The Queer Limit of Black Memory

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“Mens Womens Some that is Both
Some That is Neither”

Spiritual Epistemology and Queering the
Black Rural South in the Work of Sharon Bridgforth

deep woods crossroads/the dead       living
it’s a party.
the dice is tossed . . .
again
drumming
again
drumming
again!

—Sharon Bridgforth, love conjure/blues 1–2

The opening lines of Sharon Bridgforth’s 1999 performance novel love conjure/blues begins with an invitation to re-remember African American southern ancestors from the early twentieth century. In Bridgforth’s work, the South is a locus of Black queer life and the birthplace of Black queer identities and desires. The opening pages of love conjure/blues are emblematic of Bridgforth’s ability to straddle poetry, drama, and prose simultaneously as a method for bringing the text to the crossroads of ancestral memory and spiritual practices. The space between the words “dead” and “living” suggests the break between dimensions or states of consciousness. In Bridgforth’s work, the meanings of
“dead” that I have been working with in this volume—in terms of physical and social death—come together as the characters represent the spirits of the past and remember the disremembered. As Jacqui Alexander suggests, the crossroads is “that imaginary from which we dream the craft of a new compass.” Trauma, ritual, and celebration are what bring the dead and the divine together at the opening of the novel. The phrase “it’s a party in the deep woods” indicates that the setting for the action in the text will be a juke joint, a small, out-of-the-way club usually built by hand or barely kept from falling apart with love and prayers. Juke joints were constructed as a resistance to external impositions from racial and sexual regimes that regulated and attempted to delimit Black families, communities, bodies, and desires according to outside gendered and sexual norms.

Bridgforth has published two books of fiction written in verse and several plays, all of which are tributes to remembering the disremembered Black queer ancestors of the rural South. Her published work includes a collection of short fiction titled *the bull-jean stories* (1996) and the previously mentioned performance novel, *love conjure/blues* (1999). Bridgforth often directs (or “conducts,” in her terms) her plays and performances, including her 2009 play *delta dandi*. As an artist dedicated to dialogue between various forms, Bridgforth actually performs her books before they are published. Trained as a filmmaker, Bridgforth was the founder, writer, and Artistic Director of the root wy’mn Theatre Company from 1993 to 1998. She is a cofounder of the writing and performance collective known as The Austin Project, started in 2002 in Austin, Texas.

Bridgforth’s commitment to the principle of body-centered knowledge in her work gives us an opportunity to see the fruits of her dialogue between embodied performance and textuality. Building on Diana Taylor’s work on embodied performance as a repertoire—or the living, ephemeral document of the lives of those who do not have access to written strategies or formal archives—it is important to remember that textuality can also be an embodied practice and can work in conjunction with, not against, live performance. There is no contradiction between the archive and the repertoire in Bridgforth’s work, as she uses embodied knowledge to construct the written text and creates a performative text. As Meta DuEwa Jones suggests, there is a significant and overlooked oral, visual, and graphic component to jazz-influenced written poetry that could be considered part of a variation in performance style in itself. I analyze the play *delta dandi*, alongside the texts of *love conjure/blues* and *the bull-jean stories*, to highlight how these forms connect as an archive of Black queer Southern ancestral memory.

Each of her texts depicts early twentieth-century rural life at the crossroads, blending poetry, theater, and fiction to imagine Black communities
in the interstices of gender and sexual norms. The books and plays are epic stories of Black ancestral memory brought to life in tales of rural queer communities. Karla F. C. Holloway states that the presence of ancestors in African American women's literature is a “cultural (re)membrance of a dimension of West African spirituality.” Ancestral memory is literalized in Bridgforth’s work as the characters, who themselves inhabit the world of the early twentieth-century U.S. South, are in direct contact with slaves, precolonial and preslave ancestors on the African continent, and recently deceased ancestors. The characters communicate with the physically dead through women who have knowledge of ancient African and native American medicines and through the blues space of the juke joint.

This chapter migrates back to the rural U.S. South in order to reconsider its potential as a queer space. In the previous chapters that examine neo-slave narratives and Cherry Muhanji’s migration narrative, the rural South is a space that has limited representational possibility for Black desire of any kind. Both in Muhanji’s novel and in the neo-slave narratives, Black desire (especially for other Black people) is circumscribed by the plantation economy, which has a destructive reach well into the twentieth century. Muhanji’s novel suggests that not only does the early twentieth-century South signify the specter of racial violence, but it also is burdened with an invisible history of Black female sexual obligation that forecloses the development of desire between Black women. For Muhanji, the blues, and its concomitant expansion of genders, can take hold only in the generative setting of the North. Bridgforth joins Muhanji in reclaiming the blues as a gender- and sexually variant practice, but she extends its relationship to Black queer memory by situating the blues as a southern Black queer phenomenon as well as an urban one. This remaking of the South into a queer space is accomplished not only through the blues but also by creating a link to vernacular spiritual practices. Spiritual epistemology, as it emerges in Bridgforth’s work, is centered on the communal practices of ceremony that are found in formalized, ritual spaces, but more often in the quotidian activities of the juke joint. The juke joint becomes an interstitial space where the physical and spiritual worlds meet, which encourages the elevation of the consciousness of individuals and the community through extended contact with the divine. The community in Bridgforth’s writing extends beyond the material reality of the seen world into the realm of the spirit.

Bridgforth’s work allows us to consider gender variance as part of the interstices of Black existence—the interior of what Fred Moten calls “the break” into the realm of spirit epistemology, or conscious contact with ancestral memory. We will see in the next chapter that Jackie Kay exam-
ines the space between memory and death to sustain the trans narrative in *Trumpet.* Bridgforth relies on a situated spirit consciousness developed at the crossroads between the material world and the spirit world to sustain a both/and approach to Black genders without compromise. The recasting of Black genders is important given that conforming to gender norms is a crucial way that Black people mitigate “the permanent obliquity” of Blackness, or the open question of Black humanity.\textsuperscript{10} As Sylvia Wynter has noted, Western epistemes are split between clerical/lay and body/spirit in order to maximize hierarchies.\textsuperscript{11} Bridgforth rejects the separation of spirit and flesh as distinct and disparate sources of knowledge. Her work unites the ancestral knowledge of the divine with the flesh that was torn and ripped in the brutality of the Middle Passage and the plantation. The flesh, lacerated by the whip, provides crucial knowledge about Black “ungender[ing]”\textsuperscript{12} which is the basis for what I contend is Black gender irresolvability under Western epistemologies of the human. However, according to West African cosmologies, the flesh, no matter how degraded by human brutality, is the conduit for divine manifestation in the material world.\textsuperscript{13} Bridgforth’s fiction and drama situate gender diversity at the core of Black vernacular practices through their diasporic connection to West African spiritual epistemology.

