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“SEALED WITH A KISS ON YOUR ARTERY”: AN ARCHIVE OF SOUTHERN LESBIAN
DESIRE

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

SARAH M. HEYING

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines southern lesbian feminist print culture of the 1970s-2000s, which produced some of the most intersectional work to come out of second-wave feminism—especially in terms of creative and critical challenges to anti-Blackness, classism, metrocentrism, and regional exceptionalism. A central contribution of “Sealed with a Kiss on Your Artery” is its reimagination of archival reading practices from a queer-feminist literary studies perspective. Each chapter examines the archive of a particular lesbian feminist figure and demonstrates a corresponding interpretive practice; I seek to encounter these historical figures in a manner befitting not only the facts of their contributions to lesbian feminism, but also their radical methods of mobilizing print culture to transform collective feeling, affiliation, and action.

Taking North Carolina-based Feminary Collective’s lesbian feminist literary journal as a starting point, the first chapter demonstrates backward-onward reflexivity as a methodology, which researchers can use to confront the past so that our presently-situated research serves ever-evolving visions of justice. Drawing from the archive of writer and special collections librarian Ann Allen Shockley, the second chapter combines some of her theories of librarianship with close readings of her fiction to argue for reading practices that remain cognizant of the power dynamics of archival research. The third chapter revisits the lesbian feminist Sex Wars of the 1980s through the archive of southern writer and sex activist Dorothy Allison; I illustrate a process of perverting the archives to tell a story that moves away from the language of war and centers erotic labor as a form of care work. Finally, the fourth chapter proposes a queer praxis of

care, kinship, and grief-work modeled after the speculative archive of Jewelle Gomez's neo-slave vampire narrative *The Gilda Stories*.

DEDICATION

To Lisa Michaels—the lesbian legend, the Memphis icon, the Purple-Haired Tramazon—who
showed me love is not a finite resource.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my partner Nora for supporting me from near and afar throughout the entirety of my doctoral process. Her patience, compassion, thoughtfulness, and brilliance continue to astound and inspire me after all these years.

Along with her generous mentorship and dissertation advising, Dr. Jaime Harker has modeled the kind of academic I want to be: socially conscious, audacious, unapologetic, and passionate. Her never-say-never attitude has given me more permission to trust in my own power and agency and in the power of research and writing, which are gifts I will only be able to repay by passing them along to my students.

My three other committee members—Dr. Leigh Anne Duck, Dr. Caroline Wigginton, and Dr. Jessica Wilkerson—are also the caliber of mentors people spend their lives seeking. Every intellectual journey I take alongside Dr. Duck feels like a voyage into the multiverse; if my brain feels like it is stuck in a rut, I know I can reach out to her to shake things loose. Dr. Wigginton's careful attention to the materiality of what we study keeps me from wandering so far off into the multiverse that I lose sight of reality, and Dr. Wilkerson opened me up to the sacred histories big and small that people carry within their bodies, minds, and hearts.

I am profoundly lucky to have parents, Julia and Glenn, who have encouraged my nerdiness for as long as I remember. My dad is a gentle, kind, and open-minded person who makes me feel unconditionally accepted. My mom is hilarious and creative and will never shy away from dropping a necessary truth-bomb, like the day she told me I was grown and should stop caring what my mama thinks. My siblings—Dan, Jeny, Katy, and Eryn—gave me a lot of practice in

navigating chaos, but most of all, they gifted me with the peace of mind to know I will always be able to fall back on their love and understanding, no matter how messy or overwhelming life may seem.

If it were not for Margaret, Ally, and our writing group (The Radical Pot Roasts), I might not have made it through quarantine dissertation-writing in one piece. They have read more of my dissertation writing and pre-writing than anyone, including my pages upon pages of disorganized notes. Anytime I slipped into incoherence and self-doubt, they reminded me that I know more than I give myself credit for and that I have the ability to pick myself up even when it seems like I might not.

I am also grateful for the several sources of funding that have made my six years of archival study possible: the University of Mississippi, the American Association of University Women, Texas A&M at College Station, Cornell University, Duke University, The Bibliographic Society of America, the National Women's Studies Association, and the South Central Modern Language Association.

And lastly, a huge thank you to Dr. Katherine Brown, whose expertise in grief and narrative healing led me back to myself and my community when I needed it most.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT WE DO IN THE ARCHIVES

As of March 28, 2023, over three-hundred educational gag orders have been introduced across the country during the 2021-2023 legislative sessions (PEN America, *Educational Gag Orders*). Many of the most recent bills have been modeled off of Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay Bill” and “Stop-Woke Act,” which impose limits on the types of material that educators are allowed to cover in a classroom, with many of them attempting regulations from K-12 up through higher education. The wording on such bills varies, though most of them vaguely target material that might be considered “divisive” in some form or another, and especially material that discusses sexual orientation, gender identity, and race. In addition, a number of these bills are increasingly targeting emotional and social education, such as North Dakota’s HB 1526, which would forbid educators from teaching anything that suggests that student’s “inner feelings” are a valid source of knowledge; or Oklahoma’s SB 1027, which bans “social emotional learning” in the classroom, both evidence-based and non-evidence-based, including instruction on topics like “self-awareness,” “relationship skills,” “feelings,” “perseverance,” and “metacognitive learning skills” (Oklahoma Senate 2). While these kinds of government-backed attacks on schools and libraries certainly are not new in the U.S., their current frequency and intensity are staggering.

When I began writing my dissertation, I had barely begun to articulate the “social emotional learning” that I was undergoing through my research and that I now hope to affect in others. I knew I was looking for history, community, and genealogy—a common path for many queer academics searching for proof that people like us have long existed and will continue to

find ways to exist. As far as the field of literary studies has come in diversifying canons, it continues to be the case that most minority academics will have a moment of reckoning, perhaps even an existential crisis, about the overwhelming presence of white cisgendered heterosexual men's perspectives that have shaped their understanding of literature since their very first day of school. I do not remember reading a single book that featured an openly queer or trans character in my K-12 public school education in Missouri. I doubt it is any coincidence that I found the self-awareness and courage to come out as an undergraduate, when I started taking classes like "The Lesbian Novel." The connection between the content of what we read and learn and our own self-awareness is very clear, which is something that the increasingly fascist Republican Party in this country seems to understand very well. My dissertation began as a project of recognizing my own existence as part of community, part of history—part of something much larger and less isolating than I had been accustomed to for most of my education. Now, I also see it as an imperative act of resistance in the face of the silencing tactics running rampant during this current political moment.

My decision to write about lesbian literature, and especially southern lesbian literature, stems from my own complicated attachments to this particular linking of sexuality, politics, and place. I called myself midwestern long before I ever felt comfortable describing myself as southern. I did not grow up in the geographic area that most people would consider to be the South: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and lived in the area until I left for North Carolina at the age of eighteen. I came into my queerness—and eventually my lesbianism—in North Carolina, at the same time that I was immersing myself in the art, history, and culture of the region. I have since spent the last fifteen-plus years moving between North Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Mississippi, giving me a migratory sense of southernness that will never hinge

upon one version of what this highly contested region looks like. As infuriating as state-level politics tend to be everywhere I have lived, I also came to recognize that state politics often look quite different from local politics, and I have come to understand that white supremacy and political fascism are in no way restricted to this region. The often violent, systemic policing of race, gender, and sexuality pervades the U.S., even if this storied region tends to stand in as the primary narrative engine for the worst of it.

While I certainly think it is possible to attribute too much significance to lineage, the fact remains that I and many other human beings find ourselves longing to make “social emotional” contact with a usable history at least as much as we hope to find new ways of interpreting said history. And as many historians will contend, it is when the struggles of the present seem trapped in a silo isolated from the past that it becomes nearly impossible to imagine a future. It is incredibly common for marginalized people to feel disconnected from grand historical narratives. For communities organized around sexuality—an attribute that can exist out of sight (and is often forced to do so)—alienation from historical relevance can fuel existential shame.

On a personal level, I turned to the archives of several lesbian feminist writers I admire as a ritual for processing my complicated and fluid attachments to both lesbianism and southernness, and this journey continues to surprise me. It used to be the case that naming my sexuality in any way besides the endlessly expansive “queer” felt much too simplistic and reductive. “Lesbian,” like “southern,” suggests particular borders, however fluid they may be. I will admit that I bought into and contributed to a number of misguided narratives: that “lesbian” is an outdated, overly limiting identifier, for instance. Thankfully, people’s attachments tend to exceed the stories they tell themselves about who they are and what they like. I do tend to be attracted to queer people who identify as anything other than men, and I am also drawn to many

expressions of queer masculinities, lesbian and otherwise. Aside from my own sexual preferences, I have grown more and more indebted to lesbian feminist history for my vision of what a more collectivist, gender radical, and sexually honest future might look like.

It took this extensive dive into the archives for me to realize how flexible and adaptable lesbians have been, even throughout and after their hyper-visible politicization via lesbian feminism. Certainly, self-proclaimed gatekeepers of lesbianism existed then, as they do now. There were some lesbian feminist projects of the 1970s-1990s that attempted to articulate a monolithic version of lesbian identity and politics, but most expressions and articulations of lesbian identity, community, and politics showed how complex and malleable they could be. Anzaldúa's queer lesbian feminism offers one particularly well-known instance: the Coatlicue image she envisions as her unconscious self—a symbol of a state that is simultaneously creative and destructive, carrying her sense of identity through cycles of death and rebirth (*Borderlands/La Frontera*). Anzaldúa trusts this Coatlicue state to destroy her sense of self at the same time that it recreates her anew.

It is important to remember that lesbianism did not carry these associations with essentialism in the seventies. Mainstream publicity around the Lesbian Sex Wars and the “woman-born-woman” factions of the lesbian separatist movement quickly took hold of popular perceptions of lesbians as sexless activists who lack nuance. In reality, some of the most robust and enduring work on gender nonconformity, desire, and sex that we have from feminisms of the 70s and 80s came from writers who called themselves lesbians. Thanks to the extensive publishing and archiving efforts of feminist researchers over the past fifty years, it is now very possible for even the most inexperienced scholar to locate lesbian history, such that I sometimes take for granted that this has hardly been the case for very long. When I visited the Firebrand

Books records at Cornell, I met Brenda Marston, the librarian and archivist who spearheaded the founding of the university's Human Sexuality Collection. When I asked her what inspired her path in academia, she brought up her own dissertation, which she wrote in the 1970s. When she told her committee that she wanted to study lesbian history, they told her she couldn't because those records did not exist. So, she became an archivist and started tracking down those histories.

I have heard similar stories from many LGBTQ+ researchers and archivists who came of age during the height of the Women's and Gay Liberation Movements of the 1970s-1980s. Among LGBTQ+ identified people, and especially among LGBTQ+ researchers, the archives serve as an integral site of queer record-keeping and world-making, wherein queer folks grasp for evidence of our pasts, and—often finding such evidence scant—search for ways to fill in the gaps with our own discoveries, speculations, desires, and flashes of recognition. This impulse drives my dissertation as well, which, above all, I consider to be an archival contribution. I want people to know about how the Feminary Collective, a multi-racial and multi-class group of lesbians based in Durham, North Carolina, expressed a vision of southern lesbianism that explicitly challenges anti-Blackness, classism, metronormativity, and regional exceptionalism. I want to shine a spotlight on the archival philosophies of Ann Allen Shockley, a former special collections library at Fisk University and the author of the first novel to feature a black lesbian protagonist (*Loving Her*, 1974) as well as a more recent novel that explores the tension between institutional and embodied archives (*Celebrating Hotchclaw*, 2005). I want to tell a different story about the Sex Wars via the archive of Dorothy Allison, who called herself a lesbian and a sex outlaw long before she published *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). I want to share my fascination with imagining the vampire as an archive of collective grief in Jewelle Gomez's

brilliant rendering of vampirism as a mythological archive of collective grief. *The Gilda Stories* is a novel that begins in one genre, place, and time (neo-slave narrative, Louisiana, 1850) before traveling across several other genres and geographic borders to end elsewhere (futuristic speculative fiction, Machu Picchu, 2050). These archival longings—which are very lesbian desires—shape my sexuality as well as my scholarship.

These desires are lesbian insofar as they speak to a collective urge to recognize, remember, and create historical narratives that feel more reflective of actual lesbian lives. Community efforts like the Lesbian Herstory Archives (1974-present) served as some of the first repositories of flyers, correspondences, books, recordings, ephemera, personal photographs, and other materials that might otherwise have been lost, destroyed, or censored out of existence (as Ron DeSantis would have it). While these types of collections continue to fill in the huge gaps left by institutional archives, they are also at greater risk of running out of funding, volunteer labor, and archival space. Both community and institutional archives are under constant attack from political factions that see their presence as a threat to the abiding cultural myth of heteronormativity. Even one of the most easily-traced archival objects—published books—run the risk of being destroyed or forgotten, whether by force or neglect. The near disappearance of Zora Neale Hurston is a prime example. Had she been someone who openly identified as a lesbian, her work may have never been printed in the first place.

Because of this continual threat of erasure, both archival and bibliographic practices have been a fundamental form of activism through the Women's and Gay Liberation Movements, wherein naming, cataloging, tracing, and preserving the historical context and lineage of the texts produced by a political, social, and cultural movement is more than an academic necessity—it is a method of survival. Cait McKinney (2020) refers to feminist archival bibliographic systems as

“activist infrastructures,” where “the messy grinding, general invisible labor of ‘doing feminism takes place.” Certainly, doing feminism in this way is a matter of survival through the preservation of history, and it is also a practice that opens itself up to dreaming, envisioning, and speculating about what occurs in the gaps, and where we might be headed in the future.

To address one such gap, my dissertation examines some of the lesbian feminist writers who, like me, have found themselves attached to southernness in one form or another, whether by choice or otherwise. The Feminary Collective sought to create a lesbian vision of the South via a literary journal; Ann Allen Shockley wrote some of the first romance novels centering black lesbian experiences, many of which were set in the South; Dorothy Allison has spent almost her entire writing career living outside of the South, but she regularly invokes the influence of her native South Carolina in her writing, speeches, and interviews; Jewelle Gomez never lived in the South, but her most well-known work, *The Gilda Stories*, begins in the U.S. South and ends in South America. Though their attachments to the region are fluid, complicated, and varied, they all turn to the region in their work, building an archive of southern lesbianism that most of the southern legislatures are currently attempting to occlude. But the South is not represented entirely by its state politics, which are gerrymandered to protect the interests of a powerful few. Among other things, the South is its people, and these people have deeply storied histories of their own. With my dissertation, I aim to tell a story about lesbians, feminism, print culture, and the South, and it is a conversation between these writers and me about our desires, hang-ups, histories, and visions for the future.

In her oral history, author Dorothy Allison refers to the feminist zeitgeist of the 1970s and 80s as “a movement of writers.” Allison, who is more well-known today as a writer of gritty southern literary realism (*Bastard Out of Carolina*, 1992), found her footing in the politically-

minded writing networks of the women's movement, an awakening she compares to "opening your eyes under water. It hurt, but suddenly everything that had been dark and mysterious became visible and open to change." In her view, the texts and networks produced by the novelist, poets, political and social theorists, and other writers "ended the isolation" women felt and helped them arrive at a place where "the world began to make sense in an articulated, beautiful, complicated, evil sense." There are shelves and shelves' worth of archival materials to peruse from these pre-digital communities of writers: correspondences, drafts of unpublished work, periodicals, transcripts of conversations, or in the case of Dorothy Allison, a massive collection of clippings and other materials that she maintained as a personal compendium of research. Literary scholars are particularly well-suited to collecting, reading, and narrating these lesbian feminist histories that were, in many ways, written declarations of existence as much as they were treatises that imagined more equitable futures.

Archival research has been at the center of some of literary studies' and trans/queer/feminist studies' most significant transformations to methodological possibilities for studying and writing about the past. With the ghosts of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot hovering right behind us, reminding us of the power dynamics and predetermination ingrained within archival-based historical narratives, many of us in academia who identify with marginalized embodiment of one form or another turn to the archives as a repository for knowledge made physical. As Susan Stryker notes, even the most disembodied, dispersed archives—such as those constructed through the internet—require physicality as the (sometimes limiting and inconvenient) conditions of their existence. She gives the example of Google's humongous, climate-controlled servers, which require loads of natural resources and space as well as the attention and care of a twenty-four hours, seven-days-a-week staff to

maintain the seemingly disembodied hyperspace of our modern digital archive. With the possibilities and limits of the human body situated at the core of much of our work, many trans and queer feminist studies scholars turn to the highly inconvenient structures of archival repositories to expand, call into question, recode, reimagine, and ultimately come to terms with the limits of historical remembrance. Moreover, we must regularly contend with the reality that much media about marginalized bodies and embodied behavior is rare and hard to find, so the only available copies are quite often under the protection of institutional archives.

The usable histories we have sought to either find or create—histories many deem necessary to survival—are constantly re-narrated into ever-shifting frameworks of what it means to live queerly. Yet all the while, there is this tacit agreement that (to reference Julietta Singh) no archive will restore any sense of truth. The piecing together of historical narrative is always a formidable endeavor, and the reality of its impossibility tends to become more apparent the deeper and wider the gaps prove to be. The task of developing the tools to responsibly narrate anything meaningful about queer communities writ large can feel Sisyphean, to say the least. Instead of seeking the impossibility of historical truth, my research asks how we might form new intimacies, ways of being, and ways of feeling through contact with archival materials—and how these modes of contact can help us articulate what it means to feel queerly in relation to our histories.

Writing by and about queer women has been responsible for developing some of the most radical methods for reading queer histories. For instance, Elizabeth Freeman discusses how queer archival research taps into sensual encounters across time and space, between researchers and the lives they are re-membering; Saidiya Harman demonstrates the staggering possibilities of critical fabulation in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, wherein she offers well-researched

speculations of everyday experiences of Black women whose sexualities are continually reinvented to evade policing; Ann Cvetkovich shows us the necessity of viewing cultural texts as an archive of feeling that bleeds into public discourse. Notably, all of these scholars earned PhDs in literary studies.

Looking and feeling backward is an established queer methodology in literary studies—Heather Love, Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and many others have shown us how queer desires can translate into queer experiences of time: hybrid temporalities, identities out of place in time, alternative chronologies, intimate relationships with the past, embodiments of the past, and so forth. While this dissertation does touch on queer temporalities both explicitly and implicitly, my work speaks more directly to the ways in which Love, Halberstam, and Freeman demonstrate queer feminist care and compassion in their writing by embracing the intimacies, feelings, sensations, and personal revelations that arise through their encounters with the past. Following Love (who was following Sedgwick), I also turn toward the “descriptive rather than the critical” in my writing, striving to “think with” the people and the texts I encounter through the archives “rather than against them” (23).

The field of literary studies continues to imagine new and exciting methods for locating, reading, and writing about archival materials that speak to and expand upon their usual function as primary evidence to support arguments about how people and cultures have changed over time. Literary studies have validated, both within the field and beyond, the scholarly relevance of the highly unpredictable and very human terrains of attachment, desire, and affect in studies of history. With their emphasis on textual and discursive analysis, literary approaches have also driven many trans and queer feminist frameworks; it makes sense, as the latter are politically-driven fields concerned with locating agency in the networks of power that construct our

relationships to ourselves and each other. Language, narrative, and symbol are some of the most potent and wide-reaching tools for producing and maintaining power—and they are also forms that can be accessed (in one way or another) by anybody. Just as the feminists of the Women in Print Movement found manifold ways for reshaping power dynamics through language and print, and I follow suit by proposing methodologies capable of reshaping the power dynamics within archival research and within the stories we tell about the past.

Chapter Overview

The archive that I examine reflects the manifold ways in which southern lesbian feminisms of the 1970s-1990s were particularly invested in addressing the anti-blackness and classism that—along with sexism and homophobia—continue to pervade American culture at large. Within these intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and region arise opportunities to mobilize backwardness in a way that acknowledges historical specificity and experiential limits while also imagining new sociopolitical possibilities.

Each chapter examines a different case study of southern-lesbian-feminist print culture and proposes a corresponding archival reading practice to illuminate radical ways of feeling, thinking, and confronting history. Chapter One focuses on *Feminary*, “a feminist journal for the South emphasizing the lesbian vision.” I argue that the Feminary Collective demonstrated a praxis of *backward-onward* reflexivity, which researchers can use to confront the past so that our presently-situated research serves ever-evolving visions of justice. Research for this chapter involved recording an interview with Deborah Jamieson, a member of the Collective and a Black lesbian still living in North Carolina. The audio file and transcript of this interview are now held in Duke University’s special collections.

Chapter Two examines the archival contributions and methodologies of Ann Allen Shockley, the former special collections librarian at Fisk University and the author of (among other works) *Loving Her* (1974), the first known novel to feature a black lesbian protagonist, and *Celebrating Hotchclaw* (2005), a fictionalized account of conducting archival work at an HBCU. Shockley has also published a number of works on black librarianship, and this chapter combines some of her bibliographic methodologies with close readings of her fiction to demonstrate how interpretive ambivalence can destabilize power dynamics within archival research, such as those related to surveillance and extraction. Shockley is widely known to be very private about her personal life, and this chapter honors what Édouard Glissant refers to as “the right to opacity” (*Poetics of Relation*, 189), while also paying close attention to that which Shockley chooses to reveal of herself to the public eye.

Chapter Three delves into the archive of Dorothy Allison, who prior to her career as a southern literary realist gained notoriety during the Lesbian Feminist Sex Wars of the 1980s. This chapter proposes a praxis of *perverting the archives* to allow for “incorrect” readings that emerge from the unpredictable confluence of pleasure and danger. While Allison and other matriarchs of so-called “sex-positive” feminism are often taken to task for uncritically advocating a stance that all sex is good sex, Allison and her work with lesbian S/M (somasochism) communities show her sexual politics to be rooted in critique and collective care. Ultimately, this chapter urges queer feminist scholars to revisit and revise some of the commonplace narratives that circulate about the history of the Sex Wars. Allison and her work with lesbian S/M (somasochism) communities show her sexual politics to be rooted in critique and collective action, and this chapter tells a different story about the Sex Wars, one that moves away from the language of combat and centers erotic labor as a form of care work.

Chapter Four focuses on a speculative archive—Jewelle Gomez’s Afro-Indigenous neo-slave vampire narrative *The Gilda Stories*—which was pieced together over time from short stories and eventually found a new life as a stage performance. This chapter examines the southern imaginary’s particular relevance within Gomez’s construction of a lesbian BIPOC vampire mythology—Gomez was born and raised in Massachusetts yet invokes the South in her writing as a site from which to grapple with the “undead” afterlife of slavery. The modern sympathetic vampire—which has grown increasingly relevant in American popular culture—carries significant potential as a mythological vehicle for lesbian care, kinship, and grief-work in archival literary studies.

Sealed With a Kiss on Your Artery

Above all, this dissertation is a love letter to some of the writers and community organizers who have nurtured me as a researcher, an artist, a feminist, a queer, a lesbian, a lover. I have made every effort to avoid hagiography in favor of the deeper intimacies made possible by seeing someone at their worst and loving them anyway and by holding someone accountable for their mistakes while also leaving room for grace. If at any point I commit the error of idealization, I hope, dear reader, that you will likewise hold me accountable and grant me grace.

