Tayleur Hylton
Black Urban Studies
Final Paper
Due: 12/7/2016

1. Remembering the past - however fracture, fragmented or impartial" becomes an act of survival." To what degree does this statement apply to any TWO examples of black British culture?

Remembering the past has become an act of survival in several forms of Black British culture including life memoirs such as auto-biographies and documentaries. Hannah Pool's representation of the process of retracing adoptive parents through her novel "My Father's Daughter" and Zimena Percival's representation of reclaiming space as represented in her documentary, Tales from the Front Room, both function as acts of survival through their representations of the cultivation of personal and cultural identities, preserving history, efforts to reclaim the ownership of black experience. These works are life memoirs which are personal and emotive, but also historically grounded narratives that continue to stress the need for the discussion of both past and contemporary aspects of Black British history. By exploring concepts of cultural identity and highlighting history these life memoirs create a path by which the stories of Black British voices can be reclaimed. Susanne Scafe's, "Black Women Subjects in Auto/Biographical Discourse" describes the effects of these examples of autobiography. She theorizes that memoirs stand "at the center of growing body of self-representation that seeks to replace the white male story with a whole story of lives made hitherto invisible." Furthermore, the written memoir, "My Father's Daughter," and the visual memoir, Tales from the Front Room, combine of both historical and personal experiences that in order to strives to regain ownership of the experiences of Black British members of the diaspora.

Hannah Pool's memoir, "My Father's Daughter" opens up a discussion primarily on the process of re-tracing her adoptive father after a lifetime of growing up in Britain as a black

adoptee. After her adoption, her adoptive mother and her adoptive father placed her with family friends in Norway for several years of her childhood before she was brought to Manchester. This theme of constantly being displaced repeats itself as she describes the displacement she feels in Britain, with her adoptive family, among non-adopted children, and finally her birth family. Not only was she constantly undergoing the effects of displacement she also was not given the privilege to know that her birth father was still alive in Eritrea by the orphanage she was first placed in and therefore also knew scarce details that would help her constitute her identity including the date she was born. As her childhood progressed, Pool also discussed difficulties she faced in relation to her inter-racial adoption, and many instances of negative treatment due to her skin color and unawareness of her birth family from peers while she was still in school. Though her adoptive father actively worked to preserve aspects of her identity, such choosing to keep her birth name as her middle name and taking proper care of her hair, the hostility of the treatment she received by outside her home in Britain socially because of her adoption and race further enforced the concept of "otherness" in Pool childhood. Since her adoptive father was an aid worker in Eritrea and invited back after Eritrea's liberation from Ethiopia, he had a chance to visit the orphanage where he adopted Pool and a picture he left of her resulted in her birth family's discovery that she was still alive. This realization that she actually did have a biological family opened up questions and anxieties about how to characterize her own identity after the discovery of this information. On page two she says, "The tracing dilemma goes to the heart of what it means to be adopted. Questions of blood and identity, of what makes someone family and it means to be a parent, or a child, all come a head when tracing is brought into an already heady mix. If my birthday father is alive, whose child am I" (Pool 2)? Even when finally visited her "home-land" and birth family, Pool faced the difficulties of being once again perceived as an

outcast due to being Eritrean born but not Eritrean raised. In both cultures, because of her outcast status, she had to work to configure her own concept of her cultural identity. During her exploration she also gained awareness about her birth family's past and present history in Eritrea, including the effects of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea on their everyday lives.

In Zimena Percival's, Tales from the Front Room aired on BBC, she highlights specific objects that were common in the front rooms of Black British homes after the Windrush. Her visual memoir features the stories of several black british adults and their memories in relation to the front rooms of their homes. She also had them cover topics such as who was allowed in the front room, the rules of the front room, what events usually happened in the front room and even the similarity of many diasporic Black British front rooms to each other. Through the discussion of specific objects and uses of the front room, such a the significance of the radiogram, fake flowers, and wall paper, Percival gave the speakers a platform in which they could create a live history of the front room. Many objects in front room, such as the radiogram, tied back to memories and nostalgia of the past of the Black British home owners.