**The Crossroads**

In West African–based practices as they have reemerged in the Americas, on the other side of the Middle Passage, the best-known Orisha (or Lwa of Vodou) are often referred to as the seven African powers, which include both male and female spirits: Eleggua, Oshun, Ogun, Yemanya, Oya, Shango, and Obatala.\textsuperscript{14} Each deity has dominion over a specific natural force (e.g., rivers, wind, lightning, the ocean) and also is generally represented on their altar by particular objects that reflect their powers and characters (e.g., peacock feathers, honey, watermelon, cigars). In Yoruba practice, and also Vodou, Santería, and Candomblé, the relationship between the human and the divine is directly negotiated through embodiment. The initiate or devotee is “mounted” or possessed by the Orisha. The human and the spirit are one. The Orisha speaks through their possessed host in a communal ceremonial context. According to these traditions, Eleggua is the deity that stands at the crossroads and facilitates communication between the human and spirit realms. According to Yoruba priestess/scholar Luisah Teish, “All ceremonies begin and end with Him; and no one can speak to any of the other powers without first consulting Eleggua. He translates the language of humans into that of the Gods.”\textsuperscript{15} Though Eleggua is traditionally associ-
ated with maleness and the penis, women including Audre Lorde have been known to be children or priestesses of Eleggua. I read Eleggua in Bridgforth as a force of gender and sexual irresolution, opening up the crossroads for a queer path to the divine and broader possibilities for the interpretation of the Black body and desire. Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies Eleggua as the figure of African American rhetorical trickstering in the form of the Signifyin(g) Monkey. Lamonda Stallings uncovers an “underengaged phenomenon of trickster-troping in Black female culture that seeks to articulate various sexual desires.” In this body of work, the Eleggua figure emerges in order to open a corridor to the divine that unhinges gender and sexuality from the responsibility to adhere to dichotomous structures throughout the community; in Muhanji’s work, the proliferation of Black queer genders eventually gives way to the bifurcated split between “women” and “men” at the end of the novel. Bridgforth’s use of spiritual epistemology restructures Black gender roles and leaves gender categories open. Black masculinities are expanded to include mothering as well as collective caretaking. The feminine is especially associated with divinity, as feminine characters throughout Bridgforth’s oeuvre are the ones who open direct communication with the spirit realm as well as function as symbols of West African deities themselves. In addition, several characters are both male and female, or masculine and feminine, calling attention to a bigendered segment of Black communities and complicating the boundaries between queerness and heterosexuality.

The following analysis moves between gender identities and gender presentations of the characters in all three works. Feminine characters in Bridgforth are often guardians of divine space; they are key figures that bring communities together with the divine throughout Bridgforth’s work. The masculine characters are not as much conduits for divine communication as they are representations of the beauty and pitfalls of masculine identification. Some of the masculine characters, like Bull-Jean, exude emotional and sensual authenticity, while others are caught in a gender equation that associates masculinity with violence and abuse. All three pieces feature iconic feminine characters who are not only beautiful, but also powerful leaders in the community. The feminine main characters run the communal gathering places, which are blues spaces and also ceremonial centers. Unlike early scholarship on the blues that claims it is a secular expression of spirituals, Bridgforth’s work represents the blues as a diasporic, spiritual practice. Her texts bring the blues, conjuration, and West African religion together in these visions of the South. Bridgforth depicts the blues as part of a West African–based reverence for the ancestors that includes a pantheon of powerful deities. This combination of blues and spiritual epistemologies allows the characters to defy the gender binary and express themselves in
both masculine and feminine registers and/or to identify as both male and female simultaneously without retreating to the biological determinism that occurs in the final pages of Her.23 By discussing the texts’ various representations of gender embodiment, we see the power of Bridgforth’s work to create a reimagined vision of the African American southern past as full of endless possibilities. Once ancestral memory is freed from the bondage of normativity, we are gifted with a queer vision of Black embodiment.

“Long Nail Girls”: The Feminine Divine

In love conjure/blues Big Mama Sway is the headlining blues singer at Bettye’s juke joint. Similar to the urban blues club in Her, Bettye’s is a space for queer community creation and healing ritual. Big Mama Sway is the representation of the Orisha Eleggua in Yoruba in the text. Bridgforth’s inclusion of a feminine representation of Eleggua as the crossroads figure, Big Mama Sway, suggests a queer understanding of divine energy, disaggregating male or masculine energy from exclusively male anatomy. This insistence on simultaneity is epitomized in Lorde’s “biomythography,” Zami, in which she expresses the desire to “be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me.”24 That Big Mama Sway is the Eleggua figure of the text is a departure from the way in which Henry Louis Gates Jr. situates Eleggua’s command over “indeterminacy”25 in his ability to connect the “sacred with the profane” and “text with interpretation” with his “enormous penis” and powers of copulation.26 Big Mama Sway’s movement from side to side opens the path to ceremony and emotion for the text’s audience members. Consistent with Eleggua’s power of nommo, or the word, the sound of her voice awakens the community to ritual, releases the pain of trauma, and connects them to the divine:27

it was the sound of heat/perfectly pitched.
heat so clear you could see yourself/past
the seem-to-be laughter the thickened memories . . .
packed tight woman carried you in her voice
so deep between her notes till
wasn’t nothing left to do but stretch out in her sound
and cry
about everything there ever was
cry (22)

Big Mama Sway’s voice “unrumbles the earth” (22), creating an opening between the community, the divine, and the ancestral spirits. All pretenses
of happiness and masking fall away, and all those who covered their sorrow with “seem-to-be-laughter” are released. The community is carried to trance by the swaying of bodies, the beat of the instruments, and the open invitation in Big Mama Sway’s voice. In these moments she is the holy priestess or mambo of the community, bringing them into the arms of a spirit where they are safe enough to “stretch out in her sound and cry.” In this moment of ritual, Bridgforth’s juke joint has a lot in common with a peristil, a Vodou dance space that also helps facilitate community survival. Marie Lily Cerat remembers the peristil as a welcoming environment:

The building seemed always to have the space to accommodate the passing traveler, the pregnant teenager just thrown out of her house, or the unemployed laborer who could not afford sleeping quarters. Anyone in need, including those with what was called in whispers the “unmanly” or “unnatural” disease, found a home in the peristil. It belonged to the community; the door was always open.28

Like the peristil, the juke joint becomes an interstitial space where those castaways from society can find solace and where the physical and spiritual worlds meet through the music. With the proper guidance of a skilled priestess, the space itself is meant to encourage the elevation of the consciousness of individuals and the community through extended contact with the divine.