CHAPTER ONE

“I WAS RETURNING TO SEE IF THE GHOSTS WERE STILL ASTIRRING”¹: SOUTHERN REFLEXIVITY AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN *FEMINARY* (1979-1982)

During a Skype session with the students of my Introduction to Gender Studies class at the University of Mississippi, writer and activist Minnie Bruce Pratt fielded a question from a student concerned about reconciling her love for southern culture with the region’s legacy of slavery and Jim Crow legislation. Pratt advised the student to be very specific and aware of her audience when she spoke about this love since many people—especially those who live outside the region—equate the idea of southern culture with white racism; the legacy should not be considered past tense. “I would never say I love southern culture,” Pratt emphasized. The student politely thanked Pratt for her response, and the class was silent until someone asked an unrelated question. I jotted down a reminder to bring up this moment again in our next class so we could reflect upon any dissonance it stirred up, intellectually and emotionally. I had assigned Pratt’s work as part of our unit on constructions of whiteness and gender in the U.S. South. My students—a large majority of them born and raised in the South—knew Pratt as a radical southern lesbian feminist and as a core member of the editorial team for *Feminary*, a lesbian feminist journal that advertised itself as “for the South.” Minnie Bruce Pratt has thought and written extensively about what it means to be southern, yet for all her work in adding nuance to the word, she knows better than to deny the power of its prevailing cultural associations.

¹ Title comes from Anita Cornwell’s (1982) story, “Backward Journey,” from *Feminary*, 12(1).

Though fraught for much different reasons, the descriptor *lesbian* experiences a dynamic in popular culture adjacent to that of *southern* in that both affinities frequently stand in for the dissonance of temporal displacement (e.g., backward or old-fashioned values and practices) or for the tragedies of exclusionary practices. (e.g., segregation, separatism, and essentialism). Just as widespread associations of southernness with legacies of racial violence cannot be conscientiously discounted, the entanglement of some expressions of lesbianism with *Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists* (TERFS) leaves many women-loving women wondering how to speak to their specific experiences and desires without drawing a line in the sand. Yet I also sense that for many people uncomfortable with *lesbian*, including many queer-identifying people, the identity serves as a bucket into which they dump unchecked misogyny, just as the South can serve in other contexts as a convenient space to offload unchecked elitism and racism. *Southern* and *lesbian* have not only been co-opted by mechanisms of capitalist branding and biopolitical control (like all widely-recognizable identity categories), but they have also become public dumping grounds for the psychic excess of the histories of violence that we have barely begun to face. In an effort to work through some of the baggage of southern lesbian identity politics, this chapter engages with the following question: Is it possible to productively and responsibly collect and mobilize around such heavy-laden language without rehearsing or ignoring our most violent practices and histories? Is it possible (or worthwhile) to *love* southern lesbian literature?

Such questions are not new to lesbian communities, yet in the historical amnesia surrounding lesbian feminism from the 1970s and 1980s, a number of valuable interventions have been overlooked. This article examines a particularly instructive moment in the archive of *Feminary*, a periodical that began in 1969 as a local feminist newsletter for the Triangle region

(Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh) of North Carolina. After struggling for a decade to define their mission and scope, in 1979 the editorial collective announced a shift in focus towards “a feminist journal for the South emphasizing the lesbian vision.” In their redirection, *Feminary* uses *lesbian* and *southern* as discursive laboratories for experimenting with technologies of affiliation; rather than wielding these terms as identifiable fixed identities, the Collective treats them as multivalent markers that resist closure and contain vast relational and political potential. Even more unique to them, The Feminary Collective sought to confront the constellations of ambivalence that accompany living as a lesbian in the South, and they were adamant about building a body of literature that reflected on the ways in which southern lesbian ambivalence intersects with other social positions, especially race and class. To work toward these goals, the Collective pursued a praxis that I refer to as *backward-onward community-formation*, which requires confronting and acknowledging historical specificity and experiential limits while also imagining new possibilities for social movement.

This is not to say that all members of the Collective remember their work primarily in terms of social justice. In a personal interview, Deborah Jamieson (2019)—a Black lesbian, lifelong southerner, mother of two,² and a member of the Collective during the particular incarnation that concerns this article—describes her memories more in terms of her emotional connection to an accepting community:

Child, I’ve had two strokes and some mini-strokes. So when you ask me, what do I remember.... [Laughs]. [...] I lost some memories, but I still have the emotional part, even though I might have lost some of the actual doings and sayings. [...] For us, for me,

² Jamieson now has a step son as well, but during her time with the Feminary Collective she had just the two daughters. This interview took place in Jamieson’s home in Greensboro, NC, on November 29, 2019. We were joined by her wife Ann Clegg and her daughter Lalenja Harrington.

and for Lalenja,³ *Feminary* was not just a magazine that put out. It wasn't just that. It wasn't just these women who came together and decided on one line and put this thing together. It was women who loved women who loved each other, who was respectful. And respected other women and their choices and their beliefs. And though I may not agree with you—or as my baby would say, I might be problematic with some of the stuff you believe [laughs]—still, there's room for all at the table. (p. 21)

Throughout our conversation, it was clear that Jamieson's emotion-based memories centered on feelings of acceptance and respect not only for her perspectives as a Black woman and as a mother, but as a whole and complex human being. Notably, these memories of wholeness also hold temporal connotations for Jamieson: "*Feminary*, in essence, was not just a collective for me. It was a time for me. Because in *Feminary*, all parts of my life were entwined. Not entangled, but entwined with" (p. 17). This experience with *Feminary* speaks to how the Collective's praxis of looking backward-onward made possible multi-temporal states of being that continued long after the journal stopped printing and the interpersonal relationships dissolved. Later in the interview, Jamieson speaks of *Feminary*'s temporality in both present- and future-tense, simultaneously moving between individual and collective experiences: "It's woven into our [both Jamieson's and her daughter's] lives, still affecting us. [...] It will always, always, always be with me. Those women will always be part of my sisterhood. They will. I don't care if I never see them again" (pg. 34). Jamieson elucidates a type of kinship that extends across various spaces and timelines, allowing one's whole self to exist in all its multiplicities, contradictions, and impermanent states of being. This vision of lesbian collectivity works against gate-keeping-via-definition and works toward living, breathing articulations of affiliation.

³ Harrington attended some of the Collective's meetings when she was a child.

The Feminary Collective’s archive has much to teach us about treating lesbianism and southernness as multi-temporal articulations of collective being, and I suggest that academic elitism, racism, and misogyny—along with a pervading fear of accusations of essentialism—have prevented us from taking seriously such regenerative modes of kinship found throughout lesbian feminism from the seventies and eighties. Though *Feminary* was a nationally-circulated journal whose Collective boasted well-known members Minnie Bruce Pratt and Mab Segrest, there was for a long time a dearth of related scholarship on this visionary group of women. Until about 2014, the only in-depth studies were two articles published in an issue of the *North Carolina Literary Review* (Wynn, 2000; Powell, 2000) and a Duke University Master’s student’s thesis (Gilbert, 1993). This gap in scholarship is gradually closing thanks to more recent work from Keira V. Williams (2020), Jaime Harker (2018), Julie Enszer (2015), and Jaime Cantrell (2015), yet there is still much more to be said about the Collective’s radical imaginings of subjectivity. The Feminary Collective resisted monolithic notions of southern lesbianism, working to express the heterogeneous yet interrelated ways southern lesbians reckon with their sexualities within a diverse and complicated region. While previous issues of *Feminary* explored explicitly lesbian content, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979) marked the turn toward a particular sexual orientation. The turn also came as the first nationally circulated lesbian magazines were printing their final issues: *The Ladder* in 1972, followed by *Amazon Quarterly* in 1975, and then *The Lesbian Tide* in 1980. Harriet Desmoines and Charlotte Nicholson were in the process of transitioning *Sinister Wisdom* from a national journal based in North Carolina to one based in Massachusetts, with Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff taking the helm.⁴ It only took a few more years for *Feminary* to change hands and move to San Francisco for its two final issues as a

⁴ *Sinister Wisdom* has since returned to the South, and currently edited by Julie Enszer out of Dover, FL.

nationally-circulated magazine with an international perspective, a “lesbian feminist magazine of politics, passion and hope” (1985).⁵ I am more interested in the journal’s moment as a regional project with a largely literary focus during a period when, as now, regionalism appeared to many a hopelessly parochial approach to community-formation, just as lesbianism might currently appear to many a hopelessly limited identity category. Rather than abandoning language that carries such sticky associations, I suggest we look toward the more transformative, generative, and productively ambivalent articulations of backward-onward-looking subjectivities for strategies to create usable networks of affiliation that can extend across time and space.

Before *Feminary* found its new focus as a regional lesbian journal, it served any and all feminists in the Triangle community as the *Female Liberation Newsletter of Durham-Chapel Hill*, meaning the journal was more geographically localized in scope yet socially, politically, and ideologically broad. The Collective had struggled for quite some time to elucidate their purpose and audience,⁶ and by vol. 9, no. 1 (1978), they decided to test out a special issue on Lesbian Community.⁷ Writing on behalf of the Collective, Mab Segrest explains that “we are working to keep our ‘borders’ open to any women who want to join us for mutual nurturance, in mutual strength,” lesbian-identified or not. “Also,” she continues, “the lesbian community serves as a laboratory for relationships between and among all women since it is not only lesbians who have lived and worked in isolation from another” (p. 2). This perception of lesbianism as relational laboratory rather than identity category suggests that the Collective sought to position

⁵ From *Feminary*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1985). This is the journal’s final issue.

⁶ Vol. 1, no. 9 (1970) announces a “new look for the issue” (n.p.) and requests submissions of poetry, ads, song lyrics, and other non-news related items (though it is quite some time before the journal begins publishing these types of submissions); vol. 7, no. 21 (1974) includes an editorial note about the desire to find a focus and develop an editorial policy.

⁷ While prior to this issue, *Feminary* catered to a local, Durham-Chapel Hill audience of “feminists,” much of their content was geared particularly toward lesbian feminists, prompting readers like “Elizabeth” to encourage *Feminary* to “come all the way out” (vol. 6, no. 15, 1975).

inclusive methods of communal care at the core of lesbian identity. Two issues later, *Feminary* vol. 10, no. 1 (1979) fully embraced this lesbian vision and extended it beyond the politically progressive Triangle and into the politically fraught region known as the South. A productive tension between competing politics, desires, and perspectives is an essential component of *Feminary*'s lesbian vision, with the hopes of challenging both ideological purity (as seen in some versions of lesbian separatism) and racist, classist nostalgia (as seen in some versions of southern pride).

Much as lesbianism does not signal an essential, stable meaning—and few lesbian feminist thinkers ever argued for one—the *Feminary* Collective made clear that while the term *southern* was useful in providing language through which people could process the specificities of their shared experiences, *the South* hardly existed as a distinct region with definable cultural practices. Their goal was not to define *southernness*, but to “explore how (lesbian) lives fit into a region about which we have great ambivalences” and to “explore how this Southern experience fits into the American pattern” (p. 4). The parentheses surrounding *lesbian* recall an image of overlapping circles of community—lesbians within and outside of the South, within and outside of the United States—and are useful for imagining contingent, ever-evolving subjectivities. One particularly illustrative poem from vol. 12, no. 1 (1982)—the “Maps” issue—makes clear the complex ambivalence that inevitably arises from treating identity as contingent. In “Adversity,” Flying Thunder Cloud questions the possible masochistic underpinnings of choosing to live in the South as a “Blackdyke.” The speaker, a native New Yorker, is “happy/proud / to be living / in the South” (p. 107) because it is where she experienced her sexual awakening. However, she is also intimately familiar with the keen sting of oppression that is sometimes intensified in the region depending on one's social position, and she often feels “someplace / way out of the

concern / of many of / [her] paler skinned ‘sisters’” (p. 108). The pages of *Feminary* are full of intersectional, ambivalent expressions of subjectivity such as this, and the Collective clearly valued any work that could destabilize monolithic assumptions about what it means to identify with lesbian southernness.

As with many feminists who participated in the Women in Print Movement that flourished throughout the United States in the 1970s and 80s, the reflexively creative processes made possible vibrant and radical imaginings of what community and identity could mean. Printing paper bodies of work seemed analogous to imagining new possibilities for erotic and political bodies. For Mab Segrest and the rest of the North Carolina-based *Feminary* Collective, this faith in the regenerative power of print made possible a new southern lesbian community that previously seemed unattainable to both lesbians living outside the region and to many who claimed the South as home. In her opening contribution to the “Southern Women’s Humor” issue of *Feminary* (*Feminary* Collective), Mab Segrest (1981) writes of her frequent feelings of disgust at how slowly she is able to affect change in herself and the world around her, and how endlessly the world’s problems seem to repeat themselves: “But I know if I keep working, and playing and varying, I can suddenly or slowly find myself at a different place. [...] We may not get all the way to where we want to go in this lifetime, but we will sure get closer. Our lives will matter” (25). Like humor, lesbianism has no clearly defined form—it is slowly made, unmade, and remade from surprising, pleasurable, and sometimes maddening arrangements of language, symbol, and subjectivity.

As feminist politics became increasingly transnational in scope by the late 1970s, the *Feminary* Collective paused to consider how the acts of looking backward and thinking provincially are equally as important as imagining global communities of the future. For

Feminarians, great opportunity lay in what Jaime Harker (2018) refers to as a simultaneous deconstruction and construction of the South that worked to dismantle “a toxic, nostalgic South” while also envisioning the possibility of “a just and inclusive one” (p. 78). The Collective’s project required a delicate balance of remaining aware of popular associations with the South and working toward more expansive and complex articulations. If Kraft-Ebbing, Havelock, and other social scientists popularized the term *lesbianism* as a linguistic container for women’s sexual deviance—a container with its own associations of imagined geographic boundaries—then perhaps the Civil War and its aftermath popularized an imagined South as a container for the newly formed nation’s moral, economic, political, and social deviance. Widespread imaginings of the South as backward have as much to do with a perceived cultural divide as they do with a perceived temporal divide. Feminarians reconfigured this backwardness into backward-onwardness: a praxis of reflection in service of movement toward a more equitable future.

Central to this praxis is the principle that creation does not end with publication but continues within a framework of communal reflection and nurturance—which involves challenging each other’s and our own creations as much as we offer our support. Like many feminist periodicals from the 1970s and 80s, *Feminary* frequently published retrospective notes, responses, and critiques alongside poems, essays, stories, and reviews. Often, pieces involved the writers’ relationships to the creations of other important women in their lives, such as the excerpt from Kady Van Deurs’s autobiography that opens *Feminary*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979). In the final scene, Van Deurs reflects upon her inheritance from her grandmother Kate—an inheritance that includes her name, “four forties of submarginal swamp land in Alabama,” and an urge to account for her life through writing. Her grandmother, it turns out, had also tried to leave Van Deurs all of her unpublished poetry: “I wrote back and said, ‘Kate, being a writer myself I know how

important it is that your writing should fall into the right hands, and I hate your poetry” (p. 11). This statement could be read as an expression of tough love, and it could also be read as indicative of the desire of a young writer to break away from the “bad poetry” of her white southern lineage. Throughout the excerpt, Van Deurs writes of feeling a sense of responsibility to “go back to the South and Do Something,” and she reflects on an unproductive conversation with her mother about “the guilt that white southerners feel” (p. 10-11). However, even though the excerpt ends with the recollection of the response Van Deurs wrote to her grandmother about her poetry, she ultimately memorializes her grandmother with direct quotations from the one poem of hers that she could remember in full (a short eulogy to her dead dog), plus a line from another. The closing lines of the excerpt are telling of Van Deurs’s more complex sense of ambivalence: “In another poem, she [Van Deurs’s grandmother] managed to say, somehow, ‘Before you kill yourself, pick up your pen and write.’ Kate did not kill herself until she was 92” (p. 11). Though Van Deurs carries with her a strong urge to destroy attachments to her white southern legacy, she also recognizes the complicated humanity of those attachments, which are often upheld through deep emotional connection and a shared sense of urgency to make meaning from life. Kristen Hogan (2016) refers to this commitment to honest confrontations with legacies of racialized violence as a feminist politics of accountability, in which many feminist bookwomen worked to build a shared dialogue for the difficult and sincere conversations they needed to have in order to uphold their commitments to anti-racist work within the overwhelmingly white women’s movement. For Van Deurs and the Feminary Collective, a feminist politics of accountability entailed reflecting on one’s individual complicity within legacies of southern white supremacy for the sake of working toward a more just lesbian South.

Within the pages of *Feminary*, feminist politics of accountability contained a collective idealism, but their version of honest collective dialogue took slightly different forms from what one might typically expect from lesbian feminist periodicals (i.e. forum-style response essays, reaction letters from readers, editorial notes that disagree with a piece but also acknowledge the importance of publishing it, etc.). They did not leave contributors' typos unedited but instead frequently worked with writers on edits even at the level of content. Yet they also continually accounted for the complexity and imperfection of these collaborative acts of creation. In an interview that appears in vol. 11, no 1&2 (1980), activist and poet Barbara Deming speaks with Pratt and Segrest about her difficulties in grappling with the prospect of outing others when writing of one's own life story, Pratt asks Deming to return to "the story about the wastepaper basket" that they had discussed at another point:

Barbara: Sure—but how does that...?

Minnie Bruce: Well, because we've talked about telling the truth in all of its complexity—not saying something isn't truth if it is truth. Not trying to get rid of it.

Barbara: Yes. Back in my twenties (which was in the 1930's) I was keeping a journal, and I wrote in the journal 'I am a lesbian; I must face this truth.' Then rereading my journal a few days later, I thought, 'Gosh, I shouldn't have that down here in black and white. Someone might read it.' So I took my scissors and cut out that sentence and tossed it in the wastepaper basket. Perhaps half an hour later, as I was moving around the room, I glanced down and there, glaring up at me most conspicuously from the wastepaper basket, was this cut-out sentence. And I remember that it hit me: You can't throw truths

away. If you try to throw them away, you get into worse trouble than you were trying to escape. (84-85)

Perhaps the truth cannot be thrown away, but it does not need to be left to stew in all its unedited, raw afterbirth. In the opening comments to the interview, Segrest mentions how Deming, Pratt, and she edited the transcript of the conversation, with Deming even adding words in some spots to “make it more precise” (72). This is a particular power afforded by placing one’s words in print: the ability to reflect upon stories well after their telling. Coupled with the practice of allowing writers to revise stories, to return to the trash can and pull out the scraps previously thought to be too dangerous, and to acknowledge their mistakes, *Feminary*’s print practices destabilized the authority of the written word without ignoring its power to write the self into imperfect re-creation.

Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart, and S/place⁸

As I write these words I become lesbian and southern, or I am already a southern lesbian and the words on the page become me. As I write this chapter I set into process the moments leading up to the birth of an idea that I will never fully realize, and I love this failure of completion no less than I love my hopeless desire for completion. Maybe I love my tiny, wrinkled fetus of an idea even more than I love knowing what I think. For now I am certain: with these words, I reproduce overlapping circles of who I think I am, which overlap the people I love (and tolerate and dislike) and the world we regenerate. In our mutual validation, I/we become me/us.

⁸ In her reading of Marlene Nourbese Philip’s work, Katherine McKittrick defines S/place as a “space between” that “subverts inner/outer and active/passive dichotomies by speaking through time/place/histories; it reproduces New World children; and, it signifies threat, reclamation and violation” (*Demonic Grounds*, 49).

I call myself a lesbian, and a butch. I describe myself as a person assigned female at birth, and as trans. I am queer. I am gender-queer. I call myself white, not caucasian. I just claimed myself a southerner, yet I was born and lived the first eighteen years of my life in the Midwest. None of these technologies of affiliation are mutually exclusive. None of them are exhaustive. All of them orient my relationship to myself, my body, and the confluence of networks that I encounter on a daily basis, have encountered in the past, and will encounter in the future. The gestation of community and subjectivity are important processes to me, but biological reproduction is not. I carry with me a strong suspicion of origin stories, family trees, and calls for nation—yet I know at a deep and perhaps irrational level that I *need* creation stories, kinship networks, and sites of belonging.

Sylvia Wynter's (2015) bios/mythos theory concerning the hybrid human condition of being born of the womb and of the origin story offers one possibility for addressing this catch-
22. Building upon biological research that links the human opiate reward/punishment (good/bad) system to acts of storytelling, Wynter argues that humans can "autopoetically" create kinship "through the medium of our retroactively projected origin stories or cosmogenies" (199). Our fictive kinship networks inform our fictive subjectivities—and moreover, the "genre (or Mask) of human being" cannot exist prior to or outside of these socially encoded origin stories (201). However, these stories usually serve those in positions of power, perpetuate "ethno-class configuration," and oversimplify the complexity of human networks. So how do those skeptics among us find an autopoetic "ceremony" able to resolve the contradiction of needing yet not wanting the origin stories and networks—a need that just might be encoded within us? According to Wynter, we consider the fictive nature of our cosmogonies and create counter-cosmogonies (222), as Monique Wittig, Jill Johnston, Audre Lorde, and countless other lesbian

writers did when they found available cosmogonies to be lacking. Like Donna Haraway (2016), I prefer a revision of autopoiesis (self-making) as sympoiesis (becoming-with), which acknowledges the collective-self-making happens alongside and in conjunction with all other societal organisms, meaning counter-cosmogonies are never entirely self-determined, and we're never finished telling them.

Elizabeth Freeman (2010) further grapples with the contradiction between desire for/skepticism of origin stories, noting that the generational model of communal affiliation can look an awful lot like the inheritance of identity as property. Yet such models are not bound by this logic and structure, as Freeman argues: “‘Generation,’ a word for both biological and technical replication, cannot necessarily be tossed out with the bathwater of reproductive thinking.” She instead theorizes the concept of “temporal drag,” or the performance of historical affiliation, as a way to complicate inheritance models without abandoning them entirely (64-65). Following Wynter, Haraway, and Freeman, I also maintain that we should not (and perhaps *cannot*) abandon known structures of community- and history-building, yet it is imperative that we rewire them in the service of networks that complicate nation- and ethno-think and their symbolics. With *Feminary*, lesbian identity formation is not framed as a linear process with a clear end product; lesbian identity is a praxis of creativity and community-building that views the self and its “products” as ever-evolving, and lesbian community is defined by clusters of related yet nonidentical values and belief structures.

By vol. 10, no. 3 (1980), the Feminarians had stopped writing their editorial, “Collective Comments,” from a group perspective. “We have decided that printing a collective ‘statement’ in each issue is much too impersonal,” writes Minnie Bruce Pratt. “It makes us sound like a stone-faced corporation—and there are only six of us—and it gives you no idea of what we do and feel

in getting the magazine out” (p. 4). This acknowledgment that jointly-endorsed comments could be read as corporatization might seem a surprising turn for a feminist collective, yet the implication is that the cultivation of a group identity should never be mistaken for dehumanized uniformity. The individual gestures within, along, and outside the group, pulling from available patterns and conversations to create a distinct interpretation and articulation of, in this case, southern lesbian feminism. The Feminary Collective’s insistence on naming the humanity of social movement encourages a type of collectivity that does not assume a completely unified front but rather allows for diverse, amorphous, and sometimes contradictory constellations of ethics, approaches, and interpretations. As Deborah Jamieson notes in her interview, the Collective created space for the various threads of a person’s experiences and convictions to become “entwined with” one another, generating a feeling of wholeness that does not erase complexity (pg. 17).