As members of the diaspora Pool, as well as the speaker in the front room had to negotiate their own terms of defining their cultural identity while also adjusting to the hostility of growing up as second-generation Black British children. Hannah Pool's narrative covers both the emotional experiences of her finding and visiting her family, and how these experiences of "returning" home shaped how she viewed her own identity. In Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and the Diaspora" he discusses the concept of cultural identity. He theorizes that, "Cultural identity… is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being,' it belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 224). Within the framework of Pool's memoir, she discusses her anxiety leading up to and during the meeting of her family. While pondering about their first meeting she says, "I

will go from an adopted girl who has never met her family to the adopted girl who has. They are two very different people. How many changes of identity can one person take"(Pool 84)? She then goes on to say, "I have already been an Eritrean daughter, Eritrean orphan, Eritrean adoptee, and now I am about to become an Eritrean daughter again" (Pool 84). During her childhood, Pool constantly faced confliction about her past and constant displacement and her perception of her own cultural identity ultimately undergoes several more changes when she meets her birth family. When analyzing the dismay her birth father has at her afro, the reader can see Pool's concept of her own identity being slowly but surely knocked down. She says, "Wearing it natural and at length was showing the world that I loved my hair in it's natural state. Until now, wearing an Afro is probably the most rootsy thing I've ever done. I can't speak Tigrinya, I can't cook *injera,* but atleast I can grow a decent Afro. And I had naively assumed that when I came to Eritrea I'd get extra brownie points for not having succumbed to Western Ideals and having my hair straightened"(Pool 129). The proudness she feels by wearing her afro compared to the disagreement of her birth father exemplifies differences in the way she chose to define her cultural identity through her teens and late adulthood in Britain then she would have in Eritrea. She concluded that her hair worked as a silent political statement against the normativity of the eurocentric ideals that surrounded her in Britain. Her Afro was an active acknowledgement of her "blackness" and partly shaped how she perceived her own identity.

Hall also theorized that cultural identity "undergoes constant transformation." This constant transformation was present in Pool's experience after she met her birth family and went back to England. She was struck with an anxiety when talking about her experience. In the final chapter she describes her relationship with her adoptive family, her biological family, and her friends looking to hear about her experience as all markers of her displacement among the social

and cultural groups that she "belonged" to. Her placement into the care of a white male, her move from to Eritrea, to Norway, and then Britain, and finally the meeting of her family as an outsider, gave Pool little room for constitute an idea of herself. Retracing for Pool served as an effort of survival in terms of defining her cultural identity, and way to find solace after a lifetime of displacement and being labeled as the "other." She says, "It is difficult to describe the feeling of going from thinking you are an orphan to being told you have a living birth parent. It just doesn't shift the world's view of you, it shifts your entire view of yourself. Suddenly you have a root. A family tree, something from which you came, and grew. It - your history, your life no longer just begins and ends with you"(Pool 84). Thus, her act of re-tracing served as a platform for which she could solidify her displacement and come to terms with her own version of cultural identity that was reliant on both the effects of her past and her new effort to know her birth family.

Zimena Percival's Tales from the Front Room served a similar purpose in terms of highlighting the effects of diasporic displacement. In "Diaspora" Anne-Marie Fortier says, "Migrants tend to ruminate on the relationship between geographical location and life's events, thus giving 'place a special significance as a result of it's association with events in their life course."(Fortier 184) The objects in the front room served as points of remembrance but also created an awareness that aspects of their cultural identity needed to be actively preserved through the decoration and use of the front room. In Fortiers discussion of the changing same she says, "Though some collective recollections may be lived as enduring traditions, they result, rather, from the processing and reprocessing of cultural forms." The front room stoods as a representation of the reprocessing of cultural forms in order to fit new Black British identities. One speaker says, "Woman invested a lot of themselves into the front room as a way of