As a representative of Eleggua in the text, Big Mama Sway is a link to the spirits. She is at the crossroads between the living world, the spirits of the ancestors, and the unborn. During the day, she is a conjure woman or healer who cultivates a garden of flowers and healing herbs while she speaks to “the babies to come” (57), the unborn children who are on the way. She and the narrator are given the gift of third sight to be able to “see” and speak to future generations, to help prepare them for the journey ahead. They are the ones who will be willing and able to listen to the ancestors as they impart their stories and knowledge, even after death.

This lineage of conjure women begins with Isadora Africa, the “first/African conjuration woman” (56). According to the legend, which is featured prominently in the novel as well as in the love conjure/blues Text Installation performance, Isadora Africa leads an insurrection on the slave plantation that existed in the fictional community of the novel, using only prayer, ritual, and herbs to stop the white owner and overseers in their tracks. The slave community drummer was so feared that the slave owner cut off all of his fingers in an effort to stop the power of the drum. However, through creative resistance, “with him mouth / make sound / gagaga gagaga ga / low to the ground legs bend feet ba ba ba,” he makes rhythm with his mouth and feet (51). This is enough to help Isadora Africa call the force of the spirits,
which ushers in a wind that “lift[s] ole marsha up high in the air drop him down flat on the floor” (52). Isadora Africa’s magic is a primary example of the conjuration that the text represents as one of a constellation of West African–derived practices that exist alongside Yoruba and Vodou. She uses her access to the kitchen and knowledge of medicinal plants to poison the master’s and overseer’s food with the very fingers he took. By the end of the night, all the slaves leave the plantation and “ain’t no plantation no more never since that time /not / on these grounds” (53). The story is passed down through generations, and each time a conjure woman of strength is born, she is given her name. Big Mama Sway’s birth name is Isadora Africa Jr., but “nobody dare speak she birth name / call all them generations of power down” (56).

One deity does respond to their musical supplication for divine manifestation. Change, a “cookie brown woman with tight light brown curls rumbling all the way down / to the bounce on her behind” appears in the juke joint, “swirling a little dust before her” (63–64). When she sang, “the sound that came out shook the entire room”; the power of her voice caused the earth to rumble and the walls to shake (20). From the force with which she swoops in and captures everyone’s attention to the multicolored swirl of her dress, Change is a description of the West African Orisha Oya. In the Yoruba pantheon, Oya is a “patron of feminine leadership” and “the Queen of the Winds of Change. . . . She brings about sudden structural change in people and things,” and as a “mistress of disguises” she can appear anywhere without warning. She walks in and heads straight for Bettye’s hard-drinking, masculine ex-lover, Lushy. Change’s targeting of Lushy with her charms brings about a shift in Bettye and Lushy’s relationship, initiating their reconciliation. This moment is also an opportunity for masculine redemption, as Lushy goes from being a “drunk” (9) to making amends with Bettye for her irresponsible and selfish actions.

The benefit of fiction is its potential to expand representation and challenge cultural assumptions. In a predominantly butch/femme working-class African American queer cultural context, femme–femme desire is incongruous. However, the opening pages of *love conjure/blues* dispel the common misperception that feminine desire is inevitably directed toward masculinity. The novel’s plot begins with Nigga Red’s violent relationship with Peachy Soonyay, where she was “whooped on chased down and squished” regularly (3). Peachy finds the courage to leave Red through her affair with Bitty Fon. The narrator describes both Bitty and Peachy as feminine women:

> see/bitty and peachy what you call long nail girls.
> each one primp and fuss over they hair outfts and
lipstick nails and shoes shape and such and all and
well/we thinking them two fluffing up for a trouser
wo’mn or a man or
both/but nobody figure they been giving attention
to one the other. (3)

Consistent with stereotypical representations that associate femininity with superficiality, Bitty and Peachy are seen as impossible lovers because, as the narrator explains, “how / on earth / could two primpers / work out all the mirror timing to start the day” (3). The idea that two feminine Black women (femmes) would find the mirror image of themselves desirable is at first a joke, inconceivable in a binary gender system that exists even in queer culture. Bridgforth thus circumvents this limitation by representing Black femininity as the spiritual center of the community in both love conjure/blues and delta dandi.31

In love conjure/blues Bitty Fon is the embodiment of the mixture of African and native American bloodlines and resistance practices. In addition to getting her first name because she can “pack more into a teenincy piece of cloth then a fool filling up in a jook jernt” (4), her last name comes from the Fon people of West Africa. She is described as carrying “all of Africa on she lips / in her hips / she Indian earth tones smooth with the Black of her skin / the rise of she cheek bones / bitty fon be more beauty then beauty can take” (29). Through Bitty’s observance of ritual, the text entreats us to “dance pray smudge / remember” Houma, Tunica, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Fon, Ibo, Yoruba, and Wolof, the names of nations captured and/or invaded by European settlers and slavers (26). We are called to remember and imagine these diverse groups meeting in the swamp woods of the rural South and moving with a common reverence for the drum and the earth to resist domination and to free slaves. The memory of their cooperation and common cause is passed down through the generations as “they childrens they childrens they / children carry they story / in cloth / in feet / with hair / when laugh / with drum / Praise memory” (27–28). Bitty is a living connection to that legacy. She “sits with the dead,” which situates her in communication with the spirit realm, especially with the ghosts of those who while alive were most disrespected, disaffected, and disempowered, but who find power after death through their continued presence in the memory of the living (29). Even while in prison for shooting Red, Bitty remembers that she “always must love” and continue the rituals of the warriors from the past that have been passed down “child to child to child . . . smudge sing pray dance drum cry praise laugh” (29). There are many different paths to the divine in the novel. The metaphor of the crossroads aptly describes the position of the narrator
as a witness at the center of intersecting spiritual practices. Bitty Fon takes her ritual practice from an amalgamation of African and native American traditions, while another character, Big Bill, draws on her forefather’s use of the drum and eventually the guitar to call the spirits. Big Mama Sway combines these paths, making her the spiritual center of the novel.