In “Identity: Skin Blood Heart,” Pratt (1991) compares her journey toward understanding her white southern lesbianism—and understanding identity more generally—to the image of an interlocking, expanding circle:

So this is one gain for me as I change: I learn a way of looking at the world that is more accurate, complex, multilayered, multidimensioned, more truthful. To see the world of overlapping circles, like movement on the mill pond after a fish has jumped, instead of the courthouse square with me at the middle, even if I am on the ground. (p. 33)

This image that describes self as becoming is not one of an amoeba that shape-shifts, but is instead one of expansion and increasing connection to the world outside the self—a centrifugal movement that Pratt refers to as living “on the edge at [her] skin” (p. 35). Importantly, this expansion still remains grounded within and cognizant of the self’s history and limitations. By

contrast, she offers a counter-example of living at the edge of her skin in “Books in the Closet, in the Attic, Boxes, Secrets,” a later essay in the same collection that reflects on her college training in New Criticism:

We bent ourselves to a closer and closer examination of words, making of writing a world in itself, applying what we understood of the New Criticism by escaping into art, into the story, into the poem. We shut out the feelings, thoughts, and histories of people who lived in another dimension of the world than ours. (p. 157)

Pratt’s call for reading practices that peer beyond the text itself might seem commonsensical now, but this approach was counter to the methodologies that had swept through U.S. American academies from the 1940s through the 1970s. For New Critics, a text was a self-contained, self-referential object in which meaning could be discerned through a careful and close analysis of formalistic elements like rhyme, structure, characterization, or irony. The New Critical movement took its name from *The New Criticism* (1941), a collection of essays by John Crowe Ransom, a key member of another southern collective: the Southern Agrarians. The Agrarians (1930) championed a romanticized version of the South that placed itself in opposition to the “American or prevailing way” (p. xli). That “American way” privileged the industrialization and secular cultures of urban areas over the rural agricultural economies and religious communities of the South. Their manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), contains scant reference to Jim Crow laws, and the one essay that grapples with slavery in-depth paints the institution as one forced upon the region by outside agitators. As PhD students at the University of North Carolina and Duke University, both Pratt and Segrest would have been educated under New Criticism and its Agrarian influence, and so to reject its practices was to

reject their institutional training and instead forge their own contextually-based reading practices that recognized literature as part of social movement.

To reclaim a genealogy of southern literature that paid mind to historical and social forces of influence, Pratt and Segrest looked outside the white southern Agrarianism that had come to define much of the literature of the so-called Southern Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s. In “Lines I Dare,” an essay from her collection *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel*, Mab Segrest (1985) references slave narratives as a more direct influence on southern lesbian writing than Agrarian literature. In addressing the question, “Is there (southern) writing after Faulkner?,” Segrest responds,

Obviously, there is. But it is not a literature, like Faulkner’s, that establishes a mythic county unto itself, a “postage stamp of native soil.” It is rather in the tradition of liberation as Black poet June Jordan explains it: “the movement into self-love, self-respect, and self-determination is the movement now galvanizing the true, the unarguable majority of human beings everywhere.” (p. 103)

These liberatory traditions of literature strive for something more than representation of the human condition: they aim for movement, action, and change. While Faulkner’s characters undoubtedly express ambivalence about the South, it is an ambivalence that often manifests in his white characters as self-destructive shame and emotional blockage. The Feminary Collective, on the other hand, sought to channel the transformative energy of ambivalence into action. In her study of Pratt’s work, Tara McPherson (2003) refers to such uses of ambivalence as *strategy* rather than *sign* or symptom: “Here, ambivalence becomes a conscious tactic, a skillful maneuver that underwrites a refreshing mobility and new affective modes” (p. 231). For the

Collective, this meant mobilizing literature for the purposes of confronting and transforming legacies of white supremacist violence.

This is precarious business, however, when spearheaded by a group whose core membership consisted of mostly white women.⁹ In her oral history, Pratt (2005) acknowledges a significant mistake in gatekeeping that the Collective made in their ambition to create a southern journal. A woman who was “Native Choctaw or Creek” and living in Oklahoma submitted her work, and the Collective turned it down because they deemed her non-southern, disregarding the history of the forced displacement of Choctaw and Creek people from the region, and despite the fact that they published many works of displaced black women. “We were so focused on issues around racism against African American people, we made mistakes around other stuff,” explained Pratt. “[...] And we reevaluated ourselves and did a whole issue about what does it mean to be Southern in these different ways, and including Native voices and redrawing the map” (p. 41). The “Maps” issue, vol. 12, no. 1 (1982), was the Collective’s mostly clearly-defined effort at mobilizing ambivalence. The series of maps throughout the issue are redrawn again and again, often overlaid with text and image, in what Jaime Harker (2018) refers to as a transformation of a “seemingly known quantity” (p. 79). These continual reconfigurations of space and collective identity exemplify the transformational potential of backward-onward reflexivity, in which labeling, naming, and drawing boundaries around collectives are necessarily imprecise and impermanent actions—actions that do not privilege closure, certainty, or other forms of symbolic stasis.

⁹ While Deborah Jamieson frequently helped with the printing of issues, she indicated in her interview that Minnie Bruce Pratt, Mab Segrest, and Cris South were the core of the Collective, especially when it came to editorial decisions. According to Minnie Bruce Pratt’s oral history on file at Smith College, they added “an African American and an Arab member about halfway through” the development of their final issue.

Despite the Collective's missteps, their work addressing the violent racism of the South's color line, which at the time had only recently been deemed unconstitutional and was (still is) overtly and implicitly maintained, might be some of the most nuanced to come out of the Women in Print Movement. In her survey of periodicals from the WIP Movement, Agatha Beins (2017) notes that many publications—particularly those edited by white women—relied upon images of women of color to boost the perceived radicalism and intersectionality of the movement. Mainstream media and New Left discourses tended to trivialize women's liberation in a variety of ways, one of which was to label it as a racist movement. Several periodicals sought to speak back, and one method of doing so was by signaling inclusivity and anti-racist politics through images of revolutionary black women and, because of many feminists' involvement in anti-war organizing, women from South Vietnam (pp. 121-22). Beins discusses how these visualizations of a radical Other implied to many a site of ideological purity sought by U.S. feminists in which women of color “disproportionately bear the weight of revolution” (p. 135). Many of these images were recycled from a repository of copyright-free illustrations, meaning the same depictions of Sojourner Truth and South Vietnamese women holding guns appeared across a number of publications. This repetition of visual rhetoric in service of unspoken narrative builds a sense of what Nicole Fleetwood calls *iconicity*—or “the ways in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes”—and indicates a “desire to have the cultural product solve the very problem that it represents” (pp. 2-3). *Feminary*, on the other hand, did not pull from this same repository; they used original artwork submissions for all of their graphics. Moreover, their depictions of southern lesbians did not attempt to stabilize meaning with pre-packaged semiotic stickiness but

instead depicted it as transformational figures-in-process that challenged reading practices of closure. Their images signal social movement, but not self-referential solution.

The cover art of vol. 11, no. 1&2 (Langa and Sneddon, 1980, Fig. 1) communicates this point most clearly with its rendering of an ink-drawn figure overlaying a photograph of a dilapidated cabin under trees. The figure, whom I will refer to with feminine pronouns given the journal's audience, stares directly into the reader's eyes, her arms held defiantly akimbo, and the sign posted on the building behind her declares the issue's theme: "Disobedience." Her translucence blends body with landscape and architecture, blurring the distinction between internal and external identification. The photograph is filtered red, the color of rage.

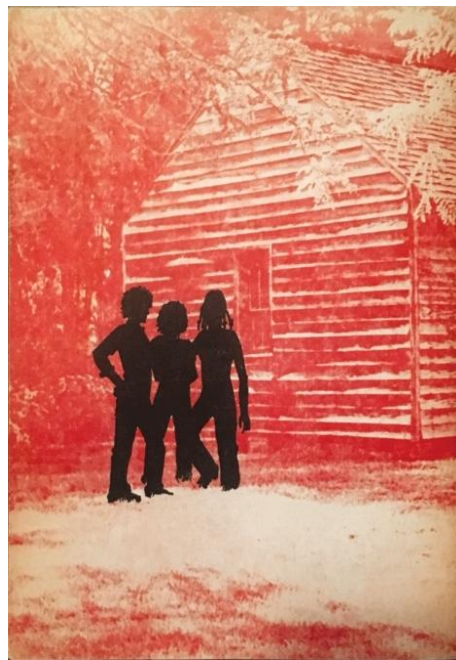


Fig. 1 (left). Cover of *Feminary*, vol. 11, no. 1&2 (Langa and Sneddon, 1980).
Fig. 2 (right). Back cover of *Feminary*, vol. 11, no. 1&2 (Langa and Sneddon, 1980).

It is only upon examining the masthead that a reader will realize that the cabin behind the figure formerly housed enslaved people, and turning to the back cover (Fig. 2) further complicates the front cover's image of rebellion. Unlike the figure on the cover, these silhouettes portray no features beyond their outlines, and a reader could easily miss their inclusion at all. They might

signal blackness through the suggestions of afros and braids, or, much more crudely, through the shadowing of their entire bodies. Yet, it is this knowability of blackness—this iconicity—that these silhouettes productively trouble. The blacked-out images simultaneously signal absence and presence and imply ontologies that occur somewhere else than within recognizable symbolics and geographies. Returning to the front cover, I am inclined to revisit the transparent character as one of privilege. The image calls into question who has the freedom to be transparent about their disobedience, and who does not, and asks us to consider whose disobedience is knowable within movements of resistance. If we read the opacity of the silhouettes as an unknowability, then any signals of whiteness and blackness likewise cannot be read under a stable, essential ontology. Additionally, the layering of ink-on-photo suggests we cannot read the connections between past and present as fluidly linear, but instead as layered and piecemeal. The cover wrap, with its photograph of the slave cabin, its suggestion of displaced and privileged subjectivities, and its representation of body blended with space and environment, calls attention to both feminist and southern reliance on black iconicity to articulate white resistance, while also destabilizing the certainty with which a reader can interpret such representations of disobedience. Rather than reading blackness, whiteness, southernness, lesbianism, etc. as knowable facets of self-hood, we can read them as transformational technologies of *being* that orient our bodies across time and space. In this instance and many others, the Feminary Collective demonstrates a commitment to confronting the complexities of an optics of resistance.

The final two issues of *Feminary* also traffic in the symbolism of the silhouette—vol. XI, no. 3 (1981, Fig. 3) depicts a backlit figure standing before the horizon in a transitional moment of either sunrise or sunset, and the front cover vol. XII, no.1 (1982, Fig. 4, the “Maps” issue)

shows an expanded map of the southern region of the U.S. with one silhouette straddling state lines and the other walking away from the map toward the bottom corner of the page; the back cover portrays these same two figures, offset slightly (Fig. 5):

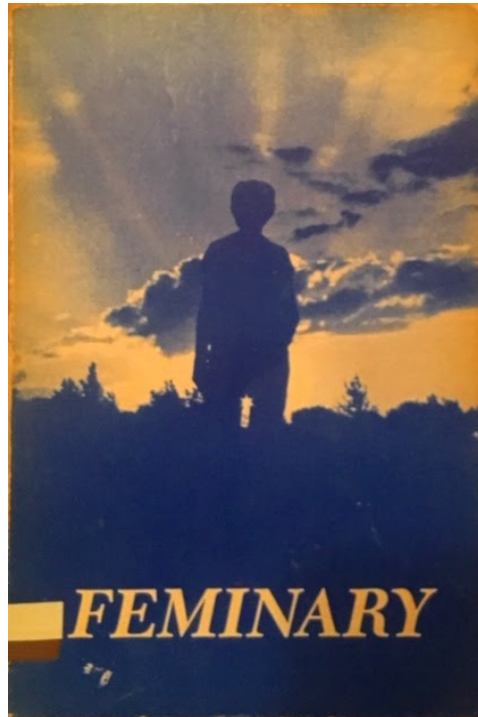


Fig. 3. Cover of *Feminary*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1981. (Langa; back cover is blank.)



Fig. 4. Cover of *Feminary*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1982. (Langa)
 Fig. 5. Back cover of *Feminary*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1982. (Langa)

Once again, these seemingly simple figures complicate visual knowability and suggest a blending of body with geographic and imagined space. The backlit figure appears to rise up out of the tree line, and it is impossible to discern whether we are looking at her head-on or standing behind her as she peers into the sunrise/sunset. In the final issue (Fig. 4 and 5), the figures standing on and moving through the map—two of which appear to be a silhouetted versions of the translucent woman from the “Disobedience” issue—indicate both a staying and a leaving, the map’s lines running through, alongside, above, or below their bodies. Both issues portray not only bodies, space, and time on the move, but also meaning-making on the move.

Silhouettes, then, are particularly characteristic of *Feminary*’s conception of identity-formation, and the form has a long history of use in visualizations of U.S. American community. Prior to the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, silhouettes were the most popular form of portraiture available, being both quick to produce and affordable to purchase.

Silhouette artists were often itinerant workers, and the rapidity with which they could produce a portrait appealed to busy people who were often on the move as well. Asma Naeem (2018) argues that this “contradiction of mobility and fixity,” along with other “innate oppositional structures of the silhouette—black against white, severing and totality, flatness and embodiment, opaqueness and transparency, void and likeness,” made this form particularly appealing during a period in U.S. American history when people around the country were attempting to reconcile divisive conversations about independence from colonial rule and an economy that was increasingly dependent upon slavery (3-4). For the Feminary Collective, the silhouette simultaneously produces and troubles both southern and lesbian feminist identity-formation. How can southerners claim community without perpetuating a narrative that disregards a deep history of displacement and white supremacy? How can lesbian feminists claim community without gatekeeping or essentializing gender and sexuality? The Feminarians do not answer these questions, and they certainly do not suggest abandoning entirely the language we use to form networks of subjectivity and community. Their movement toward liberatory community-formation (perhaps an impossible dream) requires a conception of subjectivity that destabilizes interpretive certainty through its very articulation.

Afterward, and Then

To conclude this chapter that is itself an act of devotion to the lesbian feminist practice of resistance to closure, to articulations of lesbian selves-in-process, to lesbian selves without end, I turn back to Segrest (1981) and her afterward to “My Mama’s Dead Squirrel, and Southern Humor”:

Well, here I am at the end. I have been working on this damned paper for over three years. It is in itself pretty Baroque, plenty of variations on a few themes. By now you may be lost entirely. I think the whole thing's been about survival: surviving the lies we were born into, surviving "patriarchy" and "racism" and "capitalism", those words that come nearest to naming the forces of death among us, surviving each other and ourselves.

(25)

Segrest defines laughter as a revolutionary form of survival, yet a few sentences later she warns that we must not use it to "endure what courage can change." Similarly, the Feminary Collective's work reminds us that we cannot use bonds of community, kinship, and nation to protect us from what we know must challenge.

I have demonstrated that the print journal *Feminary* ingeniously performs a praxis of *backward-onward* reflexivity that frames southern lesbianism as social movement rooted in historical awareness. However, it proves difficult to capture within the scope of a chapter how the Feminary Collective as a group of women created something special and intangible through their relationships to each other and their work. During our interview, Deborah Jamieson touched upon this impossibility:

If I say anything about this incarnation, about Feminary, is I'm very, very sorry for the readers who could not have the experience of Feminary. They could read the articles, and they can get a lot out of that, but they could not have the experience of our collective that I would have wished for them more so than the stuff they read. (pg. 34)

Jamieson offers an important reminder that archival work, like all acts of remembrance, can only catch a small glimpse of the past, and what is more important in the case of Feminary and other histories of social movement is figuring out how to mobilize these pieces of our past towards

collective visions. In lesbian studies, this means building upon the work from our predecessors to continue to effect necessary change, such as addressing classism in academic studies of identity, confronting histories of transphobia in the lesbian archives, and challenging the whiteness of much queer history that gets written and remembered. In the context of lesbian identity, I suggest that as the Feminary Collective did, we must resist dreams of a clean break from tradition, language, or community, but instead pursue creative practices that face these sites of belonging and meaning-making head-on to embrace what is usable and to articulate what is not. Backward-onward lesbian identities have no clear endpoints; they are complex, interlocking, and ever-expanding processes that leave traces of where they came from—like the ripples in a pond.

CHAPTER TWO

“HAVEN’T YOU HEARD OF ANOTHER LIFE, SWEETIE?”: GOING OFF RECORD WITH

ANN ALLEN SHOCKLEY

These days, readers can seamlessly refer to James Baldwin both as one of the finest writers in the U.S. American canon—and also as a queer black writer who made space for literary representation of love between men. However, this acceptance of Baldwin’s queerness can hardly be considered a given, and it continues to be the case that many contemporary conversations about his life and legacy gloss over this portion of his biography—as with Raoul Peck’s 2016 documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*. Baldwin’s estate might have something to do with this dampening of his sexuality, considering several of the letters in his Schomburg Center archive—including his correspondences with Lucien Happersberger, a Swiss painter Baldwin considered to be the one true love of his life (Schuessler n.p.)—are sealed until 2040. Yet even though Baldwin wrote explicitly about queer relations between men, he too preferred to keep his personal sexuality separate from his public persona, a stance that some have suggested “came directly out of increasing attacks on his authority as a (homosexual) racial spokesman” (Field 460). For him, his racial identity held much more social and political import than did his sexuality, and he consistently resisted labels or categorizations that would pin him as queer.

Unlike her friend “Jimmy,” Lorraine Hansberry “embraced the words *lesbian* and *homosexual* to define herself” and was decidedly out among the people who knew her (Perry 125). Even her husband for nearly a decade, Robert Neimeroff, was aware of Hansberry’s sexual preferences and remained in the marriage that afforded Hansberry a level of social protection

Baldwin never had. Still, Hansberry's queerness has only recently become a matter of widespread knowledge, partially thanks to her daughter and executor of her estate, Joi Gresham, who published an excerpt of Hansberry's letters to *The Ladder*, signed "LHN" (lhlt.org). Yet even though her own family has outed her and her Schomburg Center papers have been open to the public since 2010, there is still very little information available about the intimacies of Hansberry's lesbian relationships. In researching her "third person memoir," *Looking for Lorraine*, Imani Perry poured through the letters of Hansberry's lover Molly Malone Cook,¹⁰ scrounging for evidence of their desire: "I came across a journal passage of Molly's that I just knew had to be about Lorraine.[...]But I didn't know for sure. I just felt and hoped it. It seemed so right" (1, 93). For many researchers of queer lives, our work is fueled by some combination of hope, intuition, and surrender to uncertainty.

Certainly, this hunger to *know* the extent of a famous artist's queerness generally stems from a desire to locate a queerness in a legacy that required the safety of silence, but for me, at least, it is about much more than simply staking an ancestral claim. To have enough suggestion to be able to suspect the queerness of historical public figures we admire is, for many, a way to ameliorate the internalized double-bind wrought by a culture that both demands proof to validate claims of queerness but also polices and/or monetizes such proof the moment it becomes public knowledge. While Baldwin and Hansberry experienced constant surveillance due to the color of their skin, their queer private lives remained relatively safe from the scrutiny of the state and from mainstream perception. Now that they are dead, we can peer into these private intimacies without the danger of destroying their lives or careers. For both of these writers, there is also the question of how far their reach would have been had their sexual preferences been publicly

¹⁰ A photographer who became the longtime partner of poet Mary Oliver.

exposed. As Perry speculates, “[a]lthough her love of women would be treated more kindly today, there is a good chance Lorraine’s sexuality would be used to push her away from the center of American theater and thought” (202) – as would her Marxist and socialist political leanings. Given their established, indisputable legacies, we can retroactively read the queerness that ran through the lives of these artists and influenced the very foundations of American art.

While the ethics of writing about a dead public figure’s queerness are anything but clean cut, they are still much less complicated than the ethics of writing about the queerness of writing about someone living. Whether or not they are a public figure or they self-identify as queer, there is much more at stake in writing about someone whose life can be irrevocably altered by the information made available about a marginalized part of their identity that they may wish to have the option to mask, for purposes of safety or otherwise. Moreover, as a white researcher peering into the archive of a queer black woman living in a conservative region in the South, I must contend with the legacy of the “the white man...always trying to know somebody else’s business”¹¹ (qtd. in Smith 24)— the ways in which the white impulse to *know* blackness becomes inevitably entangled with a politics of invasion and ownership, bolstered in academia by a capitalist scientific model that pushes for knowledge-production and innovation, often at the expense of consent or lives. In academia, the white compulsion to know blackness is not only confined to the most sordid histories of experimenting on black bodies or in the appropriation and consumption of black arts and culture by white audiences; this compulsion can also manifest as a university department at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) whose black studies content is overwhelmingly delivered by white faculty to primarily white students with little

¹¹ This excerpted quote is from Zora Neale Hurston’s introduction to *Mules and Men* and appears in the context of white insatiability for black knowledge in Christine A. Smith’s article, “Impossible Privacy: Black Women and Police Terror.”

regard to the experiences of black faculty or students in the department. Whatever the department administration and faculty's conscious intent may be, the fact remains that the department is upholding the status quo of racialized power imbalances.

I turn to the archive of author and longtime Fisk University library Ann Allen Shockley to help me articulate a reading practice flexible enough to *go off record*, wherein a researcher might catch glances of what goes on in an archive's interstices and opacities but must retain an interpretive ambivalence. Throughout this project, I have often turned to historical conjecture to fill archival gaps, a practice that often says much more about a researcher's desires than it does about what actually happened in the past. For instance, when Imani Perry pours through Molly Malone Cook's archive to locate evidence of desire between Cook and Hansberry, she frames the intuitive knowledge that she gleans from their letters as an act of hope stemming from her own desire to witness their love. My first and foremost desire is to witness Shockley as an archive-informed artist, and the primary manner in which I speculate is by treating fiction as archival material that can speak tangentially to a writer's lived experience without directly exposing it, just as Perry uses the Hansberry's lesbian short stories (written under the pen name "Emily Jones") as yet another source from which to read Hansberry's queerness. Shockley wrote her lesbian fiction under her own name, but her fiction quite frequently grapples with the politics of privacy, and so I will refer to it in building my own sense of Shockley's archival boundaries.

Like Baldwin, Shockley has garnered a reputation as someone who deeply values her privacy about her personal life, but like Hansbury, she has shown a willingness to align herself with the label *lesbian*. Shockley published the first novel to feature a black lesbian protagonist, *Loving Her*, in 1974, five years before *Feminary* announced their journal's new emphasis on "the lesbian vision," and two years before *Sinister Wisdom* published their first issue from their

headquarters in Charlotte, NC. By the time she published *Loving Her*, Shockley had gained a reputation as a writer of black fiction, which she credits for the ability to publish a lesbian novel with mainstream press Bobbs-Merrill, who had hired a black editor at the time.¹² However, the publisher did very little to promote the book, and it quickly fell out of print and did not see the light of day again until Naiad Press reprinted it in 1987—five years after she published her second novel to feature a black lesbian protagonist, *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982).

While it is clear that the lesbian networks that would ultimately circulate Shockley's writing perceived her as a lesbian, it is less clear to what extent Shockley defined herself as such. It seems likely that she did not share details of her sexual orientation with many people in her immediate community of Nashville or at her job as Special Collections head librarian at Fisk University. Since she was publishing with independent lesbian presses prior to the widespread availability of information via the internet, it is entirely possible that she was able to keep these two branches of her professional life separate. She has always declined requests for interviews and continues to do so, and in one of few quotes I could find of her speaking about her own work, she avoids any direct reference to her own personal life—she describes *Loving Her* as an attempt “to create an understanding and compassion for people who choose another type of lifestyle” (“Black Librarians as Creative Writers,” *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 164). As for archival materials, Shockley retains possession of her personal papers, and what is available in her biographical papers at Fisk and her correspondences in the Naiad archives at the San Francisco Public Library consists almost entirely of published works or professional correspondence.¹³ A recent history of Fisk's library program (2020), researched and compiled by

¹² Shockley discusses this in a personal letter to me, dated “November 19, 2021.”