expressing who they really were and their real values, and all of those values were those they brought with them from the Caribbean which were actually the opposite of the racist stereotype of black women as somehow flawed. Respectable women typically didn't work and because black women had to work, the front room became a way in which black women who could still express their respectability as working women." The front room as a whole thus served as a reminder of the value of Black British women, though they were not given the same value outside of the home as working women in Britain at the time. This reprocessing and effort to keep values alive was also seen in the music of the front room. One speaker said, "Whenever we went somewhere and whenever we gathered together, people would want to hear their own music from home you know. In our case it would be Calypso… because the music was something that connected people to a sense of their original selves. So for most people, this front room with the radiogram was a sort of thread of stability in their lives and they had to have it." In this sense, the radiogram can be seen as a unifier of the front room. It allowed people to enjoy the music of home while trying to deal with the effects of displacement. The effort to re-discover cultural identity is enforced through the stories of each speaker, not only do they have memorable anecdotes about the front room but their stories often give of a feeling of perceived unity and safety within the walls of the front room as compared to outside in Britain. By both discussing effects of childhood within the diaspora in Britain Pool's and Percival's works both open up the discussion of cultural identity quite similarly.

Boths of these life memoirs work to keep the discussion of Black British history alive and circulating throughout common discourse. They both showcase personal and cultural perspectives, but also actively refer to history to shed light on the past and current environments that shaped their childhood and later shaped their Black British identities. Hannah Pool's memoir

provides awareness about current state of Eritrea. The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, that lasted nearly thirty years, not only separated families, but it created a tension between the UN police and and the citizens of Eritrea. The relationship of the citizens of Eritrea and the government was treated very carefully because of worries of the possible return to war. Pool's biological brother Stephanos was a soldier at the border of Eritrea and Ethiopia and closest to this dangerous tension between the two countries. After visiting his family to meet Pool, Stephanos had to return to the front. After meeting Stephanos Pool says, "Since I was told he was leaving today, I have started to feel protective towards him. He is going back to the front, the border was just thirty miles separate from Ethiopian Troops, with the UN playing referee in between. What if the border flares up again? Something could easily happen to him.(Pool 142) Through mentions of political unrest such as the tensions of war described here, Pool makes the reader aware of this current state of dismay in Eritrea that consequently formed after the war.

Another underlying example of the contemporary history mentioned in the book is Pool's effort to make the reader aware of the problems within the Eritrean Adoption and Care system due to the war and thus the placement of adult responsibilities onto children. She says, "The war, and the famine and poverty that came with it emptied the country(a third of the population in exile and filled the orphanages"(Pool 3). Both her and her brother Zemichael were given away when their mother passed during Pool's birth. The adoption of Pool and the placement of Zemichael in a children's home to fend for himself, were the consequences of the arranged marriage of Pool's Father's to a new wife. She was a fifteen year old girl overwhelmed with the automatic resposibily of caring for five new children while still being a child herself. Mentioning of the wife's age gives the reader insight into weight of responsibility handed to children in Eritrea during this time period. Furthermore, when asked how a children's home was like

Zemichael said, “It was tough. The teach you to forget about your family. That’s how you had to be. You become so reliant on yourself that you don’t know how to be with other people, how to be with family.”(168). There was an absence of nourishment and care for Zemichael and even though he was Eritrean born he faced difficulties due to not being raised within his family. The harsh reality of Eritrea children’s homes made Zemichael an “other” similar to the “otherness” Pool experienced during childhood. Zemichael therefore lacked an identity as a child due to the mistreatment and corruption within the Eritrean children’s system after the war. The war with Ethiopia was underlined the tone of Pool’s memoir. Pool not only covered history, but also made the reader aware that consequences of the war are still alive within the workings of Eritrea’s current social and political systems.

In Tales from the Front Room, the uses of the space of the front room work to represent themes of hostility with the history of the first and second generation Black British migrants after the Windrush. One of the examples given was the use of the front room as a space for prayer. Within the documentary prayer was described as central to the migrants morals codes and ways of life back in the ‘homeland’ but due to the treatment of the Black British migrants outside of the home, many of them had negative experiences while trying to attend church. One speaker was even asked by a priest to not return to the church due to it being predominantly white. This use of the front room as a space in which Black British families could come together to praise due to the responses of outside Britain, highlighted the ongoing racial tension in Britain after the Windrush. Another use of the space was the “Corner Bar.” Just as many churches turned the Black British away, so did many nightlife spots. There was an effort of the white British to avoid integration which led to the transformation of the front room as a space that held several

important discussions, events and services. The exclusion of the Black British added to the importance and value of the front room within the Black British household.