Big Mama Sway is the predecessor to Honeypot, a character in Bridgforth’s subsequent work, *delta dandi*. Honeypot is a woman who has a divinely inspired facility with music, a queenly control over women and men, and a goddess’s ability to seduce both. Honeypot’s segments are more in line with the narrative voice of *the bull-jean stories* and *love conjure/blues* in that they come from outside the perspective of the character to interject the only third-person point of view in *delta dandi*. The Honeypot monologues are also consistent with the juke-joint context of Bridgforth’s published work. Honey is a crucial element in any altar to the Orisha of love, desire, and femininity; Oshun and Honeypot are depicted in accordance with that tradition. In the monologue, Honeypot is described as “tiny as a bee” but powerful enough to “bloody many a big man and woman” (17). She also possesses the wiles to “steal your girlfriend” and intoxicate “her right out her natural mind” as her boyfriend helplessly watches (35). Honeypot earns her reputation for “fairness of opportunity / for ass whoppings” in defense of the integrity of her music (17). A consummate pianist, Honeypot controls the other musicians, showing up “in a gown and pearls” and chastising anyone who is not as focused as she is (18). As a powerful figure of the feminine divine, Honeypot is also called to regulate wayward masculinity. Her band mate, the womanizer Delroy, is “so busy sending mental messages to the womens” that he fails to pay proper respect to the music and to Honeypot. She remedies his inattention:

without missing a beat
honey pot drain she drink/spiral that shot glass in the air
cold cock delroy smack middle of the head.
straighten him out in time to catch the next note
swing the band round the room/so long and so hard till
everybody in the joint spin on out they minds.
baseboards tore to shreds
all the put together that was
now just drip pure nasty. (18–19)

Honeypot and Big Mama Sway are female authority figures who displace the male houngan or babalao in traditional Vodou and Locumi practices, respectively. They anchor the text in feminine energy and power and are
flawed and quick to get angry. Honeypot’s ability to take everyone around her “to the next world” signifies her direct connection to the divine and her place as priestess in the community.

“Trouser Women”: Representing Masculinities

Written as a collection of short stories, Bridgforth’s first book, *the bull-jean stories*, is the text with the most idealized representation of Black masculinity. The protagonist is Bull-Jean, a butch lesbian who is deeply invested in finding and maintaining romantic love. Her focus on love and relationship represents masculinity in search of long-term connection. As a result, Bull-Jean is consistently and publicly searching for a sustaining relationship. A narrator witnesses Bull-Jean’s search for love and provides a community perspective on the various romantic interludes in Bull-Jean’s life, but without judgment. In contrast to the expectation that the African American southern community will reject or disapprove of a character like Bull-Jean, the narrator is protective of Bull-Jean and bolstered by her exploits.

Even when Bull-Jean engages in unethical behavior, she is not rejected for her indiscretions. For example, one of the first stories of the collection, titled “bull-jean slipn in,” features the observations of the narrator as Bull-Jean has a rendezvous with a married woman. The narrator explains that “every day / 5 am / deacon willie / clara’s man / slip out / bull-jean / slip in” (9). Clara and Deacon Willie are a married couple who are both engaged in what the narrator calls “nappy love” (9), or complicated extramarital affairs. The narrator watches each day while the three parties are involved in the same duplicitous ballet. Bull-Jean “slips in” for only thirty minutes a day with Clara. When the narrator confronts Bull-Jean on the impossibility of a relationship with Clara, she replies with a tenderness and vulnerability that distinguishes her masculinity as gentle and romantic. Bull-Jean describes herself as having given her heart away “piece by piece” (11) to women until she does not have anything left to give.

it's almost gonn/my Heart
all i really want
is a kind word
and a smile

and that wo’mn is kind
and she Lovves me and
it don’t’ matter if it’s thirty minutes a day
or ONCE in the next Life
i'll go git her/smile
whenever she'll let me
have it! (12)

Bull-Jean’s declaration that all she wants in this life is a “kind word and smile” goes against the expectation of masculine philandering. Her involvement in an extramarital affair is not a way of establishing a masculine reputation in the community, but a desperate plea for connection. Bull-Jean’s declaration of a desire for love is juxtaposed with a description of her as smooth in a moment of crisis. The narrator witnesses Bull-Jean doing her usual 5 A.M. saunter into Clara’s house only to see Deacon Willie walk back inside five minutes later. In a gesture that challenges the typical historical memory of southern communities’ un receptive attitude to queerness, the narrator goes to get her gun in order to protect Bull-Jean, as opposed to protecting the sanctity of the married couple. In idealized masculine fashion, Bull-Jean gets the upper hand on Deacon Willie, leaving him sitting outside of his own house waiting for his wife and Bull-Jean to finish their tryst. Bull-Jean’s openness about her heartbreak followed by her successful confrontation of Deacon Willie shows the potential for an idealized Black masculine representation to be both forceful and vulnerable. The inclusion of the voices of both the narrator and Bull-Jean allows for alternative perspectives on the Black southern response to queer gender and sexuality.

Furthermore, the text challenges what few representations there are of Black masculine gender transgression in the rural United States, which depict masculine gender-variant people as having no community. For example, in the film version of Lackawana Blues (2005), written by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, the character of Ricky (portrayed by Adina Porter) is the lone butch lesbian in the community of Lackawana, New York. Her character does not experience conflict with the presumably heterosexual and gender-normative townspeople because her inclusion is never tested by a public romantic relationship or by the presence of other queer people. Ricky, although recognized by the narrator as “the closest thing I had to a father,” is isolated in the community. Similarly, in Getting Mother’s Body (2003), a novel set in rural 1960s Texas, the character Dill Smiles is a transmasculine rarity in the otherwise gender-conforming southern town. The town sometimes tolerates Dill’s identity as a man, although this identity is often challenged by references to his birth sex. In contrast, Bull-Jean is not isolated and is joined by a collection of other queer people.