¹³ In the aforementioned personal correspondence to me (2021), Shockley mentions that she keeps a large collection of personal archives in her home in Nashville.

current Dean of the Library Brandon Owens as a dissertation project, refers to Shockley as “an accomplished writer” of both library science and fiction books (156) and discusses in depth her contributions to black librarianship—but mentions nothing of her legacy in lesbian publishing. Of course, this omission of her lesbian writing does not mean that Shockley actively hid this body of work from her employers, but rather that it is not an aspect of her legacy actively and overtly recognized by the institution. As far as I know, she did not coordinate any gay or lesbian programming at Fisk, so perhaps the absence of explicit reference to Shockley’s contributions to lesbian literature by Owens and others concerned with Fisk’s institutional history is primarily due to a focus on Shockley’s visible institutional contributions.

Ultimately, whether or not Shockley was “out” as lesbian—or even as a writer of lesbian fiction—at Fisk and elsewhere in her life is beside my point. What interests me more is the possibility available in interrogating and opening up the concept of *passing* in the context of Shockley’s life and work, especially given Shockley’s direct discussion of racial and gendered passing in her most recent novel *Celebrating Hotchclaw* (2005). In their study of passing as a trope in contemporary literature and performance art (2018), Mollie Godfrey and Vershawn Ashanti Young note that the significant presence of passing as a trope in cultural narratives indicates a continued preoccupation with authorial and artistic “authenticity,” a postmodern concept that is frequently “applied to authors who are considered ‘marginal’ for various reasons, but most often because of their ethnic background” (10). Passing—or *neo-passing*¹⁴—simultaneously subverts and reinforces cultural categories, signaling their existence and relevance as well as their fluidity. Godfrey and Young argue that passing also encompasses a

¹⁴ Godfrey and Young use this term to reference performances and representations of passing after Jim Crow.

slippage between pretending and identifying (feeling like a particular performance is the “real you”), while others might see such performances as inauthentic (4).

With Shockley—as well as with the other writers discussed in this project—it is difficult if not impossible for me to think outside of my own attachments to authentic portrayals of queer sexuality: I often find myself seeking biographical, authorial proof behind a narrative mask of queerness. Certainly, the underrepresentation of lesbian-identified writers in publishing is a huge part of my preoccupation, as is my frustration with the disproportionate success of writers who profit from their imagined experiences of people more marginalized than they are. While I maintain that the dearth of lesbian-authored literature about lesbian lives continues to be an important issue worth confronting, I struggle to reckon with the possibility that my attachment to the category of lesbian says much more about my own desires and anxieties than it does about my understanding of the actual experiences of women-loving-women. I seek literature that renders desire in ways that speak to my own experiences, and it can be hard for me to find it, and when I do I scramble to locate some level of categorical stabilization that allows me to better trust the authorial intent. It is another kind of paranoid reading—one that compels me to look on with skepticism at Sedgwick’s mountain of writing about white gay men’s desires. But then, too, my writing about blackness (in this chapter and elsewhere), should be read with a healthy dose of skepticism. Moreover, there is no monolith of queer or gendered experience of which I can claim an encompassing authority. With this chapter, then, I intend to do my best to listen to what Shockley’s archive actually has to say about categorical de/stabilization rather than what I want it to say. It is an impossible goal destined for at least partial failure, but perhaps we will catch a glimpse of Shockley along the way.

While the term *passing* historically refers to racial categories, *Celebrating Hotchclaw* indicates Shockley's interest in drawing connections between racial passing and passing in terms of gender and sexuality (among other elements of identity performance). Since neo-passing relies on both subject and viewer participation, it is important to note that the power of categorical destabilization can flow in multiple directions. Stephen Belluscio (2006) distinguishes between two understandings of passing: passing as concealment, and passing in a postmodern performance sense, in which both subject and viewer rely on their familiarity with various cultural masks to temporarily stabilize illegible subjectivity (8). In Shockley's work, I see a third understanding of passing as an embodied sense of transit, in which one's body "passes through" two or more seemingly legible social categories, whether by choice or not. Sometimes, these multiple categories might be simultaneously legible to onlookers. Other times, onlookers might read the passing body as signaling only one legible category, while the person passing carries a sense of embodied multiplicity. The power one can access by performing a cultural script while doing otherwise behind the scenes can be kept hidden for subversive uses, and it is this sense of passing that we need to consider when interrogating concepts like "the closet." Perhaps Shockley prefers to keep aspects of her private life out of public view not only to protect her desires from voyeuristic scrutiny, but also to retain a subversive presence in other public spaces and documents, such as the institutional history of Fisk's library programs.

Neo-passing—wherein passing is often more about performance than appearance (Godfrey and Young, 3)—is a ubiquitous experience for many marginalized people trying to survive under biopolitical capitalism, and whether or not one "passes" within the parameters of a particular identity's socially-sanctioned markers is often a matter beyond individual control. Furthermore, the ability to be transparent usually requires a certain level of privilege in the first

place, especially when considering intersections of race, sexuality, and gender presentation. Given the historical context of passing in the US, it is impossible for discussions of passing as related to other cultural categories to exist apart from a discussion of racial passing. Godfrey and Young note that the term is etymologically rooted in the one-drop rule, and racial passing is “considered a uniquely American phenomenon” (10). As a visible marker in which privilege is based on distance or proximity to blackness, racial identity in the U.S. is a negotiation between how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived. Gender presentation, while also visible, can be more readily altered according to how we perceive ourselves or want to be perceived and can, across one person’s life, shift across numerous vectors of privilege. Yet gender is also deeply racialized, wherein proximity to blackness also influences societal perceptions about what gender performances are possible.

On the other hand, it can be much more difficult to *see* sexuality. This is not to say that sexual preferences and identities are invisible—most people tend to assume heterosexuality unless proven otherwise, and there are plenty of methods of flagging one’s sexual preferences and politics. Queer sexualities can be publicly performed, but they can also be performed behind closed bedroom or bathhouse doors, or otherwise out of public sight. Because of this possibility of privacy, there is social premium granted to those whose queer sexualities pass within the visible parameters of heterosexuality, and this passing often relies on affiliations with other markers of privilege. It is still the prevalent social expectation that queer people should, when necessary, find ways to “play straight” or “keep private matters private.” Being able to reveal or conceal one’s queerness affords a certain level of social mobility—and safety. And as Foucault

and many others have argued, keeping one's sexuality out of the public eye can protect it from forces of biopolitical control.¹⁵

Because of the widespread expectation that sexuality—and especially sexual behaviors—be kept private, it is impossible to speak of passing within the context of sexuality in the same ways that we speak about passing in terms of race or gender. I do not seek to find proof about whether or not Shockley shared or did not share the details of her sexuality with the people she encountered in her life. Certainly, there are immense political and cultural implications surrounding the decision to “come out” in a society that sees heterosexuality unless proven otherwise. There are also countless reasons to keep such details private, especially when trying to survive under racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism. What I am more interested in is Shockley's commitment to privacy and its implications for queer archival reading practices and the impulse to connect a writer's work with their personal life—especially for queer black writers.

In *Nobody is Supposed to Know*, C. Riley Snorton characterizes black men's access to the Down Low (DL), queer sex that people are aware is happening but is not directly discussed, as “the condition for black sexual representation” (4). Furthermore, Snorton questions Sedgwick's reliance on non-racialized bodies and revises her theory of the closet to account more for collective experiences of sexuality (9, 156). Snorton defines “the glass closet” as a space “marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle, and speculation” (4), and in the context of blackness, “the closet is not a space of concealment but a site for observation and display” (18). Whether or not black men are actually on the DL, the widespread awareness of its existence coupled with the hyper-sexualization of black bodies in the U.S. sets much different terms for

¹⁵ See Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1978, 1990)

any discussion about whether or not a black man is “out”—there already tends to be underlying presumption of his dangerous sexuality, queer or otherwise, and any declarations of straightness will do little to negate that cultural script.

The meaning of the closet shifts a bit in reference to black women’s sexualities, which, while hypersexualized, are not associated with underlying fears of concealed queerness. In most contexts, queerness is generally considered less dangerous for people who are read as women than for people read as men. However, the notion of the glass closet is still relevant for black women: as Christine Smith notes, black women especially “have never known the luxury of privacy in the Americas.[...]Our every move is stalked and surveilled. Our bodies, our homes, our children, even our graves are not our own; able to be raided, poked, prodded or stolen at any moment” (20). Smith, an anthropologist, argues that one way anthropologists can “engage in the politics of refusal” of such hyper-surveillance is through “[e]thnographic redaction—refusing to tell the finished story and reveal the totality of what is not known” (27). By their fragmented nature, archives already tend to be full of redactions and unfinished stories, but researchers, including myself, also tend to take on the persona of detective, wherein all proof is good proof, and some mystery remains yet to be discovered. While the access to and implications of such discoveries remain fairly limited with traditional archives comprised of curated physical documents and objects that are gatekept by institutional libraries, community and digital archives can complicate the ethical implications quite a bit. Certainly, on the surface, increased access to historical resources seems like a net positive. Yet the more available these documents and objects become—many of which were never intended for public view—the more their subjects’ lives are placed on display. When dealing with still-living subjects, this hypervisibility can have very real and sometimes dangerous consequences.

This dilemma runs through discussions of queer archival ethics, as seen through controversies like the Lesbian Herstory Archives' (LHA) efforts to digitize their inventory. The LHA is a community-run archive founded in 1974 by members of the Gay Academic Union and was run out of Joan Nestle and Deb Edelman's Manhattan apartment for many years.¹⁶ The LHA operates entirely through volunteer labor, and while it holds the documents of many lesbian figures that already have a public presence, a huge portion of their collection consists of donations from lesbians from all walks of life. What are the implications of making these personal documents, originally intended to be viewed by anyone who took the effort of traveling to the physical archive, more accessible through digitization? Or, we might consider Smith College's Sophia Smith Collection of oral histories, which includes the interviews with Minnie Bruce Pratt and Dorothy Allison referenced in previous chapters. When the archive began to digitize these oral histories roughly a decade ago, narrators who had originally given permission to publish the material online felt uncomfortable with the reality of unmediated access. Kelly Anderson, the curator of the collection surmised that for the narrators who took issue, these materials no longer felt "like an archival document with any kind of gatekeeping but rather a trove of personal information available to the masses" (qtd. in Chenier, 137).

Given these concerns about privacy and hyper-surveillance, I will do my best to read alongside any gestures of refusal that I can sense in Ann Allen Shockley's archive. I have chosen to focus more on Shockley's public-facing presence, which includes major contributions to black and lesbian archival studies. I have used our personal correspondences mostly for my own context, solely referencing them to clear up minor details related to her public-facing. I have chosen to steer this chapter away from significant detail about Shockley's private life, yet I will

¹⁶ In the mid-1980s, the LHA moved to a larger location in Brooklyn. See more at <https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/about/a-brief-history/>

also rely on her public-facing archive to look at her lived experience askance. Two major questions about her life that I do want to entertain due (if you will indulge me, dear reader): 1) Does Ann Allen Shockley consider herself to be a lesbian?, and 2) Does it matter?

The Lesbian Question

For the members of the Feminary Collective and for Dorothy Allison, writing about and publishing stories of lesbian lives was a courageous and revolutionary act that was made possible through print networks operated by and for women (many of them lesbian-identified). For Allison and the more public-facing members of Feminary (such as Minnie Bruce Pratt and Mab Segrest), the decision to publish explicitly lesbian works throughout the seventies and eighties—and perhaps more significantly, to identify as lesbians—very likely resulted in their ostracization from the types of stable career paths available at the time to unmarried women who needed to support themselves. Dorothy Allison eventually found some level of financial stability due to the success of her breakthrough novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), though, like most working writers, she has had to supplement the money made from her writing with workshop and speaker fees. Pratt and Segrest, on the other hand, did not land full-time professorships until the early 2000s, despite their PhD's from widely-respected institutions, their impressive publishing histories, and their significant contributions to feminist organizing. These are not isolated examples: for many women who chose to outwardly live and write about lesbian experiences, they were forced to do so at the expense of financial security—a decision that generally requires some other level of sociopolitical privilege to be able to make. It is no wonder the lesbian feminist movement of the seventies and eighties is stereotyped as consisting of mostly middle-to-upper-class white women.

For Shockley, this tension between public-facing lesbianism and professional stability was extremely complicated. Though known now as a black lesbian writer who regularly contributed lesbian-centered literature to feminist presses throughout the seventies and eighties, it is unclear how explicit Shockley was about her own sexuality during her career as a university librarian, which spanned from 1959 until her retirement from Fisk in 1988. What is clear is that Shockley has long been and continues to be very private about her personal life, categorically refusing interviews and only providing biographical details related to her dual careers as an academic librarian and as a fiction writer.

This is what I do know: born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1927 to social worker parents, Shockley began writing short stories in high school, and she launched her professional writing career as a staff writer for the *Louisville Defender*. She went on to earn her Bachelor's at Fisk University in 1948, and during her time there she served as fiction editor for the *Fisk Herald*. She subsequently earned her Master's in Library Science from Case Western in 1960, and worked at a number of libraries before returning to Fisk in 1970 as the head of Special Collections.¹⁷ She remained at Fisk until her retirement in 1988, and currently resides in Nashville. Little information is readily available about Shockley's personal life aside from the fact that she had been previously married to William Shockley ("Allen" is her maiden name) and has two children from that relationship. In researching the details of her life, it appears that her professional biography as a writer and librarian is what she is willing to share publicly, while she retains the details of her personal biography for herself, perhaps to be released at some point in the future.

¹⁷ Biographical details come from entries on Shockley in *Living Black American Authors: A Biographical Directory* (1973), ed. by Ann Allen Shockley and Sue P. Chandler (pp. 144-145) and in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1993) by Elsa Barkley Brown and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (pp. 1029-1030).

Shockley published numerous short stories in regional and national journals, but she is most well-known in lesbian literary circles for writing *Loving Her* (1974). While this novel sold few copies and then quickly fell out of print with their initial publishers, it received renewed attention upon its 1987 re-release with lesbian feminist publishing powerhouse Naiad Press. Naiad also published *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), Shockley's second novel about a closeted lesbian preacher who starts a "church for all" in Nashville. When Shockley receives scholarly attention, it is generally in regard to the historical significance of her fiction. Indeed, her achievement in selling books by and about black lesbians to publishers is significant—it is important to bear in mind that the first collection of black women's writing, *Conditions: Five* (to which Shockley contributed), was not published until 1979, and *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's ground-breaking and controversial novel featuring a queer relationship between two women, arrived in 1982. As with Alice Walker, Shockley's sexual ambiguity may be part of the reason she was able to continue publishing writing featuring black lesbian characters even while working as the head of Special Collections at Fisk University, at a time when visible displays of queer sexualities or gender nonconformity were regularly-enforced grounds for dismissal at workplaces across the country. Keeping one's sexuality private does carry with it a special kind of power to live "another life" parallel to people's assumptions and expectations, as seen throughout Shockley's novels—including *Celebrating Hotchclaw*, which is set at an HBCU in Tennessee.

Despite the many times Shockley has been referred to in print as a black lesbian, Shockley has appeared to evade direct discussion of her relationship to lesbian identity. In a *Sinister Wisdom* issue themed around "Passing" (published 1988, which, notably, is the same year Shockley retired from Fisk) SDiane Bogus writes a comprehensive review of Shockley's

work, touching on the details of her sexuality: “[...]what has been restrictive to the appreciation and development of Ann Allen Shockley is the belief that she is a lesbian. Without fail, even the most assiduous critics from Louie Crew to Alice Walker and Karla Jay have surmised that Shockley is a lesbian, and hence, her interest in lesbian themes, but this is not the case.[...]to this day, Ann Allen Shockley is called a lesbian when it is a life-style that she denies. In an interview with this writer in December of 1984 she reiterated this fact.[...]Personally, I believe she is entitled to her privacy, and if she were woman-loving, that would be her business” (130). Though on the surface Shockley’s inclusion in this issue must be a reference to straight women passing as lesbian in literature. Moreover, Bogus’ wording of these details about Shockley’s sexuality is conspicuously firm. It is also noteworthy that this same year, Bogus completed her PhD dissertation on Shockley’s body of work, and in the acknowledgments, she thanks Shockley for her “indispensable” help with biographical and bibliographical details (v). Clearly, Shockley had a lot of influence over this particular portrayal of her personal life.

Though one of my initial desires for this chapter was to locate another “black lesbian writer” within the queer literary canon, I am now viewing this phrase in terms of bibliography instead of identity, as it relates to Shockley. In her contribution to the iconic collection of black feminist writing, *Home Girls* (1983 [1979]),¹⁸ “The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview,” Shockley attempts to answer the question of why there are so few black lesbians in literature. Shockley notes that “white female writers do not know enough about Black lesbians to write about them” and that they are primarily focused on their own struggles. “This, of course, leaves only the Black female writer knowledgeable or sensitive enough to the subject to cultivate and strengthen an undernourished literature.” She argues that alongside the obstacle of

¹⁸ *Conditions: Five* (1975) served as the basis for *Home Girls*.

homophobia, such representation is likely lacking because black women writers see racism as their “strongest opposition” and a more worthy subject of their writing (83). However, she also acknowledges that literature is slowly changing to address this gap:

Even heterosexual Black female writers and non-woman-identified writers are throwing in, for better or worse, an occasional major or minor Lesbian character. Unfortunately, within these works exists an undercurrent of hostility, trepidation, shadiness, and in some instances, ignorance, calling forth homophobic stereotypes. (In some reviews of my novel, I, too, have been accused of character stereotypes). (86)

In this passage, as with Bogus’ review of her work, Shockley implicitly throws her lot in with “heterosexual Black female writers” without directly doing so. She suggests her own heterosexuality while still retaining some level of ambiguity, and in doing so she is able to draw upon her authorial standpoint in her call for more writers, heterosexual and otherwise, to create believable lesbian characters when they do include them. Her implicit heterosexuality could, perhaps, convince other writers who identify as heterosexual to reexamine their own stances toward lesbian representation.

The issue of lesbian representation also appears elsewhere in Shockley’s nonfiction writing from this period. In *Sinister Wisdom 21* (1982), Shockley interviews writer Red Jordan Arobateau, and her introduction to their conversation discusses how she became enthralled with finding out more about Arobateau after reading her short story about a black lesbian prostitute. “Was she black?” Shockley wonders. “The story spoke of blackness as only a black woman could know it, written in the singular vernacular of black street language” (35). She then notes the rarity of depictions of black lesbians who also exist on class margins, or “the subterranean ghetto,” as she describes it. She surmises why such a disparity exists:

Many Afro-American women who write, exist in an academic environment. Here, they are riveted in the isolated, lofty tower of scholarship, research, and pedagogy. The literary black female writers usually focus on allegorical symbolisms, women in search of a quest, or the ennobling of black women. Other writers are involved in political rhetoric or self-serving pursuits” (35).

As a black woman working in an academic environment, Shockley clearly worked against the impulse to write “lofty” academic works, instead writing novels and short stories that might more readily be classified as romance, soap opera, and other genres popular to women readers. What she does not say, but is certainly worth mentioning, is that queer women writers, and especially queer black women writers, who existed in academic spaces during the seventies and eighties often had to choose between their professional lives and any writing, research, or teaching that could associate them with queerness. Shockley undoubtedly took huge risks in doing so. The fact that she was championing and creating sympathetic lesbian representation from her position within an academic institution in a conservative region of the South is a testament to her courageous audacity.

Still, Shockley’s interest in black lesbian representation actually has much to do with her academic work. There has been very little writing on Shockley’s trailblazing work in librarianship, and black librarianship in particular. During her time as the Special Collections Librarian at Fisk University, Shockley continued the legacy of Arna Bontemps to build up the field of black special collections. At Fisk, she pioneered the Black Oral History program, which features interviews with Arna Bontemps, Fannie Lou Hamer, Julian Bond, and Shirley Graham Du Bois, wife of W.E.B. Du Bois. She helped organize the “Institute on the Selection, Organization, and Use of Materials By and About the Negro” held at Fisk during the summer of

1970, as well as the Institute in Black Studies Librarianship held that following summer, also at Fisk. She also edited, along with E.J. Josey, and contributed to the *Handbook of Black Librarianship* (1977), a compilation of essays on the history of black librarianship and best practices for establishing black special collections.

While historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) had long worked to build archives of black lives and works, interest in black special collections had grown exponentially in the light of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent establishment of black/African American Studies departments at predominantly white colleges and universities across the country. The implementation of such programming was often questionable; in one of Shockley's entries in *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, Shockley takes to task institutional cooptation of the increased interest in black holdings:

This impatience [of Black people in the U.S.] to be free, to be somebody, spilled like a tidal wave from the streets and jails into the sacrosanct walls of white academia. Within these ivory-towered structures, more black students were enrolled than ever before, aided and abetted by federal monies and pseudo-liberal white administrators. Black faces abounded in institutions that in the past had adhered to blatant tokenism. (182)

Shockley writes that these students desired to find themselves through libraries' curated histories, yet these special collections were often hastily thrown together and were underfunded, understaffed, or staffed by librarians with little knowledge of their contents (183). In response, nearly all of her contributions to the field of academic librarianship are dedicated to the task of educating librarians on how to responsibly create and maintain collections that in which students could encounter histories that felt profoundly connected to their lived experience.

Shockley was acutely aware of the need for clearly communicated standards and for adequate recognition of the work that had already been done throughout the rich history of black librarianship in the United States. She took her position as the Head of Special Collections very seriously and urged other librarians/curators to do the same. Shockley further discusses her archival philosophy in: “The Role of the Curator of Afro-American Collections,” another entry from the *Handbook of Black Librarianship*:

The main function of the curator is to collect and preserve these materials for scholarly use. This task may seem simple, but as with the spider who spins a meticulous fine web with ease to human sight, “there is more to this than meets the eye.” Not only is effective administrative organization involved, but the personal characteristics of the curator are at issue as well. The latter can be witnessed in the formation and growth of the pioneering historic black collections, for these collections did not grow alone. They were nurtured and loved by dedicated individuals who perceived the urgency to acquire and safeguard the history of black people. These early curators were visionaries who foresaw the impending relevancy of collecting all that was possible for the unborn black and white generations to come. (193)

Her reverence for the field is palpable, even poetic. She describes the curator’s role in terms of nurturing, loving, and safeguarding a collection, as if the archive were a child in need of ongoing care and guardianship. And then there’s the character of the curator, which Shockley touches on again later in the essay:

[...]of utmost importance is the curator, whose personal image upholds the image of the resource center. The curator must be a known figure to the academic community and

public, and as a public relations link, the curator must convey the prominence of the special collection within the total library's organization. (202)

Here, we have even further hint as to why Shockley might have felt it necessary to safeguard her privacy while working as curator of special collections at Fisk, a relatively conservative Christian university. Moreover, to convince someone to donate their papers to an archive (for Fisk did not have the money to pay as some wealthier universities do) is tricky business, as the donor will judge the curator's character, the curator generally being their main point of contact, in deciding whether their personal papers can be trusted in the care of a particular repository. For Shockley, her insistent protection of her personal privacy may have also had much to do with her near-spiritual reverence for Fisk's holdings, which hinged primarily on her strength and reputation as the primary curator.

