The Queer Limit of Black Memory

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The Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) is a recent structure that has emerged as a monument to Black memory. Opened in San Francisco in December of 2005, the museum is literally positioned between archives. Located near Union Square, the museum stands across the street from the California Historical Society, and a few doors down from the San Francisco Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) Archives. Each one of these institutions holds pieces of Black history, but there is no single structure that houses a satisfactory story. For a Black queer subject like me, standing between these institutions brings into stark relief the fractured and incomplete nature of the archives. It makes me aware of my own desires for a place in the archive, especially in the archives of Black memory.

Walking through the doors, I feel a sense of anticipation; I want the museum to be as beautiful and expansive as its name. Sun streams into the lobby from the clear glass windows that make up the building’s outer wall. Unlike most other places in San Francisco, Black people are working in the museum. The first thing
that catches my eye is the writing on the walls above the gift shop. The walls speak, asking the visitor to engage in a collective practice of remembering, imploring us to not forget our past and to honor our ancestors. Inscribed on the walls, the words “reinvent,” “remixing possibilities,” “transform,” and “creativity” yell to me as I make my way across the lobby. These are the properties that Black queers bring to the Black experience. We reinvent our bodies, renaming ourselves according to the genders we create, regardless of anatomy. We remix the possibilities of Black kinship, making family across boundaries not determined by blood. We transform Black culture through unique local and diasporic practices. I am excited. With these concepts guiding the museum, I anticipate queers to be central to, or at least a significant part of, its representation of diaspora. The entrance to MoAD stands in opposition to the rotunda at the National Archives. That room tells a story of national beginnings from the perspective of the colonizer; the imposing figures of the founding fathers nobly stand in peaceful contemplation of the beautiful nation they built. But it is a story fraught with lies, deceit, betrayal, hypocrisy, genocide, forced labor, and rapacious violence—all obfuscated by an illusion of order. MoAD, in contrast, is about diaspora, privileging a perspective of origins outside the nation-state, locating Africa as the Black homeland and emphasizing continuity. Though it is important to note that recent scholarship has focused on Black diaspora as a practice of shared discontinuities and processes of imagination, I feel some comfort in this vision of connected histories and shared beginnings, and I want to belong to it despite my critique of this perspective.

The museum’s permanent collection is a set of exhibits that puts African dispersal into a global context. It sets the tone for the museum itself, situating its priorities in relation to remembering the story of slavery and colonialism from the perspective of four themes: origins, movement, adaptation, and transformation. The front wall of the building is a glass window that allows one to see outside from the staircase, which leads to all the floors of the museum. Next to the staircase is a three-story photograph of the face of Africa, or more precisely, the face of a little African girl. This photograph is the literal face of the museum; because of the glass wall, it is visible from the street and transforms the front of the building into an impressive tableau. The original photograph was taken by Chester Higgins Jr. and incorporated into a photomosaic titled “Photographs from the African Diaspora,” a composite of over two thousand individual photographs. The mosaic is a significant archive of Black memory and is a permanent part of the museum. The pictures line the staircases between the museum floors. They are beautiful; they move me with their sheer force of evidence in numbers. Each one touches an affective punctum that is temporally situated through the setting,
clothes, hairstyles, and other visual aspects of the subjects. Each photograph tells a story—mothers and daughters, men in military uniform, weddings, funerals, spiritual ceremonies, Black men with children, men and women dancing, children at play, men and women at work. They tell me a story that I already know, one of pride and joy, resistance and endurance, family and love. The photographs also talk back to the ever-present narrative of the broken Black family, which is challenged and reconstituted in many forms on the museum wall. There is a phonic materiality to the visual. I think of Fred Moten’s insistence on the photograph that screams as part of a mournful/political practice. I am reminded that the purpose of the project is to provide what Hirsch and Spitzer call “points of memory” or “points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal memory and cultural recall.” They are included in the infrastructure of the museum in order to make an argument or a point about Black memory. The photographs argue for closure on the enduring questions regarding the inherent pathology of the Black family; they yell that the accusations are untrue, that Black families do exist. Representation of a normative resolution to the question of Black familial pathology requires the suppression of any echo of queerness. In this context queerness would be unmelodic, improvisational, unpredictable, and irresolute.

On the second floor, there are several sections that make up the permanent exhibit at MoAD. There are more objects in the permanent collection that speak to me, to all the visitors, about the normative Black subject. At the top of the steps, leading into the second floor, is an installation on adornment. It has three figures: a man, a child, and a woman. The placards next to the figures describe the role of adornment in culture, but to me the story they tell is about gender. In the installation, the faces of the figures separate from the torsos and morph into different ones. The torsos also change every few seconds, mixing the traditional with the contemporary, the urban with the rural. This fragmented Black body is put back together in gender-appropriate terms. Difference, multiculturalism, and diversity are celebrated in the facial morphing. Asian, African, and white European faces join those of African descent, celebrating a mixed-racial heritage, clearly eschewing racial purity. However, there is no male face with lipstick, for example, or faces that challenge gender binaries at all. Apparently, there is no place for gender variance in this diasporic social imagining. There is a queer limit to how we understand our history and ourselves.

