in film and television. Rochelle Spencer argues that traditional "Surrealism has always offered a critique of those in positions of power and questioned mainstream ways of interpreting the world" (1). This is certainly true of Afro-Surrealism as well; however, "AfroSurrealism is distinct in how it revisits and explores the weird or strange phenomena encountered by [B]lack people, forcing a confrontation between memories, present-tense reality, and dreams of the future" (Spencer 5). Similar to

traditional Surrealism, "the AfroSurreal narrative resists dominant cultural narratives" (Spencer 6) and "challenges the cultural and economic hegemony of rationality and explores dreams and psychology" (Spencer 9). What separates Afro-Surrealism from traditional Surrealism is its treatment of race. Race is often not a major element of traditional Surrealism, "however, the concept of race as an arbitrary, surreal phenomenon dominates AfroSurreal texts" (Spencer 9). Thus, the prefix "Afro" is extremely important to the integrity of the Afro-Surreal narrative structure.

As opposed to African-Surrealism, the prefix of Afro-Surrealism serves to incorporate a wider range of Black experiences in the world, though focus consistently turns to the United States. As such, concepts like slavery and systemic racial discrimination serve as the backbone of Afro-Surrealism wherein "a protagonist's personal and psychological journey becomes a rejection of racism and western ideas" (Spencer 8). Miller states that, originally, Afro-Surrealism was surreal because it was representative of Black experiences. Later, he argues that "Afrosurrealism sees that all 'others' who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist … The root for 'Afro-' can be found in 'Afro-Asiatic,' meaning a shared language between [B]lack, brown, and Asian peoples of the world" (Miller 114). Thus, Miller opens up Afro-Surrealism to include and represent not just Black individuals, but also other marginalized voices.

Because of this emphasis on Black and marginalized experiences, Afro-Surrealism is often combined with discussions of Afro-Futurism. While related, the two are distinct methods of representing Black experiences. Miller states that "Afro-Futurism is a diaspora intellectual and artistic movement that turns to science, technology, and science fiction to spec-

ulate on [B]lack possibilities in the future. Afrosurrealism is about the present. There is no need for tomorrow's tongue speculation about the future" (113). Afro-Surrealism presents different areas of emphasis when representing race. Often, Afro-Futurism, like traditional Surrealism, builds a more utopian-like existence for Black individuals through its reliance on the unusual where Afro-Surrealism considers current racial realities through absurdity. More specifically, "[t]he Afrofuturist text both warns us of the future's potential to replicate historical hierarchies and explores [B]lack people's ability to develop their own futuristic technologies to fight domination. Afrofuturism may involve futuristic or fantastic technologies" (Spencer 13). In contrast, Afro-Surrealism focuses on the present reality of everyday life under racist and capitalist systems.

Spencer also argues that Afro-Surrealism is "is similar to magical realism in that this genre also resists the idea of a world understood completely through reason and logic" but "AfroSurrealism's critiques of a specific form of racism—and its purposeful incorporation of ideas from the Black Power and Black Aesthetic Movements—mark it as distinct" from magical realism (10). Thus, Afro-Surrealism incorporates many elements of other genres and narrative structures but is distinct because of its unique articulation of racial issues through absurd representations of the present, everyday experiences of Black individuals.

The pop cultural landscape is turning Afro-Surreal in a time when society is wrestling with racial violence, bias, and inequality. Terri Francis states that "[Afro-Surrealist] work is very realistic in representing the absurdity of [B]lack life … [In America,] the ideals are there and you're aware of what should be going on … but that's not the reality" (Bakare).

Francis further comments that "the journey of Afro-surrealism is inward, it's about imagining how your interior world works and staying in that place to reckon with your everyday [life]" (Bakare). One of the most salient examples of this inward exploration and representation of unusual experiences is *Atlanta*.