The Shroud of Fiction: Privacy vs. Representation in *Celebrating Hotchclaw*

Shockley's many years of experience in both lesbian literary publishing and black librarianship converge in her most recent novel. Published in 2005, well after Shockley's retirement from Fisk, *Celebrating Hotchclaw* (2005) explores the administrative politics of a perpetually underfunded and overstretched institution as it stood in the late eighties and early nineties. The novel's catalyzing moment: after being hospitalized due to an accidental injury, a beloved professor who people assumed to be a cisgender man is discovered to have been assigned female at birth. Dr. Michael Elaine Stower serves as the focal point of the novel's primary plot arc, yet the narrator grants them¹⁹ very little interiority—even less than some of the more minor characters. This conspicuous narrative distance strikes me as an act of grace towards

¹⁹ The novel refers to Michael with masculine pronouns, then switches to feminine pronouns after disclosing Stower's gender assigned at birth. I have chosen to use "they/them" to capture Stower's gendered ambiguity.

a character whose privacy was medically invaded, resulting in professional and familial shaming and the loss of their job. Ultimately, as this novel is a romance much in the same vein as Shockley's previous works, the reader can expect a decent outcome for Michael and the woman who had fallen in love with them both before and after their presumed "secret" was revealed. This love interest, Angela, is also an employee of the university—a librarian who is forced against her will to take on additional responsibilities as the university's archivist, and for no extra pay. The novel serves readers a wholesome lesbian love story alongside a scathing critique of the abuses of power that pervade academia. Yet Shockley also helps us understand the ways in which people can fall into such abusive and discriminatory patterns for the sake of upholding the collective—in the case of *Hotchclaw*, the relatively conservative Christian HBCU that has to fight tooth and nail for its survival.

This question of whether to protect the individual versus the collective also sits at the center of many debates surrounding privacy in queer archives. *Celebrating Hotchclaw* was released by A&M Books, a successor to Naiad Press. A powerhouse in lesbian feminist publishing, Naiad was initially founded in 1971 as a vanity press for Anyda Marchant to publish lesbian fiction under her pen name, Sarah Aldridge. Marchant and her partner, Muriel Crawford, had recently retired from careers in the government sector and, working through the thick of McCarthyism, had lived largely closeted lives. In 1973, Marchant incorporated Naiad, sharing ownership with Crawford, Donna McBride, and—most famously—Barbara Grier, the former editor of the first nationally-distributed lesbian periodical, *The Ladder* (1956-1972). Along with re-printing Shockley's first novel and publishing her second, Naiad also published some of the first works by Sarah Schulman and Pat Califia and brought works by Patricia Highsmith, Renee Vivien, Gertrude Stein, Jane Rule, and other well-known lesbian writers back into print. These

reprints of already highly-regarded writers tended to bring in the most money for the press, with a few notable exceptions, including *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence* (1985)—a collection of personal essays by active and ex-nuns that became a major source of controversy in feminist publishing for its ethical implications.

Barbara Grier reportedly paid ex-nuns Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan half a million dollars to collect stories and edit the collection, a massive advance for any press, let alone an independent lesbian feminist press.²⁰ In paying such a hefty sum, it seems likely that Grier sensed the collection would be a crossover hit that reached beyond lesbian audiences, and therein lies the first dilemma: what happens when sensitive material that contributors likely assumed would be read primarily by lesbians suddenly becomes picked up by the masses? This issue had some precedence in terms of readership—a number of lesbian feminists felt Daughters, Inc. had betrayed their readership when they sold the rights to Rita Mae Brown’s novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) to a mass market press—yet the fact that the collection was nonfiction added an additional layer of ethical concern for the contributors. Whether or not the collection’s mass-market appeal was made known to the contributors is unclear. Still, the fact of the matter is that contributors have very little control over a publication’s readership in the first place, so Grier could hardly be blamed if a non-lesbian reader chose to purchase a lesbian book.

What is certain is that a number of contributors felt deeply violated when Grier sold four of the stories to a *Penthouse*-owned men’s publication, *Forum*, in an explicit attempt to expand readership to heterosexual men.²¹ This decision also garnered widespread criticism from lesbian, feminist, and gay writers and publishers across the country, primarily as an issue of consent.

²⁰ This figure is only conjecture. It is mentioned in an obituary written by a friend of Grier’s: <https://lambdaliterary.org/2011/11/in-remembrance-barbara-grier/>

²¹ See *The Advocate*, September 3, 1985, pp. 46-47.

While the presumably unpaid contributors were losing their jobs and facing other fallout from the novel's widespread success, Naiad's sales were skyrocketing, and Grier began accepting invites to speak on talk shows across the country. A caption to a photograph of Grier in an article from *The Advocate* (1985) offers a response representative of another core issue of this controversy: "With more than 160,000 copies in print and six foreign editions, *Lesbian Nuns* strikes some as *too* successful" (46). While the publishers, writers, and booksellers of the Women in Print Movement had sought to create an empowering space for women's writing that ran counter to the money-driven mainstream market, Grier demonstrated that these presses could be just as susceptible to the exploitative forces of capitalist heteropatriarchy as any.

Anyda Marchant and Muriel Crawford split from Naiad in 1995 and founded A&M Books. As part of the buy-out, they took with them the stock for Marchant's novels that she wrote under the pseudonym of Sarah Aldridge. Shockley also published her most recent novel with A&M Books, one of the last of Marchant and Crawford's publications before humor writer and A&M alum Fay Jacobs took over as editor and owner in 2005. While it is unclear the extent to which *Lesbian Nuns* precipitated Marchant and Crawford's departure from Naiad, Marchant's obituary, written by LGBTQ community historian Marie Kuda, refers to the break-up of the press as acrimonious and quotes letters from Marchant that reveal more of her perceptions of Grier's "egregious error":

Anyda wrote that as they became aware of other actions of "secrecy," "duplicity" and "questionable legality," a sad disillusionment set in that would lead to her and Muriel separating from Naiad. In 1995, after protracted and bitter negotiations, they withdrew from the corporation with a settlement of \$120,000 and the existing stock of all the Sarah Aldridge titles. Anyda wrote that they had never received any profit from their shares and

only took royalties on Aldridge books after 1987. The settlement was abrupt, with no access to Naiad's mailing list or notices sent out to individuals or bookstores regarding the separation. But pushing for a more equitable division of the company's assets, Anyda wrote, "would have entailed real legal confrontations and would have undoubtedly resulted in the destruction of The Naiad Press, which we did not really want to bring about." They fully credited Grier with the monetary success of the Press. Anyda and Muriel were in their 80s when they began their second publishing venture, and hoped by creating A&M Books it would "endure long enough to establish the sort of ideals in publishing which we had at the beginning of Naiad." (qtd. in Kuda)

Shockley has never publicly said anything to imply ill feelings towards Grier over this issue, but I cannot help but wonder if she made a conscientious decision in publishing her book with Marchant and Crawford's press. Moreover, the author biography in *Celebrating Hotchclaw* says nothing about her many publications with Naiad. Instead, it credits "a mainstream publisher" with her original printing of *Loving Her* and Northeastern University Press with the reprint in 1997 (n.p.). Certainly, the omission of Naiad may have been a decision entirely out of Shockley's hands. Yet given her desire for privacy, it would also make complete sense that she would want to distance herself from a notorious lesbian press with a national reputation.

With its penchant for romance, melodrama, and light satire of stereotypes, *Celebrating Hotchclaw* follows in the stylistic footsteps of her previous novels, and it is the novel that most directly correlates with what we know about Shockley's professional life. *Hotchclaw* offers a fascinating exploration of passing, most directly through the gendered passing of the character Michael and through a backstory about racial passing. What makes *Hotchclaw* perhaps even more significant is its handling of the complicated differences and similarities between the social

implications of passing in terms of race, gender, and/or sexuality. As previously discussed, we can also interpret the form of fiction as itself a form of passing, wherein Shockley can retain some semblance of privacy while also producing representation of—and generating empathy for—certain experiences that have little textual precedence.

According to some scholars, passing appears to be a particularly literary trope, wherein textuality offers an especially fruitful means with which to interrogate (in)stabilities of subjectivity. As Sinead Moynihan argues, “Contemporary American writers are attracted to the trope of passing because passing narratives have always foregrounded the notion of textuality in relation to the (il)legibility of ‘black’ subjects passing as white” (5). Moreover, Moynihan notes the particularly textual origins the concept of passing in the U.S., in that the “term is believed to be derived from the written pass given to slaves so they might travel without being taken for runaways” (5). In terms of their symbolic implications, Godfrey and Young note that a literary instance of passing “often represents the discord” that occurs at the “complicated intersection of how one perceives oneself, how one presents oneself, and how one is received by others” (6). With both *Loving Her* and *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, Shockley primarily explored this discord as it relates to black lesbian sexuality—people tend to read the characters as straight until proven otherwise, inevitably resulting in their split subjectivities. There are the professional lives the characters overtly lead—as a musician and a preacher, respectively—and then there are the romantic lives that occur out of social surveillance, often within domestic spaces. In both of these novels, there are supporting characters and love interests who are “in the know,” and those who are not.

Michael Elaine, the main character of *Hotchclaw*, has a much lonelier experience of passing—no one, not even their love interest, knows that they were assigned female at birth until

such information is exposed through an unexpected visit to the hospital. Michael's mother and childhood best friend also do not know that Michael had been presenting as a man while working at Hotchclaw, and the news of their passing causes significant confusion and conflict, especially for their mother. Moreover, the President of the college immediately fires Michael for what he perceives to be an unforgivable act of deception, and then he sets to work covering up the so-called scandal. These characters who are eventually "in the know" feel, for the most part, burdened by the knowledge, and so this secretive community likewise becomes more of a burden for Michael than an enclave of safety and intimacy.

Though the other characters overwhelmingly treat the reveal of Michael's "secret" as if it were an explosive and unprecedented ordeal, Michael is not the only one to keep personal details close to their chest for one reason or another. Early in the novel, Michael's love interest, a Hotchclaw librarian named Angela, speaks with her coworker Wilhemina about their plan to invite a spirited, rabble-rousing feminist poet to the university's upcoming anniversary celebration:

[Angela:] "I won't forget the Dean's face this morning when you said her name."

[Wilhemina:] "Freewoman's a rambunctious, free-spirited black woman. He'll have to find out the other part later."

"That she's a lesbian?"

Wilhemina picked up her bag. "Got to go. Wish me luck!" (39-40)

While it is clear they are both on the same page, Wilhemina does not even acknowledge Angela's explicit naming of Freewoman's sexual orientation. The two co-workers seem to be taking up a strategy of "going in through the side door" to achieve what they want in bringing a progressive lesbian artist into a highly traditional and conservative space. While they never lie

about their intentions, they also do not disclose particular details that may negatively affect the outcome they seek. However, because Michael went so far as to name their gender as “male” in their university documentation, they are treated by nearly every character—except Angela—as an agent of deceit. As demonstrated by her exchange with Wilhemina, Angela is willing to speak the unspeakable.

Angela’s similarities to Shockley are multiple, in that she is a dually appointed librarian and professor at a small, conservative HBCU in Tennessee who through the course of the novel assumes the role of archivist for the understaffed, underfunded library. Her appointment happens hastily and unceremoniously: Tezzie Head, the head librarian, is assigned by the President to beef up the university’s history section of the 100th-year commemoration ceremony pamphlet, and she decides she would rather delegate the work than do it herself. In their exchange, Tezzie tells Angela she needs her to find out more information about the institutional history than is readily available in current Hotchclaw public relations materials. Angela is taken aback:

“Dr. Head, I don’t know if there is anymore other than what is in the catalog. I understand there was a fire that destroyed early records. And, the school has never had an archivist to preserve its history.”

Tezzie gave her a blank stare. “I’m now appointing you to be the archivist.”

“Archivist!”

“Yes, I’m sure the Pres—i—dent will approve,” she added confidently.

“But—,” Angela looked at her in disbelief. “I’m a librarian. I don’t have any archival training.” In addition, the last thing she needed was another title and more work.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll find a workshop for you to attend. In the meantime, see what you can find. Get Rowena to help you. She’s been here a long time.”

And so have you, Angela did not vocalize. (49-50)

Unlike her previous exchange with Wilhemina, Angela “did not vocalize” the unspoken details of this situation’s particular dynamic, likely due to the power imbalance between Tezzie and her. Angela feels compelled to accept the terms of a situation she does not agree with—to do otherwise would put her in the line of fire of a particularly scheming superior who is close to the President’s ear. Despite Tezzie’s designation as Head Librarian, she holds the position of archivist in low esteem, bestowing the position on an untrained coworker simply for her own convenience—and without the promise to adequately compensate Angela for her extra time and effort. Tezzie flippantly offers to send Angela to a workshop as training, as if that were all it would take to adequately prepare Angela. Moreover, she once again passes the buck to a party other than herself. In this scene and throughout the novel, Shockley presents a version of academia rife with ego, unrealistic expectations, and abuses of power—a system maintained by a bevy of unspoken/unspeakable rules and dynamics.

Still, Angela assumes her responsibilities to the best of her ability. In her search for more detailed historical information on the university, she asks Juanita, the President’s secretary, if she knows of any letters or other individualized documentation stored on campus. She is met with a brick wall: “Upon hearing the word correspondence, Juanita’s eyelashes flitted nervously. ‘Correspondence,’ she repeated. ‘Not allowed’” (64). Despite the President’s call for a more emotionally evocative historical narrative, Angela is barred from accessing the types of documentation that would offer more intimate insight into the college’s inner workings. It comes as no surprise that Angela is only able to make headway on her new duties when someone more familiar with the material realities of the campus, the Director of Buildings and Grounds, points Angela in the direction of abandoned files that have been long forgotten, holed away in a damp

basement of an old dormitory (64). Ultimately, Angela locates the motherload of materials thanks to someone even further removed from institutional politics, the janitor, who directs Angela to boxes of photographs and handwritten faculty minutes from the thirties (115). At Hotchclaw, the thankless and undervalued nature of archival work is on display. If it were not for Angela's willingness to put in significant extra time and to think outside the usual avenues of research, these historical materials might never have seen the light of day.

In an effort to help, Angela's Aunt Portia sifts through the files of Samuel LaGrange, Angela's great-grandfather, who was also affiliated with the college. While Portia does not uncover much to be of help in this regard, she stumbles upon a familial secret that had been tucked away in the attic for many years. Its revelation incites an intensely embodied and spiritual experience:

Portia's hands trembled as she read and reread the letters. Like a vision, incidents from the past unraveled before her, falling into place. Throughout the years, not a whisper, a hint, an acknowledgment. Family secret stored away in a cigar box still with the faint odor of his cigars, tied with a ribbon in an old steamer trunk of family mementos. She held the letter against her face, tears forming in her eyes, feeling the ancestral spirit of Samuel LaGrange flowing out of her, causing her to cry for him—his secret.

Shockley has not yet made readers privy to Samuel's secret by this point, choosing instead to center Portia's reaction. In one moment, her perception of her family history undergoes a seismic shift, but instead of crumbling apart, pieces of her foundation shift into place thanks to the discovery of this missing piece of information. The intimacy of the hand-written letter draws Portia closer to her ancestor, enabling her to empathize with his experience in a profound way.

Reeling from this shock to her system, to her memory, Portia heads downstairs to grab a cognac, which she drinks while seated in Samuel's old rocking chair:

She began to rock as *he* did, slowly back and forth, back and forth. She lifted the glass. Strength in the wine. The vision of Samuel LaGrange was before her: a tall man, quiet, dark straight brown hair brushed back from a serious face with a high forehead, gray eyes that were passed on to her. So light-complected and Caucasian looking that she recalled whispers he could pass for white. (69)

Portia retraces Samuel's everyday movements, and in doing so, she calls him before her in a resurrection of ancestral memory. Finally, Shockley reveals the secret: LaGrange *was* actually born white. When he fell in love with a black woman, he decided to declare himself "a Negro" so that he could marry Lea in the eyes of the law. As a consequence, his white father disowned him (103). He forsook his blood inheritance in favor of a new familial lineage, one based on love, not obligation. Happening upon this bit of information ultimately helps Portia empathize with Angela and Michael in a way she might have not been able to otherwise. These unofficial, uncatalogued archives of familial history create new lines of connection for Portia, both to her past and to her present relations.

The ways in which the discovery of one's passing can destabilize people's perceptions are manifold, and certainly most of the characters do not respond to the news of Michael with the same empathy as Angela and, eventually, Portia do. Susie, the head of HR for Hotchclaw, is the first person at the institution to hear the news when the hospital calls to verify Michael's personal information. Susie hardly knows Michael, yet she still experiences intense disorientation and fear upon discovering that Michael diverged significantly from people's perceptions of their identity:

Hearing this, she, a relatively healthy woman for her fifty-six years, suddenly became faint, groping for the bottled water she kept on her desk. The feeling worsened when she realized that she would have to inform the President. She would have rather faced a tornado than to relay such information to him. (100)

Much to her relief, Susie is relieved of “the burden of disclosure” when she finds out the President is out of town (100). With that discomfort allayed, she settles back into the reality of Michael’s categorical instability. As with Portia, Susie’s revelation incites a metaphysical vision:

Closing the file, she went back to her desk, eyes falling on the picture of her son in his high school cap and gown, currently at Tennessee State University. Then, without warning, her vision began to waver, blurring, and like an apparition, she saw him changing into a girl! (101)

Also similarly to Portia, Susie’s revelation opens a new pathway in her relations—a new instability. She is suddenly and unexpectedly forced to reckon with the fact that her expectations about people may not align with reality, even with someone as close to her as her own son. The moment Susie reckons with the instability of gender, her perception transforms in a manner that straddles the line between literal and metaphorical.

Meanwhile, other characters handle the rupture in their perception of Michael’s identity with a little more grace. Upon hearing that Michael has been in an accident, Laramie, her childhood best friend, heads to Tennessee to pack up their belongings and bring Michael with her. She knows Michael has done something to get fired, but the college has not told her what. When Laramie enters her friend’s apartment, an on-campus faculty residence for which the President has keys, she starts to understand:

Bed made, she opened the closet to hang up the extra skirt and blouse she had brought with her. That was when she saw them: the neatly arranged men's clothes of trousers, coats, shoes. At a loss, she wondered if she had been given the key to the wrong apartment. Where were Michael's things? She pulled out the dresser drawers. Eerie! Men's shirts folded in plastic laundry bags. Men's socks, underwear. What were the heavy strips of white cloth for? Was Michael living with a man?[...]Then she saw the plastic ID card. *Dr. Michael Stower, Assistant Professor. Male.*

Male! Laramie sank down on the bed. There had to be a mistake. This wasn't Michael. It was like being in a science fiction time warp. It wasn't Michael. It *couldn't* be Michael. (90)

While Laramie certainly experiences a rupture to her reality upon this discovery, suddenly feeling as if she were in "a science fiction time warp," she does not respond with terror as Susie does. She also does not seek out categorical stability for her own comfort, choosing instead to welcome Michael into her home without pressing her friend to discuss the matter. She does not understand Michael's decisions, and she does not have to in order to give her friend the love she deserves.

Though Michael is the central character around which this novel revolves, there are relatively fewer scenes that directly involve them than might be expected, and the scenes that Shockley does give us grant only slivers of interiority. Michael, like Shockley herself, deeply values their privacy, and the experience of having their assigned gender revealed without their consent traumatizes her. As with the on-campus apartment that the President always had the power to open, Michael realizes the precarity of their privacy and the illusion of having complete control over external perceptions of their identity. When they reach their emotional bottom, their

mind travels to a book their father had in his library: the autobiography of black activist Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin.²²

A freak accident had upset her life. A discrete life she had created known only to herself, now exposed. She was certain Laramie knew, but had not probed. The questions were not on her lips but in her eyes. Laramie, who opened her home to her without hesitation, without questions, without answers.

She pushed her face into the pillow. *Die, Nigger, Die!* (93)

The book's title refers not only to the genocidal mentalities and actions of white Americans towards black Americans, but also to the attitudes and actions of the respectable "Negro" who wishes particular performances of blackness would die. By taking such swift and aggressive measures, Hotchclaw effectively kills the possibility of the "discrete life" Michael had created for herself, and they also take a stance on the particular identity performances they will prohibit from institutional representation. Michael experiences a social and psychological death—they will never be able to return to any semblance of that life.

Even Laramie, who continues to give Michael her support throughout the ordeal, urges Michael to accept the death of this previous version of their life. Before the gossip about Michael can travel, Laramie hooks her friend up with a job at the college in New York where she also teaches, but under the condition that Michael "goes back to being what [she is]." When Michael does not say anything in response, only exhibiting an "overcast" expression, Laramie longs to know more about Michael's interiority: "*Why?* Why had she done what she did?" Still, she respects her friend's boundaries and refrains from prodding, choosing instead to simply ask Michael if they are okay. "Yes, Laramie," they respond. "Michael Elaine is fine" (119).

²² Known at the time of publication as H. Rap Brown.

Though we as readers are also not privy to what, exactly, Michael is thinking or feeling in this moment, their use of the third person suggests a sort of self-protective dissociation. They choose to use both their masculine first name and feminine middle name, signifying a tacit (and perhaps begrudging) acceptance of feminine identity performance back into their life. Michael Elaine knows now what they need to do if they intend to rescue their career—their primary mode of survival under capitalism, and her best chance at social undeath.

In a pulpy coincidence, it turns out that Laramie knows Freewoman Black, and she brings Michael with her to a New Year’s Eve party with Freewoman and some of her friends, most of them lesbians. When Michael asks Freewoman whether Tara Lee, a famous singer and actor who will be there, will be accompanied by her also-famous husband, Freewoman Black responds that Harold Dunsford is “a husband in name only.” She asks Michael, “Haven’t you heard of another life, sweetie?” (169-70). Shockley once again holds Michael at a distance from the reader in this moment, giving us no signal of their response—neither their interior reaction nor any externally visible expression, however minor. All we know is that Michael now has the information that “another life” is possible, one that can be kept apart from a respectable, professional life. Michael and Laramie spend the rest of the night partying with a raucous group of lesbians and gay men. Michael, who does not drink, is one of the last guests standing, and they end up opening up to one of the hosts about familial influences on their gender identity:

I admired my father very much [...] I wanted to be just like him. Sometimes I play-wished myself to *be* him. Get into his body. Imagine myself him.” She had never talked to anyone like this. Not even to Laramie. “I fantasized being a man. Free!”

“Free?” Adrienne leaned her head back against the couch. “No one’s ever really free. Males have societal constraints too, although sometimes they don’t act like it.” She

put the glass down. “How nice it would be if there were no gender or sexual labels. That would be free!”

“Yes, free to be what you choose to be.”

Adrienne frowned. “And what would that be for you?”

“Just—me.” A veil seemed to be lifted from her. She looked at Adrienne with her face full of wisdom and smiled. (176)

As is often the case with situations in which someone is struggling to integrate the identity everyone perceives for them with the identity they perceive for themselves, Michael finds it easier to open up to a near-stranger—someone with little attachment to Michael’s past. In the build-up to her epiphany, Michael has already begun to speak of their masculine self-perception in the past tense. When Adrienne raises the prospect of choice, Michael realizes that identity categories do not appear in the version of *being* that they most desires for themselves. The social veil is lifted, taking with it Michael’s psychological veil.