In MoAD the photographs and the figures together tell a narrative that binds the body to normative genders and to heterosexuality. The heterosexual matrix, as Judith Butler has explained, is the logic that links biology to gender presentation/expression and sexual object choice. The expectation
is that these qualities—anatomy, gender, and sexuality—predict each other through a linear progression. The visitor experiences this logic first by way of the images on display in the photomosaic. Then, figures at the top of the stairs remind us of the proscribed biological basis of the familial and communal representations and again offer us a resolution to the accusations of Black familial pathology and gender aberrance in the biologically based nuclear family.

Further down the hall from the figures is an interactive set of stations where a visitor can take an auditory and visual tour of Black musical history: gospel, blues, jazz, hip-hop, reggae, and more. I notice myself creating my own version of a queer story in the existing cacophony of sounds and images. As Cheryl Dunye so eloquently states at the end of The Watermelon Woman, “Sometimes you have to create your own history.” There is a queer materiality to Black musical performance that is missing from the exhibit. Where is Sylvester on the soundtrack? Ma Rainey’s “Prove It on Me Blues”? Joan Armatrading? Or Luther Vandross? The richness of Black queer performance disappears, and with it goes the expansive potential of embodied knowledge.

Queers threaten mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility. The MoAD permanent exhibit is connected to a larger diasporic aim to resolve the trauma caused by dominant positioning of Black people as sexual deviants who have “incomplete, deviant and ruptured” families. Black queer people, as Evelynn Hammonds suggests, are dangerous to the collective, for we are a reminder of the accusation of sexual deviance and gender aberrance that we have fought so long to deny, decry, and defend against. The wall provides evidence of the nuclear family; the figures tell a story of clearly defined and bifurcated genders; the musical archive exists without any queers. It is a call to remember our past, a gesture to history, and an entreaty for the future, but one that does not figure the queer in the Black past or, by extension, the future. As I look upon the permanent exhibit, it becomes clearer and clearer that I am the “constitutive outside” of what is understood, celebrated, and remembered about Blackness. As the exhibit is careful to demonstrate through images from around the world, it is clear that the imperative of normativity is not located solely in the United States but is a condition that spans the diaspora.

As I ended the process of writing The Queer Limit of Black Memory, I returned to this beginning and realized, finally, that I had written the book to trace a (narrative) mosaic of Black queerness that would have cracked the walls of MoAD that afternoon. In this volume I have gathered novels and short stories that point to what is irresolute and irresolvable about the Black
relationship to normative definitions of gender, sexuality, and family. Here, “irresolute” takes on the connotation of something unfixed, with movement and potential, while “irresolvable” refers to how Blackness remains structurally positioned as “Other” in dominant understandings of the human, which, as Sylvia Wynter argues, cannot be resolved through respectability and civility. Unfortunately, the politics of respectability and civility structures Black memory in mainstream Black representations and institutions (such as MoAD) toward a narrative of resolution and normativity. I wrote this book taking Hortense Spillers’s call to “insurgent ground” seriously, and in that spirit, I argue for an embrace of the messiness of Blackness. MoAD: in these pages, I imagine that these letters can also stand for the Messiness of the African Diaspora, in all of its queer glory.

Black people have a fever for the archive. At the time of this writing, construction is underway for a Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Even this will not break the fever—a dis/ease manifest as much in the physical structure of large institutions as in the conventional and familiar narrative of memory reified through the archive. Achille Mbembe defines the archive first in terms of “a building, a symbol of a public institution,” and then the “collection of documents” that are housed there. He concludes that “[t]here cannot therefore be a definition of ‘archives’ that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored there.” This “entanglement of building and documents” is exactly what I have endeavored to underscore: it is at the root of Black expectations of recognition of collective past and present struggles that culminate in official state resolution of grievances. In addition to the authority and recognition that is associated with archives, their creation is also a method of defining the collective. As Mbembe argues, the institution has an “architectural” power that produces an “inescapable materiality” and an instantiating imaginary. Ultimately, the archive is no more than a montage of fragments [that] creates an illusion of totality and continuity. In this way, just like the architectural process, the time woven together by the archive is the product of a composition. This time has a political dimension resulting from the alchemy of the archive: it is supposed to belong to everyone. The community of time, the feeling according to which we would all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership: this is the imaginary that the archive seeks to disseminate.

For disaffected people, the autonomous creation of physical institutions becomes an important alternative to the distortion of their histories at the
hands of the dominant group. For once, the dominated has control over the historical timeline and the “composition” of documents used to represent this history. In the MoAD example, the photographs make a literal photographic composition, and the music display is an aural one. Together, all of the displays in the permanent exhibit create a feeling of collective ownership of the past and an image for the future.