The bull-jean stories and Bridgforth’s work as a whole challenge the primacy of heterosexuality as a coherent organizing structure for Black south-
ern relationships and families. For example, Deacon Willie’s “nappy love” or extramarital affair happens to be with a local feminine gay man named Frosty Jackson. The narrator explains that Deacon Willie “also been squeez-ing frosty jackson’s onion / and frosty got mo suga in him shorts / than the sto got sacks to hold it in” (13). The incident with Clara is not the only time when Bull-Jean interrupts the community’s heterosexual façade. During a wedding ceremony, which is described as the “biggest / two-preacha-four-choir-twelve-deacon / high rolling broom-jump of all time” (44), Bull-Jean objects to the marriage as a “lie-befo-God” (48). Her lover, Safirra, arranges a marriage of convenience with a man in order to gain financial stability and to make her father happy. Bull-Jean formally objects to her wedding, standing before the community in defiance and stating that, “i / the one put on this earth / to walk wid that wo’mn and / I / the one oughta be up there wid her na” (48). She exposes the hypocrisy of their marriage as sanctified and as “god’s choosing.” This, of course, resists the current political rhetoric of the sanctity of heterosexual unions in the public debates about gay marriage. In Bridgforth’s version of the rural African American past, marriage is less about an exclusive holy bond than it is an incomplete picture of the members of Black communities’ desires and sexual practices.

In addition to complicating heterosexuality, Bridgforth represents homophobia as an external violence that interrupts the kinship networks organically established in the community. Bull-Jean is a dutiful caretaker and niece to her aunts, including her aunt Till, who is her great aunt’s lifelong partner. Outside forces interfere in the intricate kinship network and remove Bull-Jean’s son from his home. The last chapter of the novel is his homecom-ing. He explains the back-story of his removal: “they called you unholy / a sinner gonn burn in hell said you was unnatural” (103). He describes his long bitter journey after he was taken from his home and then comes full circle back to it, where he exclaims, “I have missed you mamma. / but I’m back home na / and ain’t nobody gonn come take us apart again / not in this Life!” (107). Even though the son’s story emerges at the end of the novel, it gives us a glimpse into another form of Black maternal representation: the butch mother. In a way that adds dimension to her masculinity, Bull-Jean’s familial relationships bring out her nurturing side. Her son states, “[R]eally in them first twelve years of my life / you taught me how to be a man” (105). He credits her with giving him the best instruction on manhood that he received, even though he was in the army and had male influences in his life. Bull-Jean, along with the other masculine characters in Bridgforth’s work, provides an important and reharmonized contribution to the archive of Black masculine representation, in this case, the masculine maternal. The masculine is reimagined as a nurturing energy in contrast to the persistent
representation of Black masculinity as brutal and violent. Bridgforth’s re- 

ingion of gender presents an opportunity to consider the possibilities for 
Black masculine community and healing.

Even though Bridgforth’s work is about the possibilities for queer Black 
embodiment, she does not portray a utopic southern community, nor does 
she shy away from issues of violence that afflict women’s lives. The narrator in love conjure/blues, who we later learn is an older woman named Cat, 
oberves that as a people, African Americans are “borned to violence. not 
our making and not our choosing. fighting like animals leashed in a pen. 
maimed if we don’t win. killed if we don’t fight” (2). The fight for survival in 
an anti-Black context turns into a struggle against each other and explodes in 
intracommunal violence. In the opening pages we learn that Nigga Red has 
been beating her girlfriend, Peachy Soonyay, for several years. Unbeknownst 
to Red and the rest of the community, Peachy has found true love in the 
arms of another feminine woman, Bitty Fon. In a moment of anger and 
in defense of Peachy, Bitty shoots Red in front of a café full of witnesses. 
Several of the characters then take this incident as an opportunity to heal 
from the detrimental definitions of masculinity. Similarly to the novels Her 
and Trumpet (which I analyze in the following chapter), here Bridgforth 
explores the possibilities of resituating Black masculine identity through 
female-bodied protagonists. Although all of Bridgforth’s characters discussed 
here are born with female anatomy, they embrace masculine identification 
in different ways, and all contribute to the crossroads of uncertainty and 
possibility that Bridgforth creates in her portrayals.

The masculine center of love conjure/blues is Big Bill, who represents the 
Orisha Shango. A force of masculine prowess and passion, Shango speaks 
with authority and is known for drum, dance, and making “bad situations 
better.” As a representation of Shango, Big Bill is a commanding presence 
in the community both as a compelling sexual figure and as a leader. She is 
a locus of attention, wearing a “suit black / hat low / glasses dark / and shoes 
so shining make your head hurt” (9). Much like the relationship between the 
dancer and the drummer, it is the combination of Big Bill’s piano or guitar 
playing and Big Mama Sway’s voice that opens a portal to divine magic and 
ancestral forces. Big Bill entices the patrons at the juke joint as she “walk / 
pants pull here here here / material ripple across she crotch which appear 
packing a large and heavy surprise” (9) while she nonetheless plays the piano 
with an authoritative vigor. She is the novel’s representation of responsible 
masculinity, that is, a character who uses her masculine presence and privi- 
lege in a way that is respectful of femininity, not abusive, and willing to 
create a masculine community based on these same principles. Part of Big
Bill’s role is also to be a mentor and leader for other masculine-identified people in the community.