Yet both Michael and Adrienne recognize that this unmediated form of being is usually not a realistic possibility for most people—so long as these labels remain socially relevant, they will have a profound effect on how everyone sees you, no matter how you see yourself. Michael does ultimately decide to try to remain in academia, so when the gossip from Hotchclaw finally reaches their new employer in New York, Laramie hatches another plan to try to save Michael’s career: Michael could tell everyone that they had been presenting as a man in order to write a book on the experience. They could perform the version of respectability that would afford them some level of social capital, while also living “another life” behind the scenes, more to their liking. Michael initially refuses, but Laramie presses them:

“Look, just mix some autobiographical with hypothetical academese. Others do it all the time. Fudge it.”

Michael shook her head. “I can’t.”

Laramie’s heart wrenched as she felt Michael’s frustration. She realized Michael was a person who guarded her privacy. She wished she knew why she had done what she did, taken on such a bizarre persona, but she wasn’t going to probe. She would find out someday. If not, it would simply remain dormant between them. (217)

Laramie, with her best intentions and her loving, empathetic presence is only trying to look out for her friend. Michael is uncomfortable trying to convince people of a reality far from the truth, but they had already attempted to convince people around them of a reality that was closer to the truth, and it had backfired horribly. We are reminded again that Laramie will never truly understand Michael’s experience. So while Michael is the only one who truly understands their own experience, they do show a glimpse of it to the world, retaining several of their most important relationships in the process, and also forming some new ones. Along with having the chance to work alongside their best friend, Michael rekindles their budding romance with Angela and reconciles with their mother.

Michael ultimately pays the devil his dues: they agrees to tell everyone they had lived as a man as a social experiment to prepare for writing a book. If we were to catch a glimpse of Shockley in this novel’s peripheral vision, we might see some possible connections to her previous insistence that she was indeed heterosexual despite writing lesbian-centered fiction. Like Laramie, we might never truly understand—but we do not need to in order to appreciate and steward Shockley’s legacy.

This is Only the Beginning

Unfortunately, this chapter is only one of very few studies of Shockley's work. SDiane Bogus offers some of the most comprehensive writing about Shockley, scholarly and otherwise, with the aforementioned review in *Sinister Wisdom* and her 1988 dissertation. While there are discussions of her work in a handful of articles and books,²³ her work is in serious danger of being erased from lesbian, queer, and black literary canons—and it has not been remotely recognized by whiter, straighter, more masculine canons of literary merit. As a librarian, Shockley strove to expand libraries' practices towards acquisition, urging them to recognize bias in the processes of selection. In the *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, she argues that book reviews should not be trusted as the last word for acquisitions: "Reviewers have prejudices, and oftentimes, many or simply not qualified or well-versed enough on the subject to adequately review the book" (188). With the more recent boom of LGBTQ+ acquisitions in libraries around the country, this advice remains incredibly relevant. Perhaps Shockley did not regularly announce her own lesbian sexuality within some of her communities, and perhaps she did not write her novels with the tenets of critically-acclaimed literary merit in mind. Still, her large and diverse body of work—most of which are listed in Rita B. Dandridge's annotated bibliography (1987)—contains so much material on important experiences that are sorely underrepresented in the U.S. literary landscape: those of queer black women and gender nonconforming people living in the South. On top of this, Shockley's oeuvre spans the forties to 2008, a staggering sixty years' worth of writing, of which this chapter has only scratched the surface.

²³ See Dandridge (1987), Stallings: "Re-Reading Ann Allen Shockley through Queer Queen B Eyes" (2002), Ashford: "Marginal Black Religiosity" (2005), Melancon: "Towards an Aesthetic of Transgression" (2008), Van Ausdall: "Loving Her Without Class" (2010), Green: "What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold" (2013), Harker: *The Lesbian South* (2018), and Johnson: *Black. Queer. Southern. Women* (2018)

CHAPTER THREE

“HOW NOT TO GET KILLED”: FEMINIST AFTERCARE IN THE DOROTHY ALLISON PAPERS

In the introduction to *Signs* 41(1), a special issue on the legacy of the Sex Wars and the pleasure/danger framework within feminist studies, Suzanna Danuta Walters notes that while the issue set a record for submissions, the editors were startled by the dearth of scholarship centering queer women. Additionally, though the collective conversations in the 1980s featured a range of topics on feminist sexualities, Walters observes that corrective history on the Sex Wars overwhelmingly focuses on representation and pornography (2016, 5). The depiction of women in media was certainly a primary focus for Women Against Pornography, the group that notoriously picketed the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality (formally known as The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Toward a Politics of Sexuality), but the events that are usually noted as a catalyst for the Sex Wars are a panel workshop that focused on women’s sexual practices and a post-conference speak-out involving practitioners of lesbian sadomasochism (S/M). Dorothy Allison was one of the central figures of both the workshop and the speak-out, and her organizing and writing around sexuality demonstrates a feminist politics dedicated to the collective support, protection, and care of lesbian and queer women’s intimate connections.

This chapter contributes to collective feminist memory by emphasizing the centrality of lesbian and queer women’s sexual communities within conversations about the Sex Wars, and it does so by excavating the webs of care that appear in the archive of Dorothy Allison—both her published writing and her collection of personal papers housed at Duke University’s Rubenstein

Library. Moreover, this chapter answers Claire Hemmings' call to "change the way we tell stories" about feminism by approaching the academic labor of researching, remembering, narrating, and teaching feminist histories as care work (2011, 2). As such, the ensuing sketch of Dorothy Allison, lesbian S/M, and the Sex Wars is less a revision of feminist history and more so an intimate encounter with the past. Just as Allison and other feminist sex activists who organized around the term *pervert* pursued erotic labor both as a method of survival and as an avenue toward pleasure under capitalist, white supremacist heteropatriarchy, I explore academic research as a form of erotic labor. By *perverting the archives*, I open myself to the pleasures, connections, dangers, and fears I experience in my work; in my reading, I seek to tell stories that hold space for a multiplicity of feminist desires. Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic suggests that to own one's deepest feelings is an act of resistance towards the self-betrayal and suffering wrought by patriarchal capitalism, and taking responsibility for those feelings is a first step toward opening up our individual experiences to the profound intimacies of community (2007 [1984], 59-59). With this fusion of self-care and mutual aid, both of which are necessary to survival, Lorde situates the erotic as a form of intimate, life-sustaining care work, and it is the type of loving labor that can sustain feminists within frequently inhospitable conditions of academia. As one form of erotic care work, S/M attends to the sexual manifestations of power relations, offering an extremely potent method for processing power through the body. In her study of masochism, sexuality, and black femininity, Amber Jamilla Musser reads Lorde's erotic alongside Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage to propose an "erotic multiplicity that could enliven not only black female bodies but others" (2014, 181), and it is this type of erotic assemblage I gesture towards when *perverting the archives vis-à-vis Dorothy Allison's body of work*. S/M practices can simultaneously involve agency and its absence, and for many, an S/M framework

holds the possibility to reterritorialize the presence of power within the body. I suggest that this dynamic be further explored in the context of feminist collective memory to change the types of stories we tell about some of the most painful feminist conflicts.

As the boilerplate story goes, the Sex Wars polarized the feminist movement when feminist debates around sexuality divided down the lines of anti-pornography and pro-sex. Of course, an overwhelming majority of people who have written about this historical moment acknowledge that the reality was—and continues to be—much more complicated than this two-party narrative suggests, yet this legacy of feminist factions persists through consistent attempts at proving which viewpoints from the debate feminists should resurrect and which we should shed.²⁴ Certainly, my chapter does not entirely avoid this rhetorical quicksand, as I am proposing that Dorothy Allison's involvement with S/M during this historical moment has much to teach us about current possibilities for collective care. Still, it is my intent that *perverting the archives* resurrects a version of 1970s and 1980s lesbian S/M that is more chimera than prophet: a fusion of past and present as well as collective and individual desires and limitations. This article is a creature bent on feminist survival, whose mutations from and toward other feminist stories stem from a vision of building a rhetorical web far stronger than the pull of any quicksand.

In the early eighties, S/M was a deeply divisive issue within American lesbian feminist movements, which were often the branches of feminist politics where sex was being most explicitly discussed. Understandably, there was never any consolidated agreement on what counts as S/M, but in general it tended to encompass sex that centered on the eroticization of varying power dynamics, and often the eroticization of either giving or receiving pain. For many

²⁴ In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings discusses this dynamic as it applies to contemporary feminist scholarship broadly (2011, 132).

lesbian feminists, it also included any use of sex toys (e.g. dildos). While it might be tempting to frame eighties lesbian feminist critiques of S/M as prudish, it is important to remember that critiques of S/M were, by and large, more concerned with imagining types of sex that aligned with a vision of a world without violent power imbalances and less concerned with regulating women's sexualities. In "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians," a transcribed interview that appears in the 1982 anthology *Against Sadomasochism*, Rose Mason notes that she is "not necessarily against the practice of sadomasochism among women" because she believes that "women should be able to do what they want to do to themselves and their friends." She does, however, draw the line at considering sadomasochism "as being part of the feminist movement, the lesbian-feminist movement" (100). While Mason's perspective is only one of many, the point is that while the Lesbian Sex Wars during this period are often framed along polarizing lines of "pro-sex" and "anti-pornography," individual views were usually much more nuanced.

Dorothy Allison is perhaps now more well-known for her work as novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Long before she published her best-selling 1992 novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* and became one of few out lesbian writers to achieve mainstream literary success, she organized around a variety of feminist issues, including lesbian sexuality. Allison participated in a panel discussion at the 1982 Barnard Sex Conference titled "Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect," joined by Joan Nestle, Mirtha Quintanales, and Muriel Dimon. Already a public-facing figure by then, Allison became a prime target for her candid writing around sex, and especially for her organizing work as co-founder of the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM), a political and social group for lesbians interested in S/M. The political group Women Against Pornography (WAP) disseminated pamphlets at the Barnard conference specifically condemning Allison and

several other participants for their various relationships to SM, pornography, and butch/femme identities (Corbman 2015, 63). While the conference itself was supportive of Allison's participation, WAP placed her in the crosshairs of the growing anti-pornography movement in a targeted effort that had lasting consequences. Allison has written and spoken extensively on how traumatic this ostracization from much of the feminist community was for her—the community she credits with saving her life. Her first book, a collection of poetry titled *The Women Who Hate Me*, conveys the anger and hurt that arose through this falling out, and her essay “Public Silence, Private Terror” discusses her frustration toward women who refused to be honest about their complicated desires.

Supporting women's—and particularly lesbians'—sexual expression did not mean that Allison was willing to overlook the misogyny and violence that structures the sexualities of men and people of all genders. In her oral history, Allison credits her sexual candor to her work with the anti-violence against women movement, where she encountered people willing to talk about “falling in love with somebody who would slap you”—conversations she could not find in the “academic, literary feminist world” (2007, 37).²⁵ Ultimately, both the anti-violence movement and the Lesbian Sex Mafia helped Allison figure out how to develop a sexual practice that would not eventually kill her:

At a certain point, it just became obvious to me that the women I was falling in love with—one of them was going to kill me, and that I had to do something about it, but I couldn't figure out anything. I was a feminist. I understood incest. I understood the conditioning of violence. I understood self-hatred. I understood a whole bunch of things.

It never changed anything. I'm like, All right, what is really going on here? Why? And

²⁵ From an interview with Kelly Anderson for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Smith College.

especially after I started interviewing people about fetish and all of that eroticization. I was like, Okay, what if I organized my sex life the way I organized my political life? Could we really make this a little safer and saner?

And that was the whole premise of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, which is, what if we really just tried to make it a little safer and saner? Some of it was just about getting information. “How Not to Get Killed” was one of our early workshops. (42)

Organizing around S/M allowed Allison and other lesbians to find community and resources that would help them identify “safer and saner” means to more fully express their sexualities, including sexualities that have become entangled with violence against women and femmes. For LSM, one of the first steps in honoring these entangled sexualities is to provide the most vulnerable within their community the tools to survive—to not get killed. Certainly, their approach referred to the protection of sex workers who relied on erotic labor for financial survival, and it also referred to women and femmes like Allison, whose histories with violence irreconcilably shaped their relationship to sex. In tending to the dangerous desires that are pursued for intimacy, connection, and/or pleasure as well as to the erotic labors exchanged for money, the LSM was building a capacious—dare I say promiscuous—web of care for women’s diverse relationships with sex, power, and violence.

Who You Calling a Pervert?

Pervert, as expressed by Dorothy Allison and many other queer S/M practitioners, can be read as an identity rooted more in the politics of care than in the oppositional politics of shock value or anti-normativity. Kink communities have long used *pervert* subjectivities in order to care for individual and communal shame and fear surrounding queer sex, and particularly queer

sex that explicitly challenges politics of respectability. The *pervert* constructs subjectivity and community through acts of speaking and acting upon what has previously seemed unspeakable and by laying claim to sexual power where it has historically been thwarted. More specifically, Allison and the Lesbian Sex Mafia held space for lesbian-identified people to articulate and nurture sexual agency for desires that were systematically deemed unacceptable by many sociopolitical standards. LSM defined itself foremost as a support group, but they also held many educational workshops, participated in protests and other forms of activism, and orchestrated sex parties in which monitors would walk around to make sure everyone was doing okay and fully consenting. So while the group may have been “politically incorrect” in many regards, they were also a very intentional, care-driven organization.

Despite the fact that Allison became a public figurehead for the Lesbian Sex Mafia and continued to speak and write candidly about sex for years after the Barnard conference, she was not as publicly forthcoming with the specific details of what she did in the bedroom as one might expect. In her oral history, Allison reflects on the comfort levels she had at the time surrounding her sexual identity:

I was simply very matter-of-fact about who I was and that I was this kinky pervert. And I used queer and kinky and pervert because I didn't want to go into the details of what it is I do in bed, because mostly that's tedious. It's like talking to your kid about sex. I don't want to talk to you about what I do in bed. I simply want you to know that, yes, exactly, I am that person you are uncomfortable with and I'm a feminist. (2007, 44)²⁶

For Allison, *pervert* served both as an invitation to imagine what she might be doing that would make one uncomfortable and as a catch-all description that grants a certain level of opacity in its

²⁶ From an interview with Kelly Anderson for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Smith College.

generality. This particular relationship of *pervert* to the public-private divide is especially relevant to archival research, which can exist in a strange liminal space that feels simultaneously intimate with and distant from the subject. A perverted reading welcomes the intimate connections formed within the archives while remaining cognizant of the fact that such intimacies also have their limits.

Likewise, Allison recognized that S/M practices had their limits and were not inherently liberatory. Her archive consistently portrays S/M as an inevitably imperfect form of care and survival for queer people—and especially lesbians—who have deeply fraught relationships with the pleasure/danger framework. Allison’s relationship to S/M arose from a history of severe childhood abuse that would continue to have lifelong effects on her sexuality. For her and many others, S/M served as a practice to negotiate and provide care for the traces of violence that persist in the body and continue to shape pleasure and desire—often in ways that feel profoundly dangerous.

Because trans and disability feminisms are deeply rooted in questions of agency and embodiment, they have been at the forefront of developing praxes of care. Care in its most fundamental sense is about looking after our own and each other’s needs, and as Dean Spade’s framework of mutual aid suggests, collective care is about providing for each other’s survival (*Mutual Aid*, 2020). Human survival begins in the body with universal needs like food, shelter, and sleep. Touch, pleasure, and intimacy are also profoundly necessary to survival for many people, yet these needs are all too often treated as secondary. Thankfully, recent writing on feminist care work is expanding these conversations about survival and necessity. When Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) describes care in terms of access to networks of radical love, she likewise creates opportunities for considering sexual support communities one type of

care web; it is no coincidence that *Care Work* contains a chapter named after Dorothy Allison's short autobiographical narrative, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995). In *Trans Care*, Hil Malatino (2020) compares the standard practice of aftercare in BDSM—in which partners tend to the intense emotional comedown that often follows a scene—to the practice of archival research, a type of institutional aftercare for scholars looking to piece together narratives of survival from fragmented or difficult-to-detect histories. In my recent experience, the archives have served as a formative site of aftercare for grappling with my own complicated relationship with lesbianism.

The way I remember things, it was an undergraduate course on “The Lesbian Novel” that made me a lesbian. The professor would have us read aloud the sumptuous sentences from *Zami* (1982) and *Nightwood* (1936), and we would appreciate and analyze hot and heavy scenes from *Desert of the Heart* (1964) and *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973). Prior to this class, I had felt stronger attachments to words like queer, gay, bisexual, and genderqueer (all labels I still find useful depending on the context), and though I identified as a genderqueer woman who was primarily attracted to other women, associating myself with lesbianism felt, to put it bluntly, unsexy. Yet between the pages of these novels, erotic intimacies abounded in depictions that spoke deeply to my own experiences of desire. When I discussed this confusion about lesbian un/sexiness with my professor during office hours, she handed me a copy of Carol Vance's iconic collection on feminist sexuality, *Pleasure and Danger* (1984), and gave me a brief, simplified introduction to the Barnard Conference and the Lesbian Sex Wars. She explained that many people would agree that sex-positive feminism won and ultimately converged with other studies of sexuality into queer studies, and that the lesbian feminists caught on the wrong side of the debates went down in history as big prudes. It is very likely that my professor gave a qualifier—perhaps she told me

that the reality was much more complicated than how she was distilling it for me. Yet it was the sex-positive and anti-pornography divide that stuck with me for many years, shaping the stories I told about the Sex Wars.

Indeed, the reality has always been much more complicated in a manner that continues to be difficult to distill, no matter the terms we use. In her foundational article on the Sex Wars, published in 1984, Ann Ferguson describes the polarized camps as radical feminists versus libertarian feminists, and she, too, includes the now-familiar qualifier that these terms “do not exhaust the possible feminist perspectives on sexual pleasure, sexual freedom, and danger” (107). Feminist scholarship since then has consistently worked to challenge the dichotomy narrative while also recognizing its persistence, as seen in recent work from Lorna Bracewell, whose *Why We Lost the Sex Wars* makes provocative connections between the feminist sex wars of the 1980s and carceral feminism—“a political formation that mobilizes the emancipatory energies of feminism in the service of the expansion of the carceral state” (2021, 101). Narratives of both historical moments, she argues, center on a false dichotomy in which the two options appear to be a sexual politics contingent upon individual liberty (“sex-positive” feminism) or upon governmentally-enforced ethical frameworks (“anti-pornography” feminism; punishment-based anti-assault and anti-harassment organizing). Moreover, the rhetoric that the Sex Wars have been “lost” has become commonplace in feminist historical studies and usually rehearses the narrative that sex-positive (i.e. third-wave) feminism swept in to overpower the ethos developed by radical (i.e. second-wave) feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. Of course, Bracewell’s work invokes and then redefines this sense of feminist loss, just as Ferguson and many other feminist scholars have challenged such tidy narratives since their inception.

In my own attempt to care for the stories we tell about feminism, I look to the perverts of lesbian S/M. More specifically, my time spent poring over Allison's papers has led me toward a reading practice that I refer to as *perverting the archives*: a method of research-as-aftercare that creates space for confronting and processing the pleasures and dangers that pervade past and present conversations surrounding lesbian feminism. A perverted reading fills in historical gaps with narrative speculation that, while inevitably fictional in some sense, still makes meaningful contact with history. Perverting the archives also entails reading promiscuously—by locating stories in trash, failed objects, ephemera, embodied histories, unlabeled materials, or other artifacts and utterances that prove difficult to research, discuss, and distill. Finally, to perform a perverted reading always requires that we tap into the erotic, confronting our own desires and fears in the research we do to more fully open ourselves up to the multiplicities of feminist community.

Feminist theory has much to contribute to S/M theory, and vice versa, especially in relation to collective memories of the Sex Wars. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) reads some S/M as corporeal time-travel—a “bodying forth a past we can barely look in the face” (135)—and applies this definition to what she deems one of the more generative uses of S/M: a practice for working through trauma, whether sexual, gendered, racial, or otherwise. For instance, Dorothy Allison often describes her own practice of S/M as a bodying forth of the rage and violence of her history of sexual abuse. Still, Margot Weiss (2011) makes the crucial argument that S/M scenes are not inherently therapeutic. Their “circuits” of pleasure can “reproduce, reinforce or even establish forms of disavowal and unknowing that enable social privilege and help justify it” (230). As one example of “unknowing,” she notes that BDSM culture has become overwhelmingly taken up and commodified by many white couples who benefit from

heterosexual privilege and the accompanying economic privilege that allows them to afford conference and party fees or vast collections of fancy sex toys. Weiss also takes issue with the flippant use of the term “play” to downplay potential social and political implications of S/M practices, and she challenges assumptions that S/M is a purely private matter (222). Weiss reminds that what happens in the bedroom is inextricably linked to very real regimes of power that have very real effects on everyone inside and outside the bedroom—a stance this article takes as well. For the more transformative potential of S/M, she looks to the iconic writer and S/M practitioner Mollena Williams, whose participation in slave scenes forces people to confront the entanglement of sexualized power dynamics and the afterlife of slavery (217).

Amber Jamilla Musser’s writing on masochism resists moralizing claims about what counts as good/bad or therapeutic/harmful sex without ignoring the manifold entanglements that S/M has with various abuses of power. Musser defines masochism as a shifting constellation of ideas and practices that center on intersections of subjectivity, agency, and power. Masochism explores “what it feels like to be enmeshed in various regimes of power” (2014, 2) and offers a “distinct lens for theorizing the ways in which difference is embodied” (6). Musser points to several examples in which S/M has offered generative pathways for people to wrestle with the problem of locating agency when entrenched in systems of power, and she calls into question critiques of lesbian S/M that attempt to position femininity as a utopic space that exists apart from patriarchy (33). For Dorothy Allison and the Lesbian Sex Mafia, S/M offered pathways for lesbians to wrestle with the problem of connecting with their sexuality under patriarchy. When directed toward Allison’s archive, Musser’s approach of treating S/M “not as a practice of exceptionalism or subversion but as an analytic space where difference is revealed” (19) makes it easier to comprehend Allison’s work around S/M as an attempt to provide lesbians with space to

confront how patriarchy, racism, classism, and other systemic abuses influence their sexualities in ways they variously can and cannot control. Care work in this sense is not particularly utopic—it is more concerned with tending to the reality of what *is* by creating opportunities to form radical connections vis-à-vis the care webs of lesbian S/M.

With my use of the phrase *radical connections*, I refer to my previous discussion of Piepzna-Samarasinha’s care webs, as well as to the type of work done by feminist scholars like Ann Cvetkovich. In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich suggests a queering of trauma that “shamelessly explores the imbrications of pleasure and danger in sexual practice” to make possible conversations about queer trauma that do not fall into the reductive rhetoric of victimhood (2003, 35). Cvetkovich’s project centered on building radical connections between pleasure and danger to help us think critically about therapeutic models of queer trauma that move away from the individual-confessional and toward collective therapeutic processes that contribute to an archive of shared feeling. In one of her more provocative claims, Cvetkovich notes that “as someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse,” she is “happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer” (90). For Cvetkovich, these processes provide Allison with the creative potential to build public communities through performances of trauma-informed queerness. Certainly for Allison, *pervert*, which she saw as inextricable from her queerness, arose as a response to her own experiences of sexual abuse, and the Lesbian Sex Mafia became a theatre of trauma-informed sexuality.