As a departure from the institutionalization of the national archives, and even MoAD, I consider a different archive. This archive consists of a group of novels and short stories that are a diffuse, mobile, and decentralized set of literatures written by Black lesbian-identified authors from around the diaspora. These literatures project a range of embodied queer practices and identities into a past seldom collectively recalled Black departure from sexual and gender norms as a method of resistance to oppression. The group of texts examined here creates a counternarrative of history wherein multiple forms of deviance—sexual and gender variance, for example—are part of a repertoire of everyday acts of pushing back against the overwhelming epistemic violence that situates Blacks as nonhuman Other. The novels and short stories are artifacts of denied memory and performances of the “strategic absences” and revised tropes of popular history, particularly representing those who are “intentionally missing, hidden or not saved” by archiving institutions. As José Muñoz and Diana Taylor have noted, although there is an inherent relationship between the repertoire and the textual, embodied performance is often “banish[ed]” to a subordinate category of “ephemera” in relation to the supposed stability of the materials in a traditional archive. In contrast, the texts gathered here acknowledge the profound impact of performance in constituting Black queer memory, pointing toward the centrality of embodied knowledge.

Standing in MoAD, I seemed to be at an impasse of desires. The desire to be recognized as part of Black memory is antithetical to the Black desire to be considered “civilized,” and nonpathological (normative). One way to resolve this impasse is to represent the queer as normal as possible—as homonormative and transnormative. Another strategy is to remind Black people that Black culture and history are already imbued with queerness. While there has been some documentation and discussion of Black gay male history and representation, Black lesbians and transpeople have not received as much academic attention. For the Black lesbian writers who have taken on the challenge of re-remembering the past, the Enlightenment framing of Blacks as the sign of sexual excess continues to affect Black collective memory. Black lesbian renarration of the past explores the “curious tension[s],” to repurpose Gates, between Black desires for normativity that are enacted through politics of respectability and civility, and the realities
of queer experience that are central to Black cultural life; between “authentic” Blackness and the “inauthentic” Black queer; between historical evidence and queer imagination; and between bifurcated gender categories and expansive queer gender identities. These tensions are worked out through queer vernacular epistemologies, or forms of expression, that comment on and resist the oppression of queer sexualities and genders, as well as create queer kinship networks, communities, and alternatives to diasporic displacement.  

Irresolvable Genders

It was to be the peoples of Black African descent who would be constructed as the ultimate referent of the “racially inferior” Human Other . . . the negation of the generic “normal humanness,” ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West.  

—Sylvia Wynter “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being”

Why Black lesbians? In some ways, this question is at the heart of the matter. Historically, Black has been inextricably tied to the queer—the lesbian in particular. According to Sander Gilman, the dissection of Black women’s reproductive bodies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to the refinement of the distinction of the lesbian as an inherently deviant group with genitalia as excessive as the mythical Hottentot apron. The Black female body has historically been irreconcilable to white society in relation to notions of womanhood. Even as Black women reconstructed the category to reflect their own needs, they were simultaneously subject to brutal scrutiny under the scientists’ knife. According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, race provides gender’s “power to mean.” An extension of Higginbotham’s argument recognizes that Blackness obscures the meaning of biological sex as well. Nineteenth-century anatomists looked for the definitive proof of Blacks as the “missing link” between apes and humans through the dissection of Black women’s bodies, with special consideration of their genitalia, “locat[ing] racial difference through the sexual characteristics of the female body,” namely, a fascination with an imagined phallus in the form of an elongated clitoris to match the lengthened labia majora. The Black becomes the aporia between sex and gender such that the two never meet in any fashion that would satisfy the dictates of normative heterosexuality. The supposed lack of physical distinction between the sexes was thought to indicate a low moral character and to manifest in a morbid sexual appetite that included homosexual attraction. As Sharon Holland has observed: “It
appears that the words *lesbian* and *black* are forged in blood, in physiognomy, and ultimately in racist science.\(^{35}\)

This historical legacy leads gender to be a categorical conundrum in this book. As a category, woman is particularly vexed, as is Black women’s connection to that category. To claim a stable gender is a battle in a context wherein Black humanity is a perpetually open question or an unresolved debate, and part of what remains unresolved is Blacks’ ability to inhabit the gender categories given to us by chattel slavery and colonialism. To claim a stake in gender is a deeply embedded political statement of Black humanity. As I have argued elsewhere, mainstream Black communities consider claiming non-normative genders to be tantamount to race treachery.\(^{36}\) The actual experiences of Black sexual degradation took place in a field of violent epistemic debasement that defines the Black as an object of sexual aberrance; in this case the “sexual” takes on both biological and carnal registers. Black people are not violable under this episteme, for we are all walking, pulsating libidos, living for sexual encounters. Black bodies are unknowable under the schema of a two-gender system and therefore must be dissected for scientific investigation and comparative study. In this context of extreme violence, it is no wonder that Black people repress the memories of the epistemic violence of gender and sexual misnaming, as well as the physical violation that this epistemic framework makes pervasive. It is Black women’s vexed relationship to womanhood that has catalyzed Black lesbians to write most consistently about Black transgender experiences.\(^{37}\)