Through the process of multivocal storytelling, we hear from various masculine-identified characters who together construct a reconstructed representation of Black masculinity. In a late-night gathering, five “brothers,” Lil’ Tiny, Big Bill, Mannish Mary, Lushy, and Guitar Sam, get together to talk about women and masculine responsibility because the youngest one, Lil’ Tiny, has been irresponsible and unprincipled in her relationship. The group gathers around Big Bill as she counsels Tiny, “but the main thing is just / don’t let the wy’ms know you a fool. / and keep your composition at all times” (35). Big Bill’s wisdom is not absolute; it is contested among the group. Each member interjects some point or some wisdom into the conversation, admitting that “ain’t none of us really got it all figured out” (36). Then

```
guitar sam speak up/he say
lil tiny
i’m thinking
you must like feeling alone and hurt . . .
and that’s alright/if that is what you like.
but know this     as long
as you keep on courting pain and misery
thats what you gone find yourself living with. (37)
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With Guitar Sam’s closing words, Lil’ Tiny “just drop she head to the table / and cry” (37). Bridgforth offers an alternative version of Black masculine camaraderie that is based on emotional connection. Their collective humility and care for the feminine women in their lives is the basis for their brotherhood. It is also significant that it is Guitar Sam who gives the most poignant words of the gathering. He is the only one in the group whom the novel identifies with male pronouns. His presence with the others, who are butch lesbians, epitomizes how the novel works along the lines of gender expression and identity as opposed to biological categories. It is unclear whether Guitar Sam was born female or not, and the novel suggests that the answer is irrelevant. It is more imperative that the group is present to support each other and keep each other accountable in a context of masculine privilege.

Similar to the protagonist in the novel *Her*, Big Bill’s story is another example of how the blues is a practice of queer gender. In a poignant moment of unrequited love for the juke-joint operator, Bettye, Big Bill gives her the
chapter 3
gift of intimacy, explaining how she is the recipient of a legacy of Black masculine traditions passed down from father to son. Big Bill’s father, Henry B. Stonwell, imparts to her the elements of Black manhood as he understood it. She is a “guitar man” (23) by birthright from her father:

far back as i can remember daddy had me at his side while he picked that guitar.

once i got old enough/he took me walk them roads to play.
i believe he wanted to show me how to make my life work.
daddy say too many a good song done died in the heart of a fool. don't drink. don't waste your money gambling. groom hard. remember your manners and always/take care of your guitar. that guitar is grandchild of the instrument that our African/pappy passed down to us. it got the power to reach Jesus. (18)

In order to introduce her as his successor, he takes her “on the road” to the “little jook jernts and backyard shacks” (18) where he plays. Even though she has seven brothers (17), Big Bill is her father’s blues apprentice who also instructs her on how to make her “life work,” or how to successfully negotiate what her father sees as the pitfalls of masculinity—alcohol and gambling. As Henry B. Stonwell’s cultural beneficiary, Big Bill is also the heir to an African musical legacy that he designates as male. For Big Bill’s father, the guitar is the instrument of a symbolic African father that evokes the divine. Therefore the responsibility of a “guitar man” is that of a ceremonial companion: to help call forth the spirits into a space.

Big Bill’s role as a ceremonial musician is punctuated by the voices of the ancestors, which precede her story:

i am he that was king/captured sold and shipped for selling i am she whose tongue
they took so as not to tell i am he made to walk chained next to a wagon . . .
we been learned to dream cause in wake we had to be dead.
you is free cause we was captive
you are the one we been waiting for

aaawwhhh (15)

Each line of text is printed in a unique font, indicating a change in voices. Multiple ancestors speak across time to encourage the generation of free
Black people to continue to remember the atrocities and the strength of those who came before. They remind us that our ability to choose the course of our own lives comes at the heavy price of their captivity. One voice says, “I am the one that holds your prayers,” indicating the presence of the ancestral spirit in the most private expression of desire (15). They are all listening and they sing to the beat of the drum, which is represented by the onomatopoeia of the drum beat (gagaga). Following this, we learn of Big Bill’s inherited command of the guitar as a ceremonial instrument.

Revisioning the Ancestors

Bridgforth’s play *delta dandi* carries on *love conjure/blues’s* theme of ancestral voices telling their stories. It represents multiple first-hand accounts from the past lives of one soul, The Gurl, speaking from across centuries of silence with the help of her ancestral spirits and the power of the divine entities. The Gurl speaks the play’s first words, saying, “i remember joking with the moon / i remember jumping in the water i remember hiding in the / trees i remember hanging in the sun i remember gold and / chattel i remember glitter and smoke i remember i i i” (5). The last set of “i i i” is a practice of repetition that serves as a vibrational echo, a ceremonial technique used to usher the main character into memory, calling her back to relive the trauma, in this case, of slavery. The characters are not merely recollecting but reliving the events of her soul across time. Much of the text is from the perspective of characters who do not want to remember but are compelled to do so by forces beyond their control. *delta dandi* portrays a spirit’s journey to bring what would otherwise be repressed into what I call spirit consciousness—one that is held not by an individual but by the collective and mediated by the divine so that it does not overwhelm the mortal body.

The Gurl is overwhelmed by her tragic life circumstances. When she is a child, she sees her mother raped and killed by white men, and when she is only five or six, her remaining family trades her to an abusive woman. She laments that “in my dreams / when i wake / all i do is remember” (5). When she does remember, she is afraid that it will be too painful to bear. She runs from the pain of it, saying, “i don’t know how to die so i just go along. carry all these things. all these things. till once in the black/blue of day i jump. i jump where the waters meet. i jump. cold cold cut me. i jump. pray / carry me to the ocean. please. maybe i find my mama there” (9). The Gurl prays for death and release from suffering, wanting only to forget the past and to embrace oblivion, anything that will shut down her consciousness from the assault of reliving the past.
Along the way, The Elder Spirit/Returning and the Seer assist The Gurl in her journey to remember and survive her memories. She is almost successful in her suicide attempt but is interrupted by a vision of a woman. “can’t move. can’t turn head. can’t close eyes. no look away. the woman tall tall naked and shining in the water stand . . . stare. stare telling me something / i don’t know what” (10). The naked woman is a figure of desire for The Gurl. She is “shining” and literally takes her breath away. The Gurl’s desire mixed with awe stops her from committing suicide and brings her to the place of remembering the night she watched as her mother was raped and murdered.