The last act of survival that these two examples express is an act of reclaiming experience. Hannah Pool's narrative works to recreate a framework for which the discussion of the process of re-tracing and the rediscovery of diasporic identity, and the histories of Britain and Eritrea can be discussed. Hannah Pool's piece discusses her experience not only with inter-racial adoption and her upbringing in Britain, but also highlights her continued awareness of current difficulties within Eritrea's social and political life which consequently affects her birth family. Her process of re-tracing which evokes memories of her childhood and her new education of her current family ties can be used as a entry way into the discussion of re-tracing. Pool's book highlights re-tracing in terms of adoption, but can open up the discussion of re-tracing of diasporic identity even for those who were not adopted.

Though Pools' story does over arch into the discussing of themes adoption and political unrest it should not be seen as the only history of these subjects but as a gateway to for which the reader can learn more about them. Scafe says, "Necessary safeguards need to be erected against both the articulation of either an exceptional exemplar or an over determining 'we'"(Scafe 144). Scafe theorizes that memoir writing often groups all black experience together so it is crucial that the speaker of the narrative doesn't work to speak for the whole race. In her memoir Pool says, "As soon as I went public about my plan to trace my family, all sorts of people started coming to me for advice… It was like I had become some kind of tracing oracle"(Pool 88). She then says, "I didn't have the heart to tell them that I was winging it, that they might well be better off just leaving well alone"(Pool 88). In this instance Pool opens up the book as not a guide or ultimate truth, but acknowledges her continuous education during her experience and even uncertainty of

her decision to retrace. The narrative thus serves as a gateway into conversation, instead of just a representation.

When discussing “Trauma Culture” Scafe discusses two views of the memoir writing. She describes one as focusing on a harsh blow to the main character's life usually including a failed bond with a parent and the other as an analysis of this break of the characters life as chance to discuss the situations that led up to it. She then describes Leigh Gilmore’s move away from the idea of trauma writing as focusing on only one blow to the characters life, and discusses how Gilmore she believes that memoirs can include discussion of how that blow can come to represent ongoing effects of colonialism and racism. Pool’s process of re-tracing after being placed into adoption due to the war and the community that surrounded her falls under Leigh Gilmore’s hope for the future of memoir writing. Pool texts serves to offer comments on historic and personal events in order to represent these experiences through a black voice and also keep the conversation of these topics circulating.

Zimena Percival’s Tales from the Front Room served as representation of British history after the Windrush through a lens of recall and remembrance. The documentary highlighted the crucial aspects of the Black British front room that reflected the identities of the first generation of black british migrants. Similar to Pool’s autobiography, the documentary utilized emotive storytelling in order to replace bare textual descriptions of the black British home with actual experiences that work to reclaim the historical meaning of each aspect of the front room. Several uses of the room including prayer, signified the history of racism and need for a “safe haven.” By creative a narrative for the uses and history of the front room, Percival’s documentary gives life to this aspect of Black British culture found within the front room.

In conclusion both Hannah Pool's "My Father's Daughter" and Zimena Percival's "Tales from the Front room utilize memories of the past in order to keep aspects of Black British history and experience alive. In terms of survival through the means of defining cultural identity both Pool and the speakers in Percival's documentary showcase their efforts to negotiate their identities despite being raised as members of the diaspora and having to endure the effects of displacement. Furthermore, the second act of survival as seen in these works was an effort to actively preserve history. Both of the life memoirs are underlined with themes such as racism and political unrest that work to preserve knowledge on and create an awareness of these histories.

Lastly, in terms of reclaiming experience both of these works aimed to retell the stories and themes of Black British history through the use of black British voices and experience. The addition of emotion and narrative to these aspects of Black British history not only gives them life and meaning, it also creates a gateway for these topics to survive among common discourse.

Works Cited

Fortier, Anne-Marie. "Diaspora." *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*. By David Atkinson. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005. 182-87. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. By John Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 222-37. Print.

Pool, Hannah. *My Fathers' Daughter: A Story of Family and Belonging*. New York: Free, 2009. Print.

Scafe, Suzanne. "Black Women Subjects in Auto/biographical Discourse." *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945â€ " 2010)* (n.d.): 144-58. Web.

Tales from the Front Room. Dir. Zimena Percival. IMDb. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. Dec. 2016.