Black lesbian authors contribute to the category of the “queer,” especially in their representation of gender diversity, but also in their insistence that Black culture is inherently non-normative, which is why deviance along gender and sexual lines is so threatening—it exposes the futility of our claims to rights and inclusion based on shared normality.\(^{38}\) Roderick Ferguson has placed women of color feminism (and Black lesbians as central to this project) as providing a major alternative to neoliberal normativity. He states that “women of color feminism attempted to dislodge interpretations of racial domination from the normative grip of liberal capitalism.”\(^{39}\) Furthermore, he argues that women of color feminism is an epistemological, social, cultural, and political formation that challenged the “normative hues” of oppositional movements, including civil rights, women’s and Black power movements.\(^{40}\) My analysis of the fiction in this book shows that Black lesbian writers are beneficiaries of and contributors to a reconceptualization of Black resistance to include gender variance as well as sexual transgression and the epistemological frameworks that forge those practices. As C. Riley Snorton has pointed out, Black lesbian feminism is a tradition that is based on a racial critique of gender categories. The work of early Black feminist
writers and activists paved the way for a reimagining of Black embodiment along gender lines.\textsuperscript{41} It is therefore no surprise that literature by Black lesbians gives an unprecedented accounting of the sexual and gender diversity of Black communities. They contest what Rinaldo Walcott calls a “narrative of coherency” about Black gender\textsuperscript{42} and instead represent Black embodiment as unlimited and imaginative: butches/studs, straight transmen, femmes, bigender folk, women-loving-women, transwomen, drag kings, gay men, bisexuals, feminine transmasculine/masculine transfeminine people, and gay-attracted transmasculine people.\textsuperscript{43} For Black people to claim gender at all is brave given the array of violences enacted physically and epistemologically to strip us from gendered being. Thus to claim such an assemblage of creative interpretations of the self is also dangerous in its dizzying audacity and flagrant noncompliance with the terms of our dehumanization.

**Negated by the Negated: Disremembering the Queer**

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*\textsuperscript{44}

This quote from *Beloved* introduces us to the condition of the disremembered that *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* addresses in relation to Black queerness. Morrison reminds us that we cannot remember those we do not miss. In many ways this book is about the dead—both those who have physically passed on from this material plane of existence, and the figuratively “dead.” The figuratively dead are those who have never been recognized as fully human to begin with, the dispossessed and disremembered. My discussion of the “dead” is in conversation with many different scholars, including Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Sharon Holland, Abdul JanMohamed, and Orlando Patterson. What these scholars have in common is an acknowledgment that “some subjects never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the ‘living.’”\textsuperscript{45} For these purposes, “living” is having available to oneself a full range of subjectivity and citizenship; and the status of nonliving reflects that “residual subject relations” set in motion from slavery and colonialism are still active in the dominant imaginary, remaining uninterrupted by the formal ends of those systems.\textsuperscript{46} I am particularly interested in the ramifications of Black figurative death on Black queers, especially gender-variant people. I contend that Black queers are, in many
respects, dead to Black memory and that this literature is an archive that pays respect to the ancestors and to the “dead,” creating a way to grieve those who have gone unclaimed.

Loss, particularly the loss of homeland, dispersal, and rupture of subjectivity, are critical elements of the diasporic condition, which itself is embedded in the Black experience. Part of the constitution of Blackness is negation and displacement. Institutions like MoAD are created to remember the loss, but even there, Black queers do not figure into the collective memory. The Black queer falls even deeper into the abyss of negation because we are not even part of the memory of loss. We are not grieved by the collective; our claims are rejected as inauthentically Black and “un-African.” We are disremembered and unrecognized by our own—negated by the negated, dissociated from Black memory.47

According to Freud, dissociation occurs as a result of intrapsychic conflict. The ego actively represses memories of traumatic events in order to “protect itself from experiencing the painful affects associated with them.”48 This reflex to self-protection re-emerges on a collective level with the process of dissemblance, wherein Black women do not reveal details about their sexual lives out of their distrust of the archives.49

The insidious, poisonous violence of the idea that Blackness represents sexuality and gender gone wrong has affected the Black collective unconscious to such an extent that it is an act of self-care not to know its own members. Trauma situates Blacks in a peculiar predicament in relation to the past, such that dissemblance is necessary to keep certain events of violation hidden and unspoken. I further contend that part of the effect of trauma is not only to keep elements of the past hidden but also, as an added measure of self-protection, to disremember them—to erase them from collective memory. The Black collective unconscious, as Fanon saw it, is bombarded by the values of the colonizer to the extent that it turns to self-hatred. The result is that the Black queer is the “phobogenic object,” the anxiety-producing mnemonic that signals to the unconscious that it must protect itself from remembering.50 A phobogenic object that threatens to unearth the amnesic defenses created through repression, the queer becomes dead to Black memory.