Cvetkovich further argues that in building queer archives, especially those deeply inflected by trauma, affective experience must hold as much weight as factual, historical documentation. In this sense, public storytelling—both fictional and non—that holds trauma

“unrelentingly in view rather than contained within an institutional project” can generate a shared archive that refuses “any quick-fix solution...such as telling the story as a mode of declaring an identity or of seeking legal redress” (16). The public, affective archives of trauma Cvetkovich proposes instead offer “unpredictable forms of politics,” such as Allison’s part-autobiographical, part-fictional depiction of child abuse and sexual agency in *Bastard Out of Carolina* or the public conversations she held about so-called politically incorrect sex through the Lesbian Sex Mafia’s events, publications, and numerous other public and semi-public platforms. Allison’s archive resists easy correlation with pathologizing rhetoric that situates responses to trauma in either the need-to-heal or the compulsion-to-repeat camps—two sides of the same coin. Instead, her life’s work blurs the distinctions between public and private spheres to make clear that ignoring the shame tied to trauma-inflected desires effectively censors these narratives. For sexualities that are already afforded very little room in public spheres beyond the commodifiable narratives of marginalized suffering, these acts of censorship may ultimately mean erasure. To survive, Allison and many other sexual outlaws learned (and continue to learn) to organize around the capacious, creative, and usable banner of perversion. And in the promiscuous archive of a perverted reading, the care given to the pains and pleasures of the desire/power entanglement tell another kind of story about sex, violence, and feminism—one that might help in the journey to recover from the language of war.

Hot and Bothered in the Dorothy Allison Papers

Along with her published works, Allison has been a prolific letter-writer for much of her adult life. She has also meticulously maintained a dated archive of these correspondences, many of which are now stored at Duke’s Rubenstein Library. This section begins with short readings of

some of these conventionally historical documents to establish relevant context before transitioning into a perverted reading of Allison's subject files. These files of Allison's personal research, while fascinating and well-organized, do little to establish certainty in an interpretation of her life and work. Instead, this portion of Allison's archive offers more tenuous, indeterminate contact between research and subject, and from this fragile connection flows infinite opportunities for promiscuous encounters with history that have much more to do with feeling than with theory. It is my intent that juxtaposing a discussion of correspondences (which are some of the archival materials most conducive to research) alongside a perverted reading of the subject files will demonstrate a praxis of care with which to approach the most difficult-to-interpret sections of history/archives.

If you read any further, you are accepting an invitation to archival encounters that might provoke your own pleasure/danger triggers. If you read any further, you are a consenting participant in perversion.

Throughout her correspondences, Allison discusses her efforts to bring some measure of safety into inherently unsafe sexual and emotional encounters. In a letter written in 1983 to Cris South, member of the North Carolina-based Feminary Collective and author of the anti-Klan novel *Clenched Fists, Burning Crosses*, Allison writes about S/M as a method for gaining agency over the effects abuse had on her sexuality:

The thing I wanted to say about s-m though is important, because it was a way for me to make my inner rage (i used to say my belly rage) rational, controlled. It got the anger, the energy under control. The first time I got a woman to tie me down to fuck, I just about went crazy. It just let me go all over and I started fighting the ropes: I mean fighting. And I couldn't hurt her, or at least I thought I couldn't. I quickly found that most ropes

couldn't hold me when I was in that state. I got very proud of snapping leather harnesses and unbending metal rings. For a long time I had one set of rings that I'd completely unbended hanging over the bed. I was proud of it. It was very much a tangible symbol of my rage. And fucking like that was not about love. I tended to be crude about putting that idea out. "I don't love you. I want to try very hard to throw you off this bed." Of course if you do find someone who will go that distance with you, you can very easily wind up in love with them. I did it certainly which was one reason I tried always to play with couples—it was safer emotionally. Or at least I thought so. Actually I'm not so sure anything is safe when it comes to sex and emotional vulnerability.²⁷

If Allison wanted to have a sex life at all (and she did often go through periods of abstinence), she would need to find people she could trust to safely hold space for her erotic rage. She needed to make her anger tangible, controllable, and cathartic. "Fucking like that is not about love," she writes, but she also acknowledges that love can easily enter into the picture once she builds trust with another person around holding, witnessing, and tending to her rage. In an attempt to pursue that "safe and sane" sex supported by the Lesbian Sex Mafia, Allison took measures to limit her emotional attachments to these particular sexual arrangements. However, she ultimately questions the possibility of safe sex of any kind. She resists orthodoxy, suggesting that the ethical framework she built with LSM may have been something to continually strive toward, but the framework is not law, nor is it necessarily always realistic.

Even before her work with LSM, Allison had begun to experiment with S/M to address the dissonance between pursuits of her body and pursuits of her ethical, political, rational mind.

²⁷ From a letter Allison wrote to Cris South, dated "September 12, 1983." Dorothy Allison papers, Box 35, Duke University.

In 1980, Allison wrote to queer/feminist theory icon and S/M practitioner Gayle Rubin about embodying this tension and turning it into a fantasy of a pleasurable connection with the women who might ultimately reject her perversity:

The contradictions between my outrageous desires and my politics still shake me. If I didn't know my own masochistic desires so well, I could never make peace with wanting to sexually dominate another. At this point in my life I am going on my gut, not my politics. But politics intrudes. [...] A— and I have gone to Washington Area feminist alliance meetings with me in wrist and ankle cuffs, and a leather and brass collar with which she would play during discussions. You know that excitement. Each time she would pull my head back with my collar or tug with her sharp nails at the D-ring on a cuff, I'd watch the women who watched us and see myself in their eyes. When their mouths fell open or their eyes went wide I'd feel my cunt gush, wanting A— to pull my head back further still (while at the same time wanting her to let me go, to stop), wanting her to push me from my chair to the floor, to open my blouse, display my bruises and pinch my swollen nipples. [...] Behind me some woman would not look away, some woman would feel herself wet and excited and reach out to catch my hair in her hands and with A—'s permission twist my face to her cunt, and I would kneel there in the meeting at their feet and slowly bring her to orgasm. In reality, I would sit at A—'s side and whisper the fantasy to her, where when I finished one woman another would slide over to take her place. [...] Ah perversity.²⁸

When Allison mentions that the contradictions between her politics and her sexuality “still

²⁸ From a letter Allison wrote to Gayle Rubin, dated “1-1-80.” Dorothy Allison papers, Box 33, Duke University.

shake” her, she touches on another dangerous confluence, when desire mingles with fear. In the letter to South, Allison frames the power of her rage as the primary danger within her sexual encounters, and she describes how she transfers this rage into the bondage gear. In this letter to Rubin, the fantasy is much more graphic and embodied, and seems to have less to do with trauma than with a desire to both belong and create belonging from the spark of unspeakable desires. Similar to a masturbation scene from *Bastard Out of Carolina* I discuss further below in my conclusion, this particular fantasy involves the act of witnessing (“some woman would not look away”), but instead of seeking love and respect, it is simply the intimacy of shared pleasure that she seeks from her witness (“some woman would feel herself wet and excited”). Allison also offers up this fantasy for Rubin’s pleasure, and now that I have become a witness to the scene, I, too, join the orgy. You, dear reader, are now part of the scene as well. How do you feel? Intrigued? Skeptical? Titillated? Violated? While I can easily acknowledge that letters like this turn me on, I find it much harder to admit the flush of embarrassment I feel from gobbling up steamy S/M fantasies in a quiet archival reading room full of researchers and librarians. In short, I feel like a pervert. Do you?

These letters to South and Rubin are but two of many provocative invitations into S/M communities that can be found in Allison’s correspondence files, and most of these seductions are dated and contextualized, leaving much of the power of interpretation in the hands of Allison and her personal network. This aspect of her archive is a gold mine: correspondences grant researchers a nearly direct line into a person’s more intimate circle of conversations and are invaluable shreds of evidence for piecing together a story about the past that feels in some sense true to the historical actors. But I am also interested in tending to the difficult-to-discuss materials, such as those found in Allison’s subject files: eighteen boxes of files Allison kept for

her own personal research, much of it unlabeled and presented without commentary or context. It is within these boxes that I can more directly perform *perverting* as a research praxis, in which I offer narrative threads that are, in some sense, a reterritorialization of an archive's failed objects, anchored by the profound desire to witness, connect with, and tend to the Dorothy I find in the archives.


After the dapper librarian at Duke's Rubenstein Library hands me my first box from Allison's subject files, I gaze out across the reading room and imagine lesbian scholar Julie Enszer sitting at one of the long tables, examining the archives of poet and activist Minnie Bruce Pratt, "a woman whose life is full and messy and wonderful, regardless of how it is contained and catalogued" (2015, 164). Enszer opens one of the last boxes in Pratt's series, one that does "not lie flat" because the materials "do not fit in, do not conform" (165). I smile as I picture her sitting in front of the glass windows, surreptitiously glancing around to see if anyone's looking as she pulls a vibrator from the box in front of her. "I want to smell it," Enszer writes, before launching into a vivid re-imagination of Pratt's relationships with some of her famous lovers (166). I approach Allison's archives longing for the Enszer-esque experience—moments of intimate and personal connection that inspire me to co-create a version of history via encounters with objects that do not fit. I yearn for that feeling of time made flesh so I can come to an embodied understanding of Allison as a complex person whose ephemera adds depth and particularity to the historical discussions of lesbian sexuality in the seventies and eighties.

As it turns out, the file labeled "Porn" contains very little porn. Aside from the WAP and LSM documents, a majority of its contents are dedicated to alarmist articles on S/M from mainstream media sources, coverage of the Meese Commission on pornography, and psychological surveys on S/M practices. The file bears the façade of fastidious organization, but

it quickly becomes clear to me that there is little division between both the files Allison included in her Porn and Sadomasochism subseries and the files she stored elsewhere. What is clear is that she seemed equally invested in cataloging diverse expressions of sexual perversity as she was in exploring arguments for regulating certain of these perversities.

I move slowly through the folder of Lesbian Sex Mafia flyers, running my finger across the ridges of the artist paper, more concerned with contact than accumulation of information. I carefully extract some enticing DIY invitations—one for a Sex Party at D’s (fig. 1)—and another for a Valentine’s Party at Mistress Sarah’s (fig. 2). I pretend the invitations are mine. “An alternative to the bar where men outnumber women so outrageously...Act out your fantasies, or get off on others...Change inside or wear discreet overclothes, since young children live inside the building...If your name doesn’t appear on the list at the door, you will not be admitted.”²⁹ I am the inside group that meets in semi-secret spaces. Taking pleasure in perversion. Turning shame on its head. I carry the invitations up to the fancy scanner that sits next to the librarian’s desk, its preview screen facing the tables of the reading room, and fantasize that the librarians and fellow researchers peer at the screen, nodding with approval as they admire the punk-queer treasures I scan-and-save. You, too, are invited to D’s Sex Party.

²⁹ From two Lesbian Sex Mafia event flyers. Dorothy Allison papers, Box 33, Duke University.



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24th...

Lesbian S/m Party at D's

158 Garfield Pl. # 3R
Brooklyn NY 11215

Phone: 965-4391

Location: Between 6th and 7th Avenues on Garfield Place in Park Slope... a red brick building The front door will be open. Come directly up to 3R.

Time: 8:00. If you can't come by 9:00, I would prefer you not come to this party.

Dress: Wicked as your libido allows. If you prefer not to travel in style. Come and change at the party.

Bring: Your own liquor, your Toys. Any special food you desire D will provide soda, ice, some Munchies, her equipment, rope, hoist and attitude. Other than that, you're on your own.

This party is for L S/m members and close friends. It was organized in direct response to months of bitching and is meant to provide an alternative to the bars and clubs where the boys outnumber the women so outrageously. If you want to act out your own fantasy behavior in a semi-private safe place, this party is for you. You are not required to play and you should not expect someone to jump on you and work you over. You'll probably have to ask for that.

Sir Jo and the Lady Nancy have agreed to display their own special skills in free-form torture and whipping for the edification and delight of all us voyeurs. This will be the workshop postponed from Oct. 13th. If you would like to participate in this demonstration, you must contact them.

D's apartment is large--railroad style, with lots of space for both talking, dancing and playing. Music will be rock & roll and sleazy punk. If you want to alter the mood, bring your own records and cassette tapes. A volunteer DJ would be fine.

RULES: The identities and activities of women at the party are confidential. Play safe. If you're going to bring a non-LS/m member let D or Jo know in advance.

Figure 1: Scan of S/M party flyer. Dorothy Allison papers, Box 16, Duke University.

LESBIAN S-M VALENTINE'S PARTY * * * SATURDAY, FEB. 13, 1982 AT MISTRESS SARAH'S

LOCATION: 279 First St. # 8, Brooklyn, NY (788-2389) Park Slope between 4th & 5th Avenues.
(Take RR subway to UNION ST stop, one stop after Pacific St, Walk up three blocks on 4th to First street, and turn left. First apartment house on left side of street, # 8.)

TIME: 9:00 PM on...No one will be admitted after 10:00. You may sleep over if you bring a sleeping bag.

FOR ALL OF OUR PROTECTION: This party is exclusively for women 18 years and older. You must call in advance, leaving your name and the names of any guests you wish to bring. If your name doesn't appear on the list at the door you will not be admitted. Call and leave your names then between Feb. 5 and Feb 12th, between the hours of 12 noon and 9:00 PM only.

DRESS: It is preferred that you change inside the apartment or wear discrete overclothes, since young children live in the building.

BRING: Your own toys, liquor, sleeping bags; your own breakfast if you'd like; records or cassettes of hot music; any additional food you'd like. Soda, ice and chips will be provided. In addition, some toys will be available.

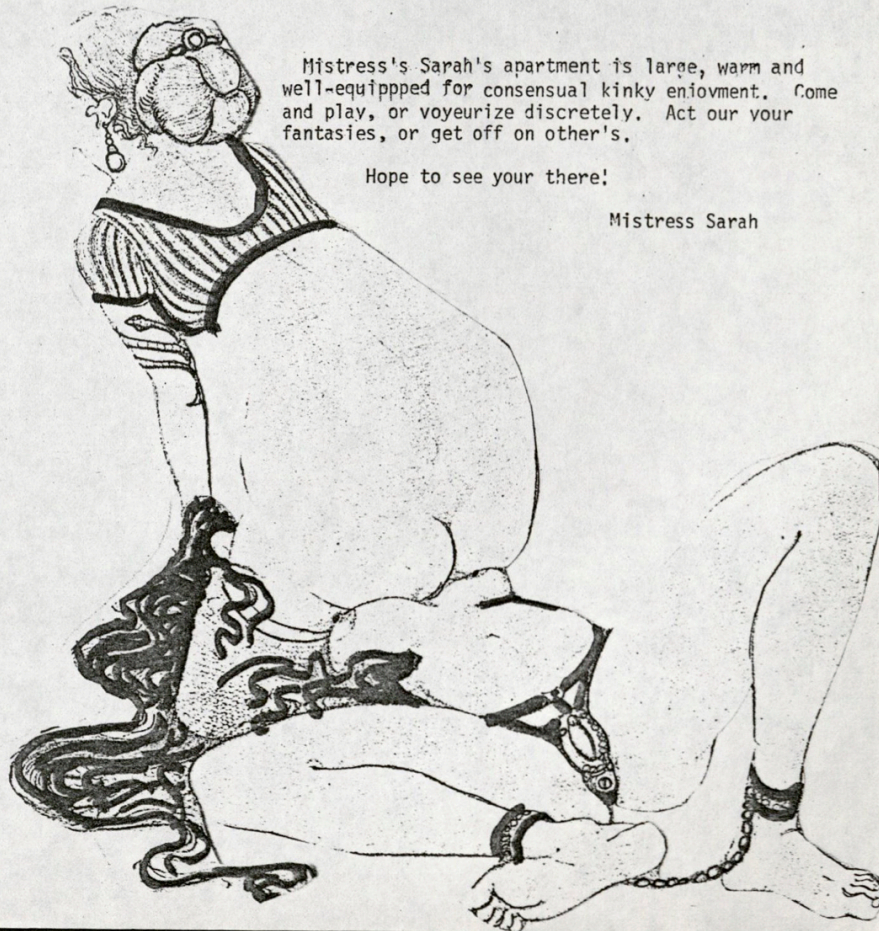


Figure 2: Scan of S/M event flyer. Dorothy Allison papers, Box 16, Duke University.

This is not just any raucous orgy—both D and Mistress Sarah are providing “large” and “warm” spaces, and the invitations take explicit measures to protect consent and privacy of guests—and

in the case of Mistress Sarah's party, the consent of children living in the building is also protected. The guests are likewise invited to provide for this communal, semi-private sex gathering should they want a chance to co-curate the space with their own toys and music. Both the voyeur and participant are welcome, and attendees are expected to ask for what they want, or perhaps demand it from the type of partner who might appreciate consensual aggression. It is significant that these are women-only sex spaces, as these have always been and continue to be difficult to locate in the type of open (or semi-open, at least) environment where a lesbian can expect to find a new sexual connection. While this atmosphere seems liberatory, surely these parties must have experienced their own set-backs, exclusions, and instances of questionable consent. There is no utopia, but only the best possible situation for navigating the intersections of pleasure, power, and embodied difference.

Similar to these sex parties, the archives function as semi-private spaces where chance encounters with pleasure and danger might occur. Many of these encounters will be exciting and titillating, but others might provoke our deepest shames and fears. This tension is quite viscerally true of Dorothy Allison's capacious subject files, which contain documents related to all sorts of sexual perversions—many of which make me extremely uncomfortable. A few files past the Lesbian Sex Mafia documents, I find a particularly discomfiting document sandwiched between PEN International administrative materials and a newsletter about a women's protest at the Annual PEN Congress. Sponsored by the Austin Pedophile Study Group, a pro-pedophilia organization, "Women 'Pedophiles?'" contains a number of personal stories from women who fantasize about or actively engage in sex with children.³⁰ Instead of marching up to the scanner, I

³⁰ The pamphlet is dated "July 1983." Dorothy Allison papers, Box 18, Duke University.

remain at my desk to snap a cell phone photo of a pamphlet cover for fear of what any chance onlookers might think (fig. 3):

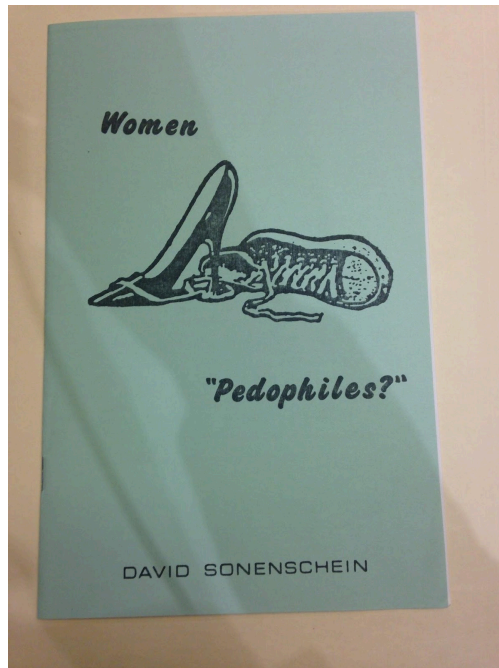


Figure 3. Personal photo of pamphlet. Dorothy Allison Papers, Box 18, Duke University.

I squint at the screen of my phone and make sure the image is clear enough to review later, outside of surveillance of cameras and librarians, away from the respectability of serious scholarly research. The silhouette of my arms, hands, and phone blankets the pamphlet. At home, I will load up my laptop and re-open the file where my shadow left its mark.

The issue of “incest liberation”—with NAMBLA (the North American Man/Boy Love Association) being the most established pro-incest organization in the U.S.—tends to be one of the most difficult to discuss within histories of sexuality. NAMBLA could at one point claim queer sci-fi and erotica writer Samuel Delany as a supporter, and feminist icons Pat Califia and Camille Paglia have previously supported the organization but have since revised their stance (Marech 2000 and Paglia 2018). When I encounter the pamphlet, I have no reason to believe Dorothy Allison ever considered herself to pro-pedophilia, yet the alarms blare through my

brain. What if she has gone *too far* at one point or another, whatever *too far* means? What does it say about me that it takes every drop of willpower in my body to sit with this pamphlet instead of hurriedly rushing past it and onto the next, hopefully safer document? And would I be more likely to betray my own ethical compass if I draw more attention to this pamphlet or if I let the strong reaction it incites die in the depths of my private memory? I have no need to make a decision right then—I make a few notes, slip the pamphlet back into its file and move on.

What is clear to me from her archive of sex and porn subject files is that Allison was interested in collecting any and all discussion of outlaw sexualities, whether she agreed with them or not. In an interview with Michael Rowe (1995), Allison reflects on how difficult it has been for some adults to stomach her explicit depictions of childhood sexuality in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which she attributes to a fear of how difficult it can be to control children's sexualities and their perceptions of categorical distinctions (1995, 62). When Rowe asks her how NAMBLA fits into this landscape, she responds:

Well, that's a problem, and I don't see a solution. Because, theoretically, I could be persuaded to agree with a lot of NAMBLA's proposals. I was reading all this wonderful stuff about childhood sexuality, and I met Dan Zang and I liked him a lot. And then I started meeting men in New York City who were part of NAMBLA, and I hated them. They had that same kind of emotional effect that my stepfather had. A lot of them were liars and abusers, and it just completely screwed up any of my ability to theoretically agree with them. [...] I absolutely believe that children have sexual desires, and that they should be honored. And I have a real discomfort with the concept of 'protection,' because I know that protection is about control. But I wouldn't let any of those people near my

son. [...] I'm as American as anybody. I'd like to have a nice clean, simple category, that would explain all the ways that I think about NAMBLA. But there isn't one. (63-64)

Just as Allison longs for a “nice, clean simple category” to contain her complicated feelings about NAMBLA and pedophilia, I desire a clear understanding of what to do with the “Women ‘Pedophiles?’” pamphlet in Allison’s archive—or in any queer archive—while also knowing that there are no easy answers. This confusion does not mean we should avoid such conversations but instead allow them and their discomfoting implications their space. And like Allison, I believe deeply in the necessity of grounding any theoretical discussion of sexuality in lived and embodied experience—while also recognizing the limits of one’s own personal emotional and sensorial responses. Allison might theoretically agree with some of the points a NAMBLA member makes about honoring children’s agency and sexuality, but she can also recognize an abuser when she encounters one. Certainly, her gut intuition is not the final word, but it is also not to be ignored. “Women ‘Pedophiles?’” takes up space in Allison’s and my queer archive, but it does not get the last word. The fear and shame that flares up in my core eventually cool down to a smoldering lump of curiosity that I add to the stockpile of my body’s memories.

What I take from the archives and leave on the page for the public eye constructs a particular story of sexuality that is not wholly mine nor wholly Allison’s, but a monstrous conglomeration of our fears, obsessions, and convictions, informed by everyone we have loved, admired, and resented. It is when we recognize the unpredictable and complex lessons contained within our networks of desire, and when we lean more on empathy and intimacy to hold difficult conversations, that we are led to the edge and back. I am reminded of another part from Allison’s long letter to Cris South, in which she raises similar questions about her own relationship with narrating her sexual history:

Every story that can be told—the bare bones of what happened, who said what and what resulted—is many stories. It all comes from where you start and what you leave out. Talking about sexual history in this way twists it. I am not telling you the important stuff really—not the names, the pivotal incidents, the growth, change, scareyness—NOT CERTAINLY HOW MUCH IT IS ALL FRAMED BY MY OWN TERRORS, MY OWN OBSESSIONS. I swear to god that sex is a hell of a lot more than anybody allows it to be and infinitely less. It is not the root of all action, though it moves us more than we can always see.”³¹

In this version of feminism, systemic change occurs not when we shame others for their correct or incorrect feminisms or political stances, but when we recognize the unpredictable and complex lessons contained within our networks of desire, and when we rely on empathy and intimacy to hold the meaningful and often difficult conversations that lead us to the edge and back.