IDENTIFICATION OF TEXT

The Emmy Award-winning show *Atlanta* has an all-Black writing staff which includes Glover and his brother, Stephen. *Atlanta* focuses on Earnest "Earn" Marks (Donald Glover), his cousin Alfred "Paper Boi" Mills (Brian Tyree Henry), and Alfred's friend Darius (LaKieth Stanfield), based in Atlanta, who try to make their way in the world through the rap scene. Along the way, they come face-to-face with social and economic issues touching on race, relationships, poverty, status, and parenthood. Holistically, the show comments on multiple issues including police brutality, co-parenting, and white Americans' fetishization of Black culture. Drawing on the pedagogical nature of television, Bijan Stephen argues that *Atlanta* is "a way for others to see [B]lack people as fully human" (8). The program articulates how Black individuals navigate the racist and classist structures while emphasizing the bizarre experiences and situations they encounter in their everyday lives.

Atlanta has captured the attention of many critics because of its unique storytelling, and honest and raw depictions of Black lives in Atlanta. When considering how to characterize the show, one critic stated that "[s]imply 'the best show on TV' will have to do" (Sheffield). *Atlanta*, and creator Donald Glover, is known for its striking cinematography and excellent writing. However, both Glover and his show are best known for being a bit weird and unusual (Glover's comedy special is

even called *Weirdo* [2012]). Discussing the show in the first year it aired, Glover said "I just always wanted to make *Twin Peaks* with rappers … Television shows are like novels … The tone of this, it's going to take people time to figure out what's going on, which I think is a good thing" (Cwik). Tamisha Nicole Askew further states that Glover "wants the viewers to practice some self-awareness by asking themselves: Why am I laughing? Why does this make me feel uncomfortable? How does this moment relate to the current social and political climate?" (3). While this weirdness and unease is not necessarily a trait that traditionally makes quality television, Afro-Surrealism thrives on such a characteristic.

Afro-Surrealist "artist[s] have chosen to use this genre to express their feelings of worry, liberty, and injustice, giving them the room to be as weird and free as they'd like" (Adams). Several critics of the show discuss how *Atlanta*'s weirdness presents a fresh view of Black experiences. The author of the *Afrosurreal Manifesto*, Miller, has even retweeted several comments linking the show with his articulation of Afro-Surrealism. While this weirdness was not directly associated with Afro-Surrealism in the first seasons on *Atlanta*, the show embraced the genre fully for the third season. Evan Nicole Brown discusses how the artist commissioned for the season three promotional materials, Alim Smith, explicitly identifies as an Afro-Surrealist artist. The promotional posters and banners feature stylistic elements that are integral to the surrealist style. Ultimately, "*Atlanta*'s genius is to show the surreality of [B]lack life in America, and without the typical network explanations" (Stephen 7). The show refuses to directly comment on the absurdity that it thrives on. *Atlanta* utilizes discomfort and the mundane to emphasize that reality is inherently surreal for marginalized individuals in the United States.

Atlanta has sparked recent scholarship in consideration of how the program represents Blackness and the everyday experiences of its characters. Given the relative newness of the show, this scholarship has appeared mainly in the form of online articles by academics and theses by graduate students. These vary from how the show articulates "authentic" Blackness through musical counternarratives (Terry), to representations of masculinity and Black women within the program (Askew), and neoliberalism and teenage life under capitalism (O'Donnell). Forthun discusses how Afro-Surrealism is now being utilized within the industry to denote "quality" television. Moreover, several scholars have found that the way that the show is shot and the narrative presented can only occur on television. Smyk argues that the formulaic and episodic nature of *Atlanta*, "an ordinary, slightly comedic situation turned into a nightmarish scenario, which continues to get worse," is an essential element of the narrative structure (120). The narrative structure *Atlanta* utilizes "wouldn't work on any other show; *Atlanta* has cultivated a form that, paradoxically, it doesn't seem interested in repeating … There's an argument here that TV as a medium is opening up now" (Stephen 8-9). As such, television is becoming an essential medium for shows like *Atlanta* which utilize alternative narrative structure because of its history of representation that begs to be challenged along with the formal affordances of the medium. Afro-Surrealism is that alternative narrative structure. Since *Atlanta* attempts to depict a dramatized version of the lives of Atlanta natives, the show must grapple with issues of race and Blackness. Afro-Surrealism allows *Atlanta* to fully explore and explicate the absurdness of race and racial discrimination.