One of the consequences of the stealing of Black bodies and cultures for the transcontinental slave trade is that Black people are profoundly concerned with historical memory, or how historical narratives live in collective memories of the past. Given centuries of grotesque distortion of Blackness in every form of representation (history, law, literature, philosophy, film, public media), for Black people, one of the only available resources of historical documentation is memory. Two beautifully poetic essays, Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s “Black
Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” are useful guides through the choppy waters of making use of fiction as an alternate archive when collective memory falters. As Hartman suggests, for certain Black subjects the formal archive is a “casket,” a grave, a “death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property . . . [and] an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”

Telling a story about lives (and deaths) of abject people is a process of insurgent counterhistory and reclaimed memory. The pathway to the thoughts and the “picture of the everyday life” of the forgotten is a route forged through the imagination of those looking for them. When the formal archive fails and (collective) memory is a catacomb of the worthy dead, or what Judith Butler calls “grievable life,” then “sometimes [one] has to create [one’s] own history.”

I have stated elsewhere that any picture of the quotidian that reveals so-called deviant behavior is excised from any formal accounting of lived experience as a measure of self-protection for the individual and for the collective “self.” Therefore, Black women and Black queer people have a reasonable distrust in the archives. The desire to “retriev[e] what remains dormant” and “[listen] for the unsaid,” leads to the impulse to find recourse in different sources of knowledge. In this case, the archive of knowledge is found not in a particular edifice or set of official documents, but through the fictional accounting of a dispersed set of practices, discourses, and feelings available to the imagination in order to utter the “unspeakable.” The Black lesbian fiction analyzed in this book is a method of addressing the violence of excision from Black memory and of Black queer self-articulation. It is also a history counter to humanism, creating, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley describes, a “new geography . . . of sexual, gendered, transnational and racial identities” and a “queer, unconventional and imaginative archive” of resistance.

In this volume, I look at acts that both resist the dominant oppression and simultaneously entangle the protagonists in forms of domination. I offer this as an expansion of Cathy Cohen’s definition of resistance that emphasizes that “political resistance is the intent to defy laws, interactions, obligations, and normative assumptions viewed as systematically unfair.” In addition, I want to stress that I do not want to suggest that resistance is always meant to result, or does result, in the overturning or transcendence of current structures. Rather, resistance is simply pushing back against these structures. Blacks who do not attempt to conform to dominant standards of heterosexuality or who dare to define their own genders are clearly moving against the basic conditions of our enslavement and colonization. The boldness of this enterprise is made even more intrepid given that this is an analysis of Black queer resistance imagined from the perspective of dispossessed and disenfranchised poor and working-class communities. As Cohen
states, there is potentially much to be gained in Black Studies more broadly by paying attention to those who “are reminded daily of their distance from the promise of full citizenship.”

Reconstructing History: Historiographic Literature

To have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is a voluptuous intrigue: to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness made like art.

—Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return

As suggested in Dionne Brand’s quote from A Map to the Door of No Return, Black memory is filled with the fiction of empires. These texts challenge the normative strains of Black memory for its colonized fictions of a past without queers. They enact what M. Jacqui Alexander describes as an “expansive memory” of the past. Expansive memory, as Alexander defines it, is not “bound by the limits of time, enclosed within the outlines of a map, encased in the physicality of body, or imprisoned as exhibit in a museum,” nor is it bound, I would add, by definitions of sexuality or the limits of genre. I identify this work as expansive historiographic literature, meaning texts that comment on and re-imagine the past, but without concern for historical verisimilitude. Expansive historiographic texts are not bound by the thick description and period detail that historical fiction demands.

My idea of historiographic fiction is partially adapted from literary scholar Linda Hutcheon’s term “historiographic metafiction,” which is concerned with the postmodern “incredulity towards realism.” Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction accounts for fictional work that resists realist conventions while maintaining a self-reflexivity about the act of writing fiction and the act of writing history. Her definition relies on the interplay between history and parody in order to assert that “both history and literature [are] human constructs.” The work that I analyze in this book departs from Hutcheon’s definition precisely in its ability to offer commentary not necessarily through parody but through recreations of standard refrains of Black memory. The juxtaposition of historiographic and anachronistic (or expansive) representation emphasizes the temporal contradictions of the texts in their own performance of queering Black time and space. They simultaneously offer reverence toward history and push back against it through rebellious narratives that insist on interfering in the familiar
heterosexual and normatively gendered story of the past, creating anachronism by centering queers who “don’t belong” in the historical narratives as they are currently known. From slave cabins and cane fields to juke joints and jazz clubs, from the neighborhood organizing meeting to the revolutionary assembly, Black lesbian fiction trespasses on the imagined gender and sexual normativity of the spaces of Black self-making—telling their histories with a queer difference.

The fiction analyzed in this volume irresolutely moves “with and against” the normative version of Black memory such as the ones in the permanent exhibits in MoAD. Historiographic fiction performatively queers the temporalities associated with particular historical narratives, often interfering in established timelines. For example, Jackie Kay’s novel Trumpet refers to Black presence in Scotland during the turn of the twentieth century, well before the 1950s Windrush era, thereby disrupting the conventional narrative of Black migration to Scotland. The texts also blend temporalities, at once recreating the patterns of speech, dress, and other details from a bygone era and mixing them with the vernacular expressions or tone that suggests the contemporary period in which the text was written. Though Laurinda Brown’s The Highest Price for Passion, for example, is set on a nineteenth-century plantation, its characters approach each other in a blending of nineteenth- and twenty-first-century speech, thereby imagining a language for the contemporary complexities of woman-to-woman sexual desire that has its roots in slavery’s ways of meaning.