The naked woman in The Gurl’s vision is written in the voice of The Elder Spirit/Returning and is also a version of the Orisha Yemanya. In an interview, Bridgforth discussed how she studied Yoruba spiritual practices while she was writing *delta dandi.* As mentioned above, elements of West African cultural/spiritual practices are evident in all of Bridgforth’s previous work, including ancestral reverence, the collapsing of space–time, and even the emergence of figurative female deities/healers in each text. However, in *delta dandi,* the Orisha emerge as much more distinctive figures in the story.

We know that it is Yemanya speaking through The Elder Spirit/Returning because of The Gurl’s description of her and the way she speaks through the symbols that are associated with her:

silver pearls and turquoise, yams and seaweed. blue skirts 7 layers. peacocks and fish/watermelons and grapes. monday. shifts. north star half moon rivers and pound cake/strength. (10)

Several of the items in her monologue (e.g., silver pearls, turquoise, watermelon) are actually things that one would place on an altar in reverence of Yemanya. Some parts of the text, such as the numeral 7 and the color blue, are connected to Yemanya, and others are associated with other deities. For example, Monday is usually connected to Eleggua, and peacocks with Oshun. Although this section in the play is connected predominantly to reverence for Yemanya, other deities are also included, which increases the sense of the symbolic divine support for The Gurl. Yemanya’s emergence from the water is consistent with her description from Teish: “Yemaya-Olokun in the Mother of the Sea, the Great Water . . . She is the Mother of Dreams, the Mother of Secrets. . . . She is envisioned as a large and beautiful woman, radiant and dark; nurturing and devouring, crystal clear and mysteriously deep. . . . Watch Her shimmering in the light of the full moon and be renewed.” The Gurl goes to the river to cry and to pray to Yemanya for release. Teish warns her not to approach the deity in complete
despair, for she “does not wish to see you in misery and may pull you into Her arms with the undertow and restore you to her Belly” (133). The Gurl is initially looking for an embrace into the undertow that would remove her from her dire condition, but the text emphasizes instead Yemanya’s role as a nurturer and seductress. The arms of Yemanya that Teish describes are used in this capacity to captivate The Gurl sensually and lead her to retell the story without its ripping her apart. Onstage this scene has resembled male and female cast members encircling The Gurl as deities or ancestral spirits loving her into the next phase of her life.

The initial casting guidelines call for “4 women” to play the lead roles: The Gurl, The Elder Spirit/Returning, Blues, and Seer. However, not all of the play’s productions have followed these guidelines. For example, in the production that I was part of at the Fire and Ink Conference, there were five performers total, three of whom were men. The script contains both masculine and feminine voices, and the cast is expected to embody different characters across genders, thereby shifting the anticipation that the feminine voice in the text is connected to a female body. The creative and flexible casting is consistent with the primary commitment to a performance aesthetics that privileges improvisation and demands that the actors bring their “specific and idiosyncratic sel[ves]” to the performance and that “visceral knowledge systems” are the basis of performance.

In addition to leaving space for cross-gender performances, these principles provide an opportunity for gender-nonconforming performers to be present onstage and to disrupt representations of binary genders in a Black performance tradition. If “[m]emory and daily living are lodged in the muscles,” as Jones suggests, then stage performance is a practice of jogging the “muscle” of embodied memories. Therefore, when ancestors who did not have a binary gender identity are represented in performance, it is a practice of awakening forgotten parts of our past.

I performed the role of The King, which is the voice of a female African king who is actively profiting from the slave trade. This performance came only two months after my own gender-reassignment surgery, and I stood before the audience in a state of liminal gender presentation. Even though I identify as male, I was asked to embody a physical presence of female masculinity that is cruel, uncaring, and misogynistic. In this way, Bridgforth’s work is not just a wholesale celebration of butch and trans masculinities. Part of the brilliance of the work is her critique of sexism and misogyny from any source. The King says,

go.
get me more bodies.
from here and there and there and there
bring them to me. now.
i’ve riches to make
guns beads brandy. SOLD!
my children glow with laughter and fat bellies
guns beads brandy. SOLD!
my wives dance my name in the moonlight (7)

The King’s voice is of royal authority and divine right. She is the ultimate authority in her realm and commands obedience. Her voice is that of greed and self-absorption taken to their extremes. The King character is reminiscent of the description of the traditional African division of biological sex and social roles that Ifi Amadiume discusses in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. However, biology does not necessarily determine her social role. She is King and therefore is able to claim that “everyone is my servant my slave my concubine” (7). The King’s voice is one of the first monologues, along with The Gurl’s opening convocation of remembrance and statement that she is “a fallen star they say / i come here baring everything / all at once. / again / again / again / again / again / me” (6). Together these two portions foreshadow the journey through intraracial histories and dynamics of grief and pain to transcendence.

We know that The King is a female only because The Gurl recognizes her as part of herself. She says,

i know things i think.
like i remember i was king once. a woman looking how she felt. i see her.
just before i running sometimes she come whisper to me.
she scares me.
i feel she reach for me with the mean of her soul. (20)

The woman King is both an example of female possibility and gender autonomy and a menacing part of The Gurl’s self. The King is a part of her, her own past life, reminding us that queer ancestors are not unproblematic or universally celebrated in every instance. The King is a figure of pain and grief and an undeniable part of this soul’s journey across time and states of being. Without The King, The Gurl would not be equipped with the strength that she needs to survive the fact that her family sold her “for a few chickens and a barrel of shine” (24) and the incredibly brutal treatment that she endured at the hands of the woman whom they sold her to. Bridgforth’s use of The King in The Gurl’s past life is reminiscent of the white male ancestor in
Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. In *Kindred*, the main character is transported back in time into slavery and meets her own slave and slave-owning ancestors. She comes to terms with the fact that she would not exist if her female ancestor did not experience repeated sexual violence, and she is even in the position of having to facilitate her ancestor’s abuse to ensure her own presence in the future. In the case of *delta dandi*, The Gurl witnesses her past lives, their pleasures and their pain, and it is this process of witnessing and embracing all the parts of herself and her past that gives her hope for living in her present.

As disturbing and problematic as *The King* is, she also is the ancestral/energetic antecedent for The Gurl’s experience of her gender. The Gurl says,