Thus, several episodes throughout the three seasons of *Atlanta* utilize Afro-Surrealism as a narrative structure. In the episode "Nobody Beats the Biebs" (1.05), Earn and Alfred attend a charity basketball game. Before the game, "Justin Bieber" walks in. While the real Bieber is white, this Bieber is played by a young, Black actor (Austin Crute), a difference that is never acknowledged in the episode. This Bieber often uses the racial slurs, gets into a fight on the basketball court, and even sings during his apology press conference. His actions, paired with the lack of acknowledgement of his race, present a surreal discomfort. The character is visibly Black, but the audience cannot disassociate him from the real-life white Bieber. Relying on the intertextual and satirical nature of Afro-Surrealism, the jokes within the episode are funny because of the dissonance between the two characters. The white Bieber consistently appropriates Black culture and is forgiven for his obnoxious actions because of his whiteness. He has repeatedly adopted aspects of Black culture like hair, dress, and speech and then apologized for his actions. While he often receives negative media attention, like in 2021 when he was called out for wearing dreadlocks, he is often not held accountable for his action (barring one rare case in 2014 where he apologized for using the n-word in various videos) (Karimi). In *Atlanta*, the Black Bieber invites the audience to wonder if the singer would be treated differently if he were Black.

An example of this comes late in the episode. After fighting with Alfred during the basketball game, Bieber apologizes in a press conference. He says that "I guess I been trying to be so cool lately that I became something I'm not" ("Nobody Beats the Biebs" 18:50). He changes his hat from a backwards sideways position to a straightforward one which is met with dramatic gasps from the audience. To this he responds "Wait,

it's cool. This is me. This is the real Justin. I'm not a bad guy. I actually love Christ. I guess I've been hanging with the wrong people," before breaking out into a song from his latest album ("Nobody Beats the Biebs" 19:00). The absurdness of the apology and the audience's reactions to his words and song is apparent and laughable because of the direct connection to the real Bieber's actions. Additionally, individuals continuously reference Alfred shooting another person earlier that year throughout the episode.

The Afro-Surrealist narrative structure can be seen at play in the intertextual references to faux-hip-hop artist Justin Bieber and to his various methods of appropriation of Black cultures. It relies on the lack of exposition or even explanation to produce the absurdity of a Black Bieber. The audience knows that Alfred is attempting to build his career as a rapper and is attempting to prove that he can be taken seriously, a narrative thread that has been building throughout the first season. The introduction of a race-swapped Bieber serves to both showcase the popularity that Alfred is (supposedly) capable of achieving while also creating a sense of disbelief that he will actually be able to achieve that level of success because of his close affiliation with rap music and the negative connotations associated with that type of music.

While Alfred cannot escape this event because of his gangster rapper persona, this Bieber can because of his proximity and popularity within whiteness. This juxtaposition adds to the surrealist nature of the episode. Maya Phillips states that "[t]he race-swapped performances in *Atlanta* usually function as a marker of privilege" (para. 8). Through this representation, *Atlanta* calls attention to the double standard set for Black individuals in the music industry and in America writ large. When they express their culture or make a mis-

take and apologize, it is not readily accepted or excused by the larger public; however, when a white individual appropriates Black culture and/or apologizes for their wrongdoings, their more likely to be forgiven or their transgressions overlooked because of their whiteness. Similarly, if a Black artist associates with hip-hop or rap, they are defined by the genre and the negative stereotypes associated with it; however, when a white artist makes the same type of music, they are less constrained by the stereotypes and can always step away from the genre without it hurting their entire career. By representing Bieber as Black and utilizing Afro-Surrealism as a narrative structure, *Atlanta* points out this irony.