Vernacular Epistemologies

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing . . . is often in narrative forms.

—Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”

These texts situate vernacular modes and folk traditions that have been used to resist racism as queer aesthetic forms. These practices have allowed African diasporic communities to survive despite brutal and rapacious anti-Black violence and socioeconomic exploitation and deprivation. Black lesbian writers use this rich tradition and highlight that vernacular practices have always included explicit commentary on heterosexism and gender oppression. In doing so, they have created representations that not only challenge racist and misogynist hierarchies but also push the boundaries of Black politics to consider forms of sexual and gender nonconformity as part of a Black
tradition of resistance to anti-Black oppression. Furthermore, by representing stories of the working-class masses of Black queer people, they establish an archive of Black queer voices “from below” that are very rarely heard anywhere else.75

This book thus looks at the impact of Black vernacular culture from a queer theoretical perspective, specifically revising the function of performance, blues, and jazz as structures that enable gender transition and fluidity as well as same-sex desire. I also expand the definition of vernacular culture to include embodied practices of pleasure and erotic desire, arguing that they emerge from specific economic and historical conditions that mitigate abjection as well as create communal bonds, thereby restructuring Black collectivity in relationship to queerness.

By placing texts set in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and the UK in dialogue with each other, I figure “vernacular culture” not as belonging to one people but as expanding as diasporic practices. My choice to do so looks to suggest not that all points of the diaspora are the same, but rather that people in each geographic locale interpret, envelope, reorganize, and transform cultural practices in queer ways. Through a process of constructing an archive of “memory, fantasy, narrative and myth,” the need for a “law of origin”—for a consistent and tangible “home”—is not dependent on a single physical site that holds the key to authenticity.76 What’s also important is that vernacular cultures do not stop at their reformulation in Toronto, or Detroit, or Grenada, or Glasgow, but continue on, making the circuit again and again to be remade and reconstituted in a never-ending exchange of repositioning, unfolding “beyond the arbitrary closure” it makes.77 As Dionne Brand suggests in the quote above, self-creation is an art of recreation across and despite the boundaries of empire.

The Black queer ancestor is an unimaginable figure in mainstream diasporic memory. That she does not exist is a fiction of domination, an effect of trauma that has made her illegible even in alternative archives. To speak of her, one has to be creative and seize the means of archival production while pointing to her absence in written history and in memory. Black lesbian writing, then, is a practice of historical commentary, a trespass against demands of evidence, finding recourse and voice through the creation of imaginative counternarratives and embodied practices. The Queer Limit of Black Memory tunes into the complicated way that novels and short stories by Black lesbian writers take up the trope of voice and engage with Black-vernacular written performance and phonic cultures, amplifying their voices to resonate with and trouble the established heterosexuality and gender normativity of Black memory. Black feminist writer Ntozake Shange’s classic For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf
laments the desire to hear a “Black girl’s song.” In these instances the content of a Black girl’s song expands to explore the lives of transgender women, femme gay men, butch lesbians, and so on. In other words, Black lesbians remix what is expected from a Black female voice and sing a decidedly queer song. The practice of remixing is a task that requires new epistemes. As Sylvia Wynter argues: “the re-writing” of the subject “must necessarily entail the un/writing of our present normative defining of the secular mode of the Subject.” This book considers Black lesbian deployment and development of vernacular practices and discourses as a basis of knowledge for the revision or “un/writing” of the normative Black memory, which has been especially challenged in these texts through the representation of gender-variant or transgender characters. As Karin Knorr-Cetina says in *Epistemic Cultures*, there are cultures that “create and warrant knowledge.” I identify the slave narrative, blues, jazz, performance, the erotic, and the spiritual to be Black vernacular sources of knowledge that are critical tools for re-remembering the past.

Epistemology is a politically relevant practice. Black queer literature represents real-world changes in the way that we know things, a shift in knowledge. I underscore fiction and imagination’s ability to assert potential into systems of knowledge. This is admittedly not the work of the first-hand account. However, the act of reimagining has just as much to do with reminding us that there are those who are being lost in the present, who are slipping out of memory before our eyes and at the tips of our fingers, as it does with populating the past with forgotten subjects. Reimagining is the process of taking something that has already been conceived of and recreating it with new elements, thereby infusing the past with difference. These texts rely heavily on embodied knowledge to attest to the ways that Black experience can be restaged, “heard, remembered, and understood.” Reimagining the past gives us the ability to say now what was unsayable then. The “already said” is resurrected into a possibility that could help in reimagining the ever-unfolding present.