```
i free when i run so i running all the time. the dresses
they make me wear choke my skin and heart so i run till the
touch of no fit leave my mind. always i wonder why
they yell these dress on me. why boys look like i feel
but not how i look. (19)
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In this description, external impositions of gender are regarded as violent acts as “they” (presumably adults) “yell” dresses on her, which is a quintessential signifier of femininity. The dresses are a “no fit” for her sense of being and “choke” her skin. The protagonist copes by running away to experience a temporary freedom. The gender violence that occurs when she is forced to wear feminine clothing is represented as part of a larger context of brutality that frames her life experience.

Taken together, the narratives of *The King* and The Gurl’s experiences of forced gender conformity are connected to the web of violence in The Gurl’s life and constitute part of the reharmonization that *delta dandi* narratively employs. Reharmonization is a process wherein familiar tunes are reworked to fit the harmonic sensibilities of the artist to the extent that the tune becomes “radically defamiliarized” to the listener. Reharmonization is often used to introduce “new harmonies, new chords, to accompany the melody of a song or the improvisations of a song.” In *delta dandi* fundamental aspects of African diasporic memory are reharmonized. The story of the female King interrupts how African genders are usually remembered, challenging the reader/audience members to find scholarly sources and verify the text’s version of possible African subjectivities. The text challenges romanticized notions in the diaspora of a male-centered and patriarchal Africa of noble kings and beautiful and dutiful queens. It is also in dialogue with the political discourse in parts of West Africa which applies these romanticizations
to legal and public policy to criminalize homosexuality and gender variance and disavow the existence of these populations because of the idea that they defy tradition.48

Both and Neither: Bigendered Characters at the Crossroads

Bridgforth does some of her most dexterous storytelling in her depiction of members of her ancestral world who refuse any predictable or fixed pronoun or gender designation. Interestingly, it is in *love conjure/blues* that these characterizations come across most clearly. The two characters from the novel that defy gender definition are Duckie Smooth and Sweet T. Duckie, a cross-dressing performer who does “female interpretations” (26). His depictions of Black femininity are sensual and engaging in their own way, since Duckie is not conventionally beautiful. Nevertheless, he is desirable across the gender spectrum as “the mens the womens the both and the neither / be batting eyes at himshe” (26). The focus on interpretation signals the complex series of individual interpretations of gender at work throughout the text that are not assigned to any particular anatomy or sexuality. Duckie Smooth is a male feminine figure who is in a heterosexual marriage. His wife Cora supports her husband’s performance efforts by collecting tips at each show. Duckie’s marriage to Cora does not prevent him from joining the line of feminine trustees of the juke joint in Bettye’s absence.

Miss Sunday Morning is another feminine guardian of sacred space. She runs the joint *behind* Bettye’s joint. Miss Sunday Morning’s place exists at the edges of the community. It is “standing way past good timing” and “just outside of right” (43). There are patrons and workers along “dark corners [in] back rooms [and] against the walls” of the joint (42). Those who engage in explicit sexual performance and transactional sex have a place in Bridgforth’s schema of the sacredness of Black community. Illicit scenes like Miss Sunday Morning’s are usually represented in terms of shadow and despair; however, Bridgforth lights up the dark corners of the sexual margins with love and healing through her representation of Sweet T.

Neither man nor woman, Sweet T lives in the interstices of gender: “a man last life” and now a “woman / feel like a man” (44). Sweet T’s confusion and frustration over not having a body that matches her/his gender identity is compounded by a life of abuse and suffering. She/he was “the one that never harmed nobody / but always got beat” from childhood, leaving her/him with a body marked with scars (44). Sweet T is a symbol of the brutality of the past that lives in the scars on his/her body. Again, queer love shows
the collective a way through suffering and embracing all of the marginalized parts of the Black community through his/her journey of connection and self-acceptance. Sweet T lives a life of isolation and despair until he/she meets Miss Sunday Morning. Their lovemaking is a sacred prayer for wholeness, their “bodies wrapped / the make holy / every Sabbath” (47). With the help of Miss Sunday Morning’s soothing and reassuring love, Sweet T is able to embrace the “girl in he” (48). Sweet T and Miss Sunday Morning unite to take care of the marginalized and discarded and “holy wholly everyday” (48); together they love each other and the rest of the community. Sweet T’s transformation from being alone to his/her newfound joy is a metaphor for what can happen to the Black collective when the discarded parts are enfolded into the whole with love.

In Bridgforth’s work, the southern community is the locus of Black queer life. It is also the birthplace of Black queer identities and pleasures—both of which are constructed as resistances to external impositions from society and regulating regimes that attempt to delimit and define Black families, communities, bodies, and desires according to outside norms. Performance becomes a staged enactment of unfinished stories and accompanying movements. Performance brings these individual movements to a shared experience. To move with the intent of integrating “lost” bodies from the collective story is a communal act of healing, which in this case involves coming to terms with irresolution.

Every other text analyzed in _The Queer Limit of Black Memory_ relies on the renarrativization process that fiction makes readily available. From themes of slavery to migration to diasporic consciousness, each short story or novel that I have examined and will examine has situated Black queer characters at the center. Retelling history in a way that places Black queer experience at the crux of Black life can challenge the dissociative absence of queers in Black memory. In the retelling, the queer becomes a source of strength and a cause of celebration of resistance.

Bridgforth takes this narrative strategy and goes a step further to incorporate information gathered through embodied performance into her recasting of the rural South. Her approach is in keeping with the preliminary findings of contemporary psychotherapists and researchers, such as Pat Ogden. Following Pierre Janet’s assertions on the importance of treating somatic symptoms of dissociative clients, Ogden considers the body as crucial to moving unconscious responses into conscious awareness and thereby healing traumatic experiences. Ogden and her colleagues have concluded, “We have already noted that traditional psychotherapies pay scant attention to the physical experience of the client in treatment, in part because there is little theory or training to assist in the consideration of the embodied
experience of trauma.”⁴⁹ According to this research, movement carries its own potential healing energy as the body completes gestures interrupted during the traumatic event. In the context I am writing about here, performance becomes a staged enactment of unfinished stories and accompanying movements. Performance brings these individual movements to a shared experience. To move with the intent of integrating “lost” bodies from the collective story is a communal act of healing. Including this material in a printed book provides an opportunity for the experience to spread to places that live performance cannot, and/or for live audiences to carry the message with them from the theater to create another experience at home. In this body of work, spiritual epistemologies are performed through the body and shared communally.

If Bridgforth represents blues performance as a process of remembering queer ancestors otherwise “lost” to communal memory, Jackie Kay considers jazz as a metaphor for queering diasporic memory. Like Bridgforth’s revision of Black masculinity, the following chapter asks, What would the outcome of remaking Black diasporic masculinity be?