Perhaps the most well-known and well awarded episode of *Atlanta*, "Teddy Perkins" (2.06), is also an example of Afro-Surrealist narrative at work. As mentioned above, the show relies on weirdness and unease as a mechanism to depict racial issues and "Teddy Perkins" is where these feelings are evoked the most. The episode follows Darius's attempt to pick up a piano that he bought from a mysterious older musician. The musician, called Teddy Perkins and played by Donald Glover in whiteface, invites Darius in and proceeds to both show and tell him increasingly strange aspects of his life. From the moment he enters the mansion, Darius has symbolically entered another world. Aesthetically, the episode is very dark contrasting the darkness within the house with Teddy's bright white skin. The *mise-en-scene* features highly ornate decorations and furniture, a striking difference from the sparsely decorated living spaces featured in other episodes. Teddy himself seems to be an allegory of Michael Jackson. His pale skin, dark black hair, high-pitched voice, and connection to the music industry all support this connection.

Throughout the episode, the audience discovers that Teddy has a brother, Benny, who lives in the basement. This brother apparently received serious injuries in an accident and covers himself completely and uses a wheelchair. In the end, Benny kills Teddy and himself because he believed that Teddy was planning on killing him. Stephen states that the "episode, a meditation on stage-managing parents obsessed with their children's art, ends with two gunshots and flashing police lights. Nobody gets what they came for" (9). While there are several ways to read this surreal encounter, one interpretation of the narrative is that Benny is a reference to his Black self that he needed to lock away and try to kill to become a more palatable musician for white audiences. To do so, Teddy needed to hide his Black self and take on more traditionally white characteristics like straight hair, lighter skin, and a higher voice. This entire episode is shot to build suspense and confusion to mimic Darius's emotions and heighten the surreal nature. The way that this particular story is told, through an Afro-Surrealist narrative structure, relies on the formal elements unique to television discussed above. There is little to no clear exposition throughout the episode until the very end as the audience (through Darius) must piece together the lives of Benny and Teddy through context clues and the various props within the mansion. Even then, it is unclear if Benny was real or just a figment of Darius's imagination. The episode relies on an ambiguous ending by continuously drawing upon the surreal nature of the episode and never fully explaining the events that occurred.

By utilizing Afro-Surrealism in this nature, *Atlanta* represents W.E.B. du Bois's concept of Double Consciousness in which people of color have two versions of themselves conflicting with one another: their true self and what white individuals think they should be. However, unlike Ralph Ellison's utili-

zation of Double Consciousness in *Invisible Man*, Atlanta relies on the visual to exemplify the absurdity and discomfort of living within a society dominated by white individuals. This complicates the myopic representation of people of color while also presenting a more nuanced conversation concerning racism within the United States. Rather than focusing on the outward implications of racial discrimination, the Afro-Surrealist narrative structure utilized in this episode (and *Atlanta* overall) highlights the equally important internal ramifications of racial violence. Phillips argues that "[w]hether Teddy and Benny are separate or the same person, the fact remains that both are linked, even in their manner of death, and Teddy's devout belief in sacrifice as the means to success seems to apply even to his identity. If Benny is Teddy's [B]lack brother, or if Benny is Teddy's [B]lack self, then either way Teddy must sacrifice him" (para. 14). This interpretation of Teddy Perkins and his brother also serves as a warning for Darius and, by extension, the audience. It points out the harm that is perpetuated by continual explicit and implicit racism as well as the dangers of centering the white gaze. This highlights the futility that marginalized individuals often feel in the face of systemic racism and discrimination and the internal turmoil they face.

In the third season, *Atlanta* fully embraced its Afro-Surrealist narrative form. The episode most indicative of this is the finale, "Tarrare" (3.10). One of the most introspective episodes of the series, though certainly not the only one, "Tarrare" (3.10) follows Earn's on-and-off girlfriend, and mother of his child, as she navigates the streets of Paris after following (and then separating from) the boys on tour. Vanessa "Van" Keefer (Zazie Beetz) has consistently questioned herself and position in life throughout the program and has demonstrated worrying behavior leading up to the episode. The episode

begins with a friend of Van spotting her in the streets of Paris. When she is approached by this friend, it is apparent that Van has adopted a false French persona, speaking with a French accent and living out an entire life that is very different from hers back in Atlanta. Wielding a hardened baguette which she uses as a weapon and working in a kitchen which serves fried human hands to extremely wealthy people as a special culinary experience, Van refuses to even acknowledge her past life even when questioned by her friend. When her friend finally asks about her daughter, Van breaks down and articulates her longing to be someone else and not have to face her responsibilities back home and the possibility of failure.