Black queer cultures come into being as a result of and despite violence and displacement. Recent works by Darieck Scott and Gloria González-López argue that violence is a productive site of knowledge. Scott asks readers to stop avoiding “uncomfortable questions” in order to examine Black abjection as a form of epistemology, from which he considers how “pain or discomfort” is put to “multifarious uses.” In focusing on the point of violation, Scott argues for the “value [in] identifying with violated ancestors.” The site of suffering is also a site of release of internalized domination. In “Epistemologies of the Wound: Anzaldúan Theories and Sociological Research on Incest in Mexican Society,” Gloria González-López describes
the importance of what she calls the collective wounds as an “epistemological location” that she identifies as a space of irresolution that, in “the midst of complex ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions,” allows transformation. Reimagining past violences and sites of resistance has the potential to remind those of us in the present to be aware of those falling around us: falling into violence, falling into mass incarceration, falling into despair. It could help us to remember what it is about the moments of erotic pleasure and creativity that are such valuable sources of knowledge.

**Archives: Using New Epistemes, Revising Traditions**

What are queer versions the Black past? If Black people living during and around the time of the diaspora were to listen to Black queer voices, what would they hear? The texts that I discuss in this volume reenvision Black poor and working-class communities through a politics of improvisation as opposed to a politics of respectability. In jazz, the improvisation solo moves with and in contradistinction to the melody. In similar ways, these texts work with and against the politics of respectability and normative gender categories to create an irresolute revision of those traditions. They deliberately rework the beloved tropes of the neo-slave, migration, and diasporic narrative—replacing the assumed normative genders and heterosexuality associated with these genres with main characters that are queer, bodies that do not conform to their biological function, pleasures that come from unexpected places, and sexualities that eschew the homo/hetero binary.

Slavery is the door through which this analysis of expansive historiographic fiction enters. Through readings of four contemporary works about slavery, generally known as neo-slave narratives—“Louisiana, 1850” by Jewelle Gomez, “Miss Hannah’s Lesson” by LaShonda Barnett, “The Champagne Lady” by SDiane Adamz-Bogus, and the novel *The Highest Price For Passion* by Laurinda D. Brown—I consider the neo-slave narrative as a form of vernacular epistemology, which foregrounds the role of desire and pleasure in literary and historical narratives of female sexual abjection. These texts reimagine the psychosexual dynamics of the plantations, especially the sexual servitude between female slave and slave owner (who, it is too often left unsaid, can also be female); they expose the intimate nature of bondage and comment on racial passing as a gendered practice. These works are particularly significant given the centrality of slavery in African American literary scholarship and the lack of attention to issues of homoerotic desire in the peculiar institution. I analyze the focus on woman-to-woman sexual relationships in slavery as part of the authors’ attempts to recuperate agency.
for the Black female slave. Using these short stories, I posit that representations of sexual relations between Black and white women in slavery function as a way to reimagine Black women’s resistance to racial and sexual abjection. The mulatta (often depicted as “tragically” not white enough and eschewing Blackness) shows up in many of the narratives of same-sex desire represented in this volume. In the neo-slave narratives I have gathered here, the mulatta is depicted as an “undead” personage situated between the social death of slavery and liberal subjectivity. She is a figure that represents the potential of Black femininity, yet she refuses heterosexual resolution and is transformed into a complex figure of sexual agency.

The mulatta figure also emerges in Her through the main character, Sunshine/Kali. In Cherry Muhanji’s revision of the migration novel, the characters’ embrace of irresolute genders and sexual relationships provide them with a method of resistance to abjection. Her also introduces the blues as an epistemological practice embodying Black queer memory, both as a queer aesthetic form and as a counterpublic space wherein Black sexuality and gender identity are reimagined through performance. Muhanji’s novel constructs a blues of mobility, repetition, and improvisation that infuses bisexual, lesbian, and gender-transgressive narratives with both a Black cultural foundation and a queer predilection for boundary crossing. The novel’s main female character, Sunshine, has a male alter ego named Kali. Sunshine/Kali uses the blues to enact a gender transformation in the middle of the novel and to subvert traditional expectations of the “tragic mulatta” trope. This second chapter of The Queer Limit of Black Memory (like the third chapter) expands on previous scholarship that has documented how African American women blues singers of the early twentieth century used the blues to express female masculinity and desire for other women. I suggest that in Black lesbian fiction, the blues functions as an epistemological framework through which (trans)gender practices are reimagined for transfeminine as well as transmasculine people, thereby expanding the ways in which Black femininity and womanhood are imagined and understood. As a novel, Her is a theoretically sophisticated text in its formulation of African American migration involving multiple points of transformation. Movement happens on a number of levels as Blackness is represented as a dynamic and living cultural and political practice that is evidenced in the characters’ literal and symbolic transitions across boundaries.

Throughout the texts, the characters’ processes of transition are documented through performance, commenting on history through the vernacular. For example, the reinscription of the blues in a queer context in Her both revises the migration genre, including the traditions that form its foundations, and reinterprets the historical archive to foreground the influence of
performance in the formation of Black queer communities. The third and fourth chapters of this book also centrally locate performance as a practice of vernacular epistemologies and as a space that allows for nonbinary gender identities to be affirmed and for variant sexual desires to flourish. As Jill Dolan argues, performance “provides a place where people come, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”

However, instead of enacting what Dolan calls a “radical humanism,” these texts question Enlightenment humanism as a framework for Black queer self-fashioning.

Sharon Bridgforth’s two published books—the bull-jean stories and love conjure/blues—as well as her currently unpublished play, delta dandi, are set in unspecified African American rural southern communities, resituting the blues and the juke joint as a “queer space” in the heart of African diasporic spiritual traditions. As Bridgforth stated in our 2009 interview, she considers herself a griot (historical storyteller) illuminating and retelling familiar stories, but with the forgotten queer subject at their center. My chapter devoted to her work demonstrates the ways that the divine is embodied in her texts, marking the text’s aim to archive ancestral memory in the body of the reader/audience/performer as well as its meditation on how the written word can itself become an embodied and divinely inspired performative instrument.

In both Bridgforth’s work as a whole and in the novel Her, the early and mid-twentieth century are remembered respectively as times when rural and urban Black communities created counterpublic, working-class places where performing the blues meant expressing sexual and gender fluidity not only for the performers but also for the audience members. These authors reimagine the blues space as providing a respite from the racial exploitation of industrial and agricultural labor by offering a place where Black queer people could have their own gender identities and sexualities without fear of condemnation. The blues and the spiritual work in partnership in Bridgforth’s plays and texts as interconnected epistemologies that make it possible to queerly reenvision transatlantic flow of ancestral memory.

Scottish author Jackie Kay’s 1998 novel Trumpet is an occasion to consider Black migration on a larger scale through the cross-Atlantic circulation of culture, specifically jazz, and its contribution to the construction of gender for diasporic Black communities. Trumpet is a fascinating example of the diasporic narrative, a text that explores the past, present, and future effects of the transatlantic transit and trade of African bodies. The novel’s main character is Joss Moody, a Black transgendered man born in Scotland of a white mother and an African father. The novel resists resolution; the revelation of Joss Moody’s female birth causes a scandal that rocks the world
of Moody’s wife and son, disallowing the narrative to rest comfortably in normativity. *Trumpet* is set entirely in Scotland and England yet continually challenges the notion of a Black subjectivity bound to the nation-state through its use of jazz as a diasporic signifier that ties Black (queer) people together across the diaspora.

Dionne Brand’s 1996 novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, tells another story of diaspora through woman-to-woman sexual desire. It is a lyrical and haunting narrative of the brief but significant relationship between a sugar cane worker and a revolutionary activist during the final days of the Grenadian socialist regime. The text asserts their belonging in the memory of the Caribbean and in the revolutionary consciousness of the Black diaspora. Struggles for national liberation are the backdrop to the story of the two women’s desperate search for “home” and belonging. The disappearance of Black queer subjects from the diasporic memory of resistance compounds the loss already felt from the irrevocable robbery of “home” and “homeland” suffered through slavery. The novel suggests that an alternative to searching for “home” in a physical location is in the belonging that can be found in another’s arms. The love between the two main characters is the basis for an epistemology of the erotic that serves as a channel for a change in consciousness for the cane worker, Elizete. She finds the erotic to be a life-saving gift that flows through her and opens her to experiences other than violent exploitation. Meanwhile, her lover, Verlia, chooses the path laid out by revolutionary rhetoric, only to find that it is not expansive enough to move her from alienation to belonging.

Each of these examples looks inward to Black queer experience to reconstitute Black collectivity, acknowledge the generative power of Black queer resistance strategies, and archive the disremembered creativity and multiplicity of Black sexual and gender identities. This work speaks back to real-life consequences of disassociating queerness from Black conscious memory. Returning to Morrison’s poignant assertion that the forgotten go unclaimed, we see that these authors resituate the queer into Black memory in a context of Black queer death ungrieved. If no one remembers our names, then who will grieve our deaths?

My reading of the fictional texts suggests that there are many more lives to grieve than previously realized.92 A politics of civility and respectability would demand that Black people claim a collective mourning, which, according to Freudian definition, is a signal that resolution is possible and that Black grief and perhaps even Black anger and discontent will finally come to an end.93 However, grief is a productive affect that resists amnesia.

*The Queer Limit of Black Memory* concludes with a meditation on the effect of the dissociative process in which the Black queer is repressed in Black collective imagination. One consequence is the inability for Black
people to grieve queer death on a collective scale. On October 28, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 into law. The symbolic force of Matthew Shepard, killed in a homophobic assault in 1998, standing as emblematic of queer death next to James Byrd, killed in a racist lynching in the same year, representing Black death, demonstrates the extent to which Black death and queer death are considered mutually exclusive in the broader imagination and for Black people in particular. However, our deaths do not go completely unnoticed. As *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* tells us, Black queer people find creative ways to remember each other and to grieve for ourselves when others do not. In our grief we create an ever-expanding archive of Black queer innovations in Black experience, resistance, and self-making.