Given the setting as well as the heavy reliance on internal struggle and subconscious, the episode is more than likely a direct comment on the comparisons between French Surrealism and Afro-Surrealism. Setting one of the most introspective episodes of the program in Paris is not lost on those who are familiar with the ongoing conversations surrounding the surreal nature of *Atlanta*. Throughout the episode, Van and her friends find themselves in increasingly absurd situations in seemingly ordinary places, an indication of an Afro-Surrealist narrative structure. Unlike French Surrealism, this episode does not linger in the "super-reality" or the utopian. Rather, the Afro-Surrealist narrative structure emphasizes the downfall of living in a utopian sense of mind as well as the futility of entertaining a utopian without addressing reality. The narrative focuses heavily on the disconnect between Van's utopian life and her actual responsibilities in her real life. Van is increasingly paranoid, and her friend consistently considers the fact that Van might have killed a real Parisian and subsumed her identity. Afro-Surrealist narrative structure is characterized by a complex exploration of Black identities. Mixed with satirical elements that poke fun

at French culture and anti-capitalist notions through conversations of wealth and celebrity, the episode's Afro-Surreal narrative visually represents Van's inner turmoil concerning the struggles that come with Black motherhood and womanhood. Her ongoing narrative arc finally concludes, not with a definitive ending, but with an introspective realization that a traditional Surrealist utopia cannot be achieved without first addressing the systemic pressures on and discrimination of Black women.

The final episode of the entire series is titled "It Was All a Dream" (4.10). Seemingly a reference to various fan theories which postulated that the entire show was Darius's dream, the narrative plays on the intertextual aspect of Afro-Surrealism by nodding to the fans and Darius's previous interactions with the surreal. Darius often experienced various unusual moments throughout the series and had strange conversations including how he believed that the entire world was a simulation. In this episode, the audience follows Darius's journey to his sensory deprivation tank appointment. Multiple times, Darius has weird experiences which result in him waking up in the deprivation tank multiple times. Thus, the audience is unaware if what they are seeing is real or just a hallucination that Darius has created while in the tank. These hallucinations include a ride to the center with his ex-girlfriend in which she is pulled over for driving under the influence. She passes the sobriety test and then takes the officer's gun. After crashing the car, she runs off while apologizing to Darius. Darius raises his hands, realizes he is holding the gun, and wakes up in the tank.

Structuring the episode around an inability to distinguish reality from fiction underscores the strangeness of "routine" police stops of people of color. The Afro-Surrealist narra-

tive structure highlights Darius's inner fears and desires and how they are structured or hindered by racial violence and discrimination. For example, when Darius is left holding the gun, he is awoken because of his fear of what is to come. This very real fear is represented through a non-traditional narrative structure to emphasize the idea that it is a subconscious reality for many minoritized individuals.

Another example points to the role of white women in perpetuating racial violence and hindering the everyday lives of Black individuals. In this hallucination, a group of white women continuously laugh at Darius after he supposedly wakes up. He eventually grabs one of the women and yells at her to stop laughing which results in his expulsion from the center. This hallucination highlights the apathy of white women toward Black men's fear and struggles and their role in the punishment of said Black men. Because the Afro-Surrealist narrative structure relies on foregrounding racial issues and the interiority of its Black characters, this scene could be interpreted as Darius's view of and experiences with white women.

Darius then shows up at his brother's house, seemingly awake. After having a full conversation with his brother, Darius says "I miss you, man. I miss you. How's mom? What about dad?" ("It Was All a Dream" 21:50). Darius then wakes up in the tank a final time. Since Darius's family have not appeared or even been mentioned in the entire series until this point, one could argue that either Darius has lost touch with his entire family or they are all dead, emphasizing the ambiguity that is unique to television narratives. This hallucination comments on the loneliness and family values or tensions present in Darius's, and other minoritized individuals, experience of the world. The Afro-Surrealist narrative structure in this scene

relies on the formal elements of serial television like the lack of exposition to cultivate a sense of concern and nonsensical logic to present Darius's internal confusion and accentuate the complexity of his identity.

The episode ends with Darius attempting to discern if he is still in the tank while hanging out with Earn, Alfred, and Van. While he eventually finds out, the audience is not given the satisfaction of knowing what is real and what is a dream. This reliance on the dream and paranoia is a major element present within Afro-Surrealist work. The ambiguous ending emphasizes the strangeness of minority experiences. Often, individuals are met with outright strange and incomprehensible events of discrimination, bias, and prejudice. The program cultivates a sense of unease by again relying on the formal characteristics of television narrative discussed above (ending with a cliff-hanger and not allowing definitive closure). Ending the show without allowing the audience to explicitly label the events that the characters experience as real or unreal, *Atlanta* posits its final use of Afro-Surrealist narrative structure by continuing that sense of unease until the very last second.

CONCLUSION

Afro-Surrealism has re-emerged in the popular culture sphere to represent the varied experiences of Black individuals in the United States. The televisual medium lends itself well to Afro-Surrealist narratives because of its emphasis on the everyday and its pedagogical nature. Additionally, television allows for a more complex narrative experience by relying on specific formal characteristics unique to the medium. Television programs that utilize Afro-Surrealist narrative structure to highlight voices that would otherwise not have a place are distinct from genres like New Weird and New

Absurd (and others discussed above) because of their emphasis on the racial aspects of the absurdity of everyday life. As Phillips articulates, "[i]t's a strange time to be [B]lack in America—surreal, really. The art tells us no different" (para. 18). Given the recent hyper visible surrealness of Black lives in the United States, the demand for more ways to articulate that absurdity has grown.

As evidenced in *Atlanta*, Afro-Surrealism is one such way that Black individuals are utilizing alternative narrative structures to represent their own experiences and providing sources of identification on television. Evidently, more shows, films, and even music videos are attempting to utilize aspects of Afro-Surrealism to tell the stories of Black individuals in the United States (see The Carters's "Apesh*t" music video [2018], *Lovecraft County* [HBO; 2020], *Candyman* [2021], and *Nope* [2022]). Stephen argues that "I wouldn't be surprised to see a spate of new shows from people who have historically been erased from the version of America we see on TV" (10), opening up the phenomenon to alternative narrative forms that represent more than just Black experiences. Returning to the mixtape mentioned in the introduction, Gambino ends the final track with "and then I woke up" (Gambino, "Go DJ"). Much like the final episode of *Atlanta*, the audience is left with the sense that what they just experienced was something in between reality and dream. When systemic and institutional discriminations make life strange and unusual, one of the only ways to represent that is through the nontraditional.

WORKS CITED

"It Was All a Dream." *Atlanta*, created by Donald Glover, season 4, episode 10, FX Productions / MGMT Entertainment, 10 Nov. 2022.

"Nobody Beats the Biebs." *Atlanta*, created by Donald Glover, season 1, episode 5, FX Productions / MGMT Entertainment, 27 Sep. 2016.

"Teddy Perkins." *Atlanta*, created by Donald Glover, season 2, episode 6, FX Productions / MGMT Entertainment, 5 Apr. 2018.

"The Big Bang." *Atlanta*, created by Donald Glover, season 1, episode 1, FX Productions / MGMT Entertainment, 6 Sep. 2016.

Adams, Kiersten. "Afro-Surrealism: Embracing and Reconstructing the Absurdity of 'Right Now.'" *Medium*, 14 Mar. 2023, medium.com/@akierstena/afro-surrealism-embracing-reconstructing-the-absurdity-of-right-now7521cc6ab27f.

Allrath, Gaby, et al. "Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series." *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, edited by Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich, Palgrave Macmillan., 2005, pp. 1–43.

Askew, Tamisha Nicole. *The Real Atlanta: Representations of Black Southern Culture, Masculinity, and Womanhood as Seen in Season One of the FX Series* Atlanta. Kennesaw State University, 2018.

Bakare, Lanre. "From Beyoncé to Sorry to Bother You: The New Age of Afro-surrealism." *The Guardian*, 19 Oct. 2022,

www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/dec/06/afro-surrealism-black-artists-racist-society.

Baraka, Amiri. "Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist." *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 164–166. https://doi.org/10.2307/2904491.

Bordwell, David. "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures." *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, edited by Phillip Rosen, Columbia UP, 1984.

Brown, Evan Nicole. "Meet Alim Smith, the Artist Behind the Afro-surrealist Promo Art for FX's Atlanta." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 Apr. 2022, www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/arts/meet-alim-smith-artist-afro-surrealist-art-atlanta-fx-1235127017.

Cwik, Greg. "Donald Glover Wants Atlanta to Be 'Twin Peaks With Rappers.'" *Vulture*, 16 Jan. 2016, www.vulture.com/2016/01/donald-glover-on-doing-twin-peaks-with-rappers.html.

D'Acci, Julie. "Television, Representation and Gender." *The Television Studies Reader*, edited by Robert Clyde Allen and Annette Hill, Routledge, 2002, pp. 373–88.

du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. Random House, 1952.

Forthun, Eric. "'We Should Be Addressing Whiteness Less, and Affirming Blackness More': Random Acts of Flyness, Afrosurrealism, and Quality Programming." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 4–19.

https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaa013.

Francis, Terry. "Introduction: The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism." *Black Camera*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2013, pp. 95–112. doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.5.1.95.

Gambino, Childish. "Dream/Southern Hospitality/Partna Dem." *Genius*. https://genius.com/Childish-gambino-dream-southern-hospitality-partna-dem-lyrics.

Gambino. Childish. "Go DJ." *Genius*. https://genius.com/Childish-gambino-go-dj-lyrics.

García, Alberto Nahum. "A Storytelling Machine: The Complexity and Revolution of Narrative Television." *Between*, Vol. 6, No. 11, 2017, pp. 1–25. www.betweenjournal.it.

Gray, Jonathan. *Television Entertainment*. Routledge, 2009.

hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies*. Routledge eBooks, Routledge, 2008.

Karimi, Faith. "Justin Bieber Is Being Accused of Cultural Appropriation Over His Hair. Again." *CNN*, 27 Apr. 2021, www.cnn.com/2021/04/27/entertainment/justin-bieber-dreadlocks-trnd/index.html.

Miller, D. Scot. "The Afrosurreal Manifesto: A Living Document - Open Space." *Open Space*, 13 July 2017, openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/11/the-afrosurreal-manifesto-a-living-document.

Miller, D. Scott. "Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black Is the New Black—A 21st Century Manifesto." *Black Camera*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2021, pp. 515–519. https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.13.1.0515.

Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2006, pp. 29–40. https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2006.0032.

O'Donnell, Jennifer Lee. "Groomed for Capitalism: Biopower and the Self-care, Self-improvement Rituals of Adolescence in Bo Burnham's *Eighth Grade* and Donald Glover's *Atlanta*." *Social Identities*, Vol 27., Issue 3, 2020, pp. 307–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1816954.

Phillips, Maya. "Sorry to Bother You and the New Black Surrealism." *Slate Magazine*, 18 July 2018, www.slate.com/culture/2018/07/sorry-to-bother-you-get-out-atlanta-and-the-new-black-surrealism.html.

Sheffield, Rob. "Rolling Stone." *Rolling Stone*, 2 July 2018, www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-reviews/atlanta-is-simply-the-best-show-on-tv-127644/?sub_action=logged_in.

Smyk, Dawid. "Afro-surrealism—A New Language for Discussing the Black Experience? An Exploration of the Trend in Recent Films, TV Series, and Music Videos." *Currents*, Vol. 6, 2020, pp. 112–35.

Spencer, Rochelle. *AfroSurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction*. Routledge, 2020.

Stephen, Bijan. "Atlanta Dreaming." *Dissent*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2018, pp. 6–10. https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2018.0047.

Terry, Sierriana. *"Black Atlanta": Musical Counternarratives of "Authentic" Blackness in Donald Glover's* Atlanta. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018.