One of my final encounters in the Allison Papers involves a more traditional archival object that comes in a box of its own. In a sparsely-labeled photo album, Allison grants researchers access to a kinship network of people whose identities she has left only partially exposed. Near the end of the album, I find an ambiguously labeled photograph of two people—lesbian women, I imagine—half-revealed to the camera lens behind an open bathroom door (fig. 4). I initially feel voyeuristic, an onlooker of a private moment—identities unknown; consent unknown—an intimacy captured and eventually shared for semi-public viewing.

³¹ From a letter Allison wrote to Cris South, dated “December 9, 1983.” Dorothy Allison papers, Box 35, Duke University.



Figure 4: Personal photo of album. Dorothy Allison papers, Box 172, Duke University.

Allison affords me a partially obscured glimpse of a moment from her queer community in 1973, and it is when I stop seeking interpretation and start receiving the photo as our own intimate connection that I can feel the cold seat of the toilet beneath me. I sit, half-exposed, half-hidden, accepting the kiss of a lover who comes to me in fragments.

Aftercare: Feminist Slippage and the Re-Vision of the Voyeur

Upon Dorothy Allison's success with *Trash* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, her more controversial reputation as a pervert and sex activist took a backseat to her widespread acclaim as a respectable novelist. Yet these two branches of Allison's career are not quite as divergent as they may first appear: even Allison's most well-known work pushes against the culturally-accepted limits of desire. In one particularly discomfiting scene from *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the child narrator Bone masturbates to fantasies of girls and women watching her endure a beating from her stepfather:

When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or down the street, or one of my cousins, or even somebody I had seen on television. Sometimes a whole group of them would be trapped into watching. They couldn't help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I'd stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. It was scary, but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (1994, 112)

In actuality, Bone is alone with her stepfather each time he assaults her, but in her fantasy, she orgasms to her audience's inability to look away from her pain, and to the story she tells of her own resistance. Notably, she does not include her sisters or her mother in this fantasy, nor anyone closer to her than her cousins. It is the gazes of the women and the girls she barely knows or does not know at all that she seems to desire most, and it does not appear that she is seeking salvation from them. Instead, she wants to trap their gazes, perhaps even against their will, so that they must watch as she withstands the pain and humiliation of the assault. Despite having no option to look away, these witnesses ultimately admire Bone, love her, consider her their own. The traumatic violence exceeds spectacle in this fantasy: it becomes a medium through which Bone compels connection with a community larger than herself and her reality. And as readers, we become that community of witnesses who have consented to pick up a story about sexual trauma. While reading this imagined scene is undoubtedly an uncomfortable experience for any reader resistant to co-imagining sexual fantasies with a child, Bone craves the eyes that refuse to

look away from the messiness of locating pleasure—and even love—alongside horrific pain and shame.

Here is the Dorothy Allison that I urge us to witness: the queer feminist sex radical, the pervert, the writer willing to challenge readers to enter such controversial yet essential territory. Her history of activism in this realm is wide-reaching, and very many of her less attended-to writings address the topic head-on. “For feminists, it often seems dangerous to acknowledge the sexual imagination at all,” Allison writes in an essay. “The sexual is unpredictable, irrational, sneaky, and far-reaching. Worse still, it is completely resistant to simple legalisms or clear philosophical categories” (1985, 95). I suspect that Allison is not denigrating feminism here—she has attributed feminism with saving her life—but rather, she is pressing on a fundamental issue that many feminist scholars—including me—struggle to articulate when summarizing histories of sexual politics for our students or other general audiences: our deep need to honor slippage.

In exploring this ethical slippage through the Lesbian Sex Mafia, Allison found that *pervert* granted *lesbian* a certain necessary instability. She retrospectively describes the group’s policy as “[a]ll perverts welcome. And I don’t care if you used to be a boy and now you’re a girl. I don’t care about any of that shit. I simply want us to organize for our own survival” (2007, 44). While Ti-Grace Atkinson proclaimed that “feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice” (1974, 135)—a popular second-wave adage that gets at the utopian hopes some women held for lesbian sexual expression—Allison resisted such utopianism with LSM, but she did so without eschewing entirely a feminist hope for a better world. Likewise, when researchers are willing to be capacious and creative dreamers while also recognizing the needs and realities sitting right in front of us, we generate more possibilities for building networks of care across space and time.

This ethical slippage can also help us empathetically witness Allison's—and each other's—mistakes without enabling them. Allison has been rightfully challenged for her approach toward coalition-building with so-called Third World Feminists at the Barnard Sex Conference. Citing a letter in which Cherríe Moraga calls out the Lesbian Sex Mafia for misleading her and other members of Kitchen Table Press to get them to unwittingly participate in a pro-S/M post-conference speak-out, Bracewell argues that Allison's and other white sex radicals' "monistic focus on the sexual needs, experiences, and desires of white women may have blunted the radicalism of both antipornography feminism and sex-radical feminism" (2021, 178). Allison has since acknowledged her failing, commenting in her oral history that "[Moraga]'s right about how she got played and pulled in, and that was really hard to confront and see that, in fact. I wanted her to back me and fight it on my terms" (2007, 54). However, Allison also resists the interpretation that this fight was monistic. She notes that the Lesbian Sex Mafia, which she saw as more racially diverse and mixed class than many of her other feminist circles, was concerned with so much more than individual sexual needs:

A lot of [the Lesbian Sex Mafia's work] was about basic survival and economic issues, which is hard for people to understand when you talk about the sex wars, because they think you're talking about autonomy of the body and freedom on that level. And we were, but we were also talking about prostitutes' rights and unionization, and all those economic issues and health issues that got subsumed or just not really talked about as being really intricate to that fight. (54)

The reality is always more complicated than a single interpretation can encompass. Over the course of writing this article, I have had to confront my urge to "save" Allison's historical reputation, and I found myself arguing against that same feminist straw man whose continual

resurrections contribute to these polarized summaries of feminist histories. Allison's reputation doesn't need a savior. Feminist historical narratives don't need saviors to set the record straight. Instead, I am suggesting that what we need are witnesses of history who can sustain complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities in our stories about what happened and why it still matters.

As S/M practitioners have argued again and again, intentional and compassionate aftercare is essential to processing the intense breaks in subjectivity that can come from confronting intersections of pleasure, danger, and power, and such confrontations are hardly restricted to the bedroom. Aftercare is, quite simply, the processes by which we check in on each other's emotional and psychological well-being. When perverting the archives, the researcher serves as a voyeur in some sense, but the voyeur is doing more than "getting off" on the subject—they are working to provide the type of aftercare in which voyeur becomes witness, and the witness works to accept the fullness, contradiction, uncertainty, pleasure, and danger that arises out of our various embodied relationships to power. Within feminist studies, perverting the archives is the type of aftercare needed to honor the complexity and multiplicity of our histories. It is the very stuff of our survival.

CHAPTER FOUR

“A FACE NOT UNLIKE HER MOTHER’S”: QUEER GRIEF IN JEWELLE GOMEZ’S *THE GILDA STORIES*

What do lesbian feminism and vampires have in common? The legacy of Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) instilled lesbophobia as a common trope of vampire narratives, and the genre’s general associations with conservative fears of a sexualized Other might seem at odds with late-twentieth-century lesbian feminism’s constellation of progressive sexual politics. Yet the contemporary American vampire rose from its coffin right alongside the women’s and gay liberation movements, in a large part thanks to *The Vampire Chronicles* of Anne Rice. In many ways, Rice’s vampires share much with their 19th-century Irish and British forebearers, concocted by Le Fanu, Stoker, and Polidori. These new American vampires are wily, seductive creatures of the gothic, born at the intersections of intimacy and consumption. Yet in many ways, they are also much less frightening—the most popular American vampires since Rice lean more chivalrous or campy than scary. In some cases, they even learn to control their murderous impulses so they can attend high school and reclaim their access to teenaged love.³²

For Jewelle Gomez, who was writing her black lesbian vampire novel *The Gilda Stories* (1991) just as the collective political energy of lesbian feminism was shifting overwhelmingly

³² The teenage vampire has become quite popular with American audiences, tending to depict a teenage girl as a lead character and centuries-old vampire who looks like a teenage boy as a love interest. See Stephanie Meyer’s YA series *Twilight* for a particularly tamed version of this modern convention, or televised series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the more recent *Vampire Diaries* for slightly racier depictions. Vampire love interests in these narratives seem to serve as fairly conservative metaphors for teenage girls’ yearning for a lover who is also a father figure—a chivalrous man/boy/creature who can initiate them into the dangerous world of sexuality. These series often include werewolves as well, which are classic metaphors for the excessive, primal desires that accompany hormonal transformation.

(and perhaps necessarily) toward HIV/AIDS activism, the vampire offers the possibility of mythological transfiguration from grief narratives centered on fear or despair to one of collective care. Moreover, the vampire makes possible an expansive temporality that reaches across the perceived bounds of sociopolitical movements and can explore how collective energies continue to build upon and respond to each other over time, no matter the limits of our individual perspectives or lifetimes. *The Gilda Stories* spans 250 years of the life of the main character, a young girl who escapes slavery and joins a community of vampires running a brothel in Louisiana, eventually becoming one herself. The expansive, interminable temporalities of vampires make such characters beholden to their futures and pasts in a way that a regular human temporality might not—"the Girl" (as the main character is initially called) must carry with her more mistakes, more memories, more attachments to others than any human life can possibly hold, and to accept immortality is to accept both the power and the burden of a limitless future, one in which grief can spring eternal.

This is not to say that human grief ever ends, even when an individual's experience of mourning dies along with them. Grief can be inherited from previous generations, and it can persist long after those who experience it can identify its source. The afterlife of slavery and the ongoing mourning of those who have died and continue to die from AIDS are but two salient examples of collective grief affecting marginalized communities, and they easily converge into the symbolism of the sympathetic vampire. Laurence Rickels argues that "vampirism not only serves the exclusion of the different," but also "always covers the need to mourn" someone who was not properly buried or grieved (4). Anne Rice was inspired to write *Interview with the Vampire* after the death of her five-year-old daughter. Sheridan Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla* after his wife Susanna died from a "hysterical attack," which may have been related to an intense

relationship with another woman of whom Sheridan did not approve. In her essay “Transubstantiation,” Gomez reflects on the origin of her fascination with vampirism, which she attributes to a Catholic fascination with blood combined with the devastating grief of losing her great-grandmother, who, along with her grandmother, primarily raised Gomez. “In that pain,” she writes, “I was seeking a myth that would allow everyone I love to live forever” (75). The pain of familial loss converges with Gomez’s experiences of lesbian feminist community in the vampire, a mythology rich with potential for communicating queer experiences of grief.

According to W. Scott Poole, the sympathetic vampire may have been “made in America” as a cultural response to the seemingly pointless mass deaths of the Vietnam War, an outgrowth of the collective need to mourn the bodies that would never return home (196-198). For Gomez, the vampire likewise serves as a figure of excess collective mourning: how do we cope when it seems we might never be able to bury our grief? Yet Gomez strips the sympathetic vampire of its romantic melancholy by suggesting that vampiric/human grief can also coincide with vampiric/human desires for connection and transformation. Gomez’s vampires are certainly sympathetic, and Nina Auerbach goes so far as to call them “defanged” due to Gomez’s most significant revision to vampire mythology: some (but not all) vampires in *The Gilda Stories* treat their consumption of human blood as an exchange, in which they leave behind some psychological gift, such as an affirmation, or a bit of advice, or a dream of a better life. This exchange is not usually entirely consensual, nor is it equally reciprocal—how does one measure a meal against a dream?—and this tension sits at the center of an ethics of care that takes into account the complicated power relations inherent in decisions about who is caring for whom, and how. Perhaps it is the subtle power imbalances at play even in this idealized version of vampiric exchange that makes Gomez’s vampires some of the most sympathetic (dare I say realistic) of

all: no matter how well-intended people may be in their attempts to form kinship and connection, we are always at the mercy of power imbalances, and no two versions of ideal community, connection, or exchange are alike.

While Gomez's fascination with the vampire began with a long-held fixation on transubstantiated blood that was stirred up by the loss of a parental figure, she attributes the eroticization of women's "natural monthly blood cycle" to her ultimate decision to write a vampire novel ("Transubstantiation," 75). In most iterations, the vampire is just as much about unburied grief as it is about the fear of breaching bodily boundaries via physical intimacy—or the desire and disgust for monstrous penetration and exchange of bodily fluid. Thus, the vampire frequently serves as a collective means with which to process the disorienting relationship between grief and lust. The phenomenon of grief-induced sex is well-established, and Gomez's particular vision of vampire blood erotics can help us imagine grief libido as a call to turn towards each other in times of loss rather than framing it as a temptation to escape pain through sex. Just after the brothel owner Gilda turns the Girl whom she had protected as a fugitive from slavery into her vampire child, she requests that the Girl asks her (Gilda's) partner Bird to "complete the circle" and perform one more blood-exchange to make the Girl their daughter (47). This instance of vampiric transformation seems less about pleasurable physical sensation and more about deeply embodied, sensual exchange. Gilda's goal seems only to solidify a profound sense of kinship between herself, the Girl, and her partner Bird. On the surface, this transformation may seem like a lesbian revision of heteroreproduction, but the fact that Gilda promptly dies by suicide after this blood-exchange disrupts any dream of a lesbian nuclear family. The Girl, a woman by the time Gilda transforms her, takes on Gilda's name after the suicide and eventually becomes Bird's lover. This eroticization of blood-relations is plenty

incestuous and exquisitely queer, forcing readers to confront the complexity of the strong, often morally ambiguous feelings that occur at the edge of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings (Lorde), many of which are rooted in our earliest familial relationships.

One could easily argue that it is insensitive or careless for Gomez to depict blood erotics this way, given the collective fears around exchange of bodily fluids that arose from the HIV/AIDS crisis. Certainly, by the time the novel was published in 1991, HIV/AIDS awareness and activism had become widespread, and Gomez was both well-informed and deeply entrenched in the collective grief that ran through queer communities—she, like many, lost a horrifying number of friends and chosen family. In a 1994 interview with Debra Polak (*FaT GIRL*, no. 4), Gomez went so far as to credit the HIV/AIDS crisis with solidifying her commitment to blood erotics:

[...]I don't want us to get into the erotophobic place where we completely lose our sexual adventurism. We as lesbians and gay people have really pushed boundaries around sexuality and have, in a way, more than anyone, been insistent around our sexuality.

[...]And even though I believe that people should be practicing safer sex in order to survive this decade, I don't want us to go into this puritanical phase where anything having to do with bodily fluids suddenly becomes so taboo that the next thing you know we're going back to lesbians and gay people hugging and shaking hands. (28-29)

Gomez's desire to preserve a sense of sexual adventure and to leave room for the eroticization of bodily fluids cannot be separated from a sense of mourning—for the acute, ever-present loss of lives and for a pre-AIDS era of queer sex communities. *The Gilda Stories* reads as a reclamation of hope in the face of such overwhelming grief, yet it also stops short of idealized nostalgia in its awareness that reclamation of the past isn't possible. The Girl/Gilda and other vampire

characters in the novel must frequently leave behind their attachments, especially to mortals, yet the Girl/Gilda also resists the temptation to avoid such attachments to protect herself from loss, and she learns to move through the world with an understanding that nothing is permanent, not even immortality.

Furthermore, Gomez's vision of queer blood-ties offers a counterpoint to some of the antisocial, death-driven queer theories that understandably arose in academia as a response to the collective trauma of HIV/AIDS. As people, and overwhelmingly gay men and trans women, were dying in droves, a significant portion of the collective energies that fueled lesbian feminist organizing converged into AIDS activism. In academia, queer theory emerged alongside and within Feminist/Women's Studies, responding overtly and implicitly to the mass death that was razing queer and trans communities. As a culmination of queer theory's investment in the sexual politics of death, Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) critiques the "reproductive futurism" that drives U.S. social and sexual politics and is signified through the figure of the child. Instead, Edelman offers an ethics of queer theory that refuses to protect this seemingly innocent future and instead embraces the "negating" forces that arise through queerness: death, anti-sociality, and narcissism.

While poststructuralist, death-informed queer theories took hold in academia, much of the work coming out of women's studies interrogated the intersections and divergences between queer and feminist theory. A primary example is Suzanna Danuta Walters' "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Fag)," which reckons with "the displacements of radical and lesbian feminism by a theory [queer theory] that often posits itself as the antidote to a 'retrograde' feminist theorizing" (832). Much as Gomez found herself coping with a sense of loss of a pre-AIDS sexual era for queer

people, Walters, Gomez, and other lesbian feminists also found themselves coping with a loss of momentum within feminist activism, coupled with a loss of the perception of lesbian feminism as a radical movement.

Within queer creative writing communities, many found it difficult to imagine stories outside of the death narratives wrought by the epidemic. In January of 1997, Gomez led a workshop at the Key West Literary Seminar “Literature in the Age of AIDS” conference, a first of its kind. Her description of the workshop she led, titled “Preserving Hope in Our Fiction,” elucidates her position on this dilemma:

I would like my workshop to have AIDS as a core, but I will be using a larger context: As writers we should look at how debilitating illness or disability changes our thinking, and our art. If we can not [sic] find hope, why will we want to tell our stories? And how do we tell the stories in ways that will keep others listening, even when it isn't what they want to hear?" (Flyer from her SF papers)

With *The Gilda Stories*, as with this workshop, Gomez pursues the kinds of narratives and conversations that allow people to confront their pain without falling into an isolated sense of despair. She refers to “our stories,” with the “our” left ambiguous—it may refer to those impacted by AIDS, or by some other “debilitating illness or disability.” This push to seek embodied connections across seemingly disparate experiences, queer or otherwise, contributes to a process she refers to elsewhere as “Rememberment,” which first requires “going deep inside and accepting the reality of who we are physically and all the ramifications”:

For European-Americans it means understanding white-skin privilege, a privilege exercised and kept in place merely because of a physical property, skin color. For gay men in the age of AIDS it may mean relearning the body's relationship to mortality or the

advantages to actually being part of a larger whole, not simply an independent ego. For women and lesbians Rememberment implies not simply reclaiming the right to our own bodies but a real exploration of what those bodies desire. For all of us it is not simply an examination of our own bodies but also an examination of our part, our membership in the body politic. How who we are reflects on or supports the rest of the members. In this universe our bodies are both precious and insignificant. (From an undated speech titled “Rememberment,” 7-8)

Rememberment is an imagined return to a holistic experience of the body, both one’s own body and the collective bodies we move within and between. But the body takes on a new relationship to significance when granted a vampire’s immortality. Illness and old age are the trappings of mortality, and so a vampire’s body becomes less susceptible to uncontrollable death, but more vulnerable in that it requires a perpetual supply of blood and a number of protective measures to continue existing. Gomez’s vampires, as with many others in the genre, must keep their existence hidden from humans, who greatly fear and outnumber them. In this sense, the collective body of vampires is both more powerful and more vulnerable than the collective body of humanity, and Rememberment in this case involves an acceptance of one’s power and limitations as a vampire and a refusal to deny one’s connection to humanity, even if secrecy is necessary. We might read these vampires as a reflection of the power and vulnerability of marginalized groups, and especially queer groups, as well as a warning against pursuing complete separatism and in-group superiority as ultimate goals.

Gomez’s vision of kin-community is hardly a utopian one, inflected as it is by the complicated power dynamics that inevitably run through relationships. When forming a new blood-bond, the vampire is always more powerful than the mortal they are changing and can

initiate a transformation without the mortal's consent. Even when Gilda attempts to uphold an ethics of mutual desire and fair (not necessarily equal) exchange in her transformation of the Girl, the reality of the situation is hardly clear cut. Gilda, who the Girl perceives as having a face "not unlike her mother's" (16), allows the Girl the choice of whether or not to be born as an immortal being. When the Girl agrees, Gilda enacts the ritual of draining the Girl of her blood, mixing it with her own, and then returning it. In effect, both mother and child gain new blood that opens up a world of shared sensations. Each time a vampire births another child, they become a new vampire. This vampiric blood logic is "not unlike" human gestational exchange, in which both the mother and fetus trade tissue.

However, Gomez also makes clear that even in the most well-intentioned relational configurations, lines of consent and pleasure cannot be clearly drawn. Though Gomez describes the Girl's vampiric birth as consensual—Gilda obtains the Girl's permission to begin the ritual of exchange and transformation—Gilda still relies upon powers of mind-control to seduce the Girl into her arms, and it is clear that Gilda understands the power that the Girl's birth mother, who died at the hands of enslavers, holds over the Girl. That Gilda reminds the Girl of her birth mother indicates the kind of transference that quickly opens a person to trust, whether warranted or not. To allay the Girl's discomfort, Gilda replicates the soft humming from the Girl's memory of her mother as she penetrates the Girl's skin with her bite. Gilda then opens the skin on her own breast and presses the Girl's mouth to "the red life that seeped from her" (46). This moment blurs pain and pleasure, giving and receiving, erotic and familial bond. Gilda breaches the Girl's boundary multiple ways—by extracting the memory of the song from her childhood, by sending her telepathic messages, by puncturing the Girl's skin to release her blood, and by commanding the Girl to drink blood from her breast. The Girl begins to lose

consciousness, further complicating the lines of consent, and then Gilda guides the Girl's lips to her breast. Though the Girl agrees to enter the ritual knowing full well that it would change her forever, she is not aware of what the ritual entails or to what extent this change will affect her.

It is shortly after Bird performs the ritual a second time that the Girl, due to Gilda's bequest, takes on her maker's name. Though she is at first reluctant to do so, when Bird calls out "Gilda," she answers (50), and the decision is made, albeit indirectly and certainly not without questionable consent. Still, the Girl becomes Gilda the vampire, and remains so for the duration of the novel. The vision of collective hope is not necessarily a vision of liberation. The nameless girl must take on a white name and a new kinship network to survive; she must travel the roads in men's clothes to avoid being raped or otherwise attacked; she must remain secretive about her power to avoid being hunted. Yet always, she seeks possibility, connection, and transformation, and she does so without leaving behind her complicated attachments to an unchangeable past, which includes the losses of her biological mother and her vampiric maker. In becoming a vessel for grief, the vampire Girl-Gilda³³ also becomes a vessel for cross-temporal connection to those she loves, and it is this grief-informed love that keeps her in touch with the unending growth and death cycles of life.

Grief in/as Archival Return

All of the writers included in this project have treated the South as a site of return in both their public and private archives, but they have by and large resisted nostalgic or otherwise sentimental lenses when depicting their personal and collective histories of southernness.

³³ After the death of her maker, the Girl assumes her new name, and the novel henceforth refers to her as Gilda. To avoid confusion, I have decided to refer to the Girl's vampiric iteration as Girl-Gilda. When I use Gilda by itself, I am referring to the Girl's maker.

Instead, nostalgia more often finds its way into their retrospective conversations of the pre-AIDS and pre-Sex Wars lesbian feminism, which they frequently remember as a golden age of radical sociopolitical reform for women. Both of these sites of return are imbued with grief, but many southern lesbians I have spoken with treat lesbian feminist grief and southern grief very differently in our conversations about past. With lesbian feminist grief, I often sense a bittersweet pang of something loved and lost and a desire to share how things *really* were with younger generations. While love is present in many of our conversations about memories of living in the South, the South tends first and foremost to incite the types of grief that arise from violence and trauma—from institutionalized violence like racism, homophobia, and classism, or from intimate violence like sexual assault and broken kinship.

Despite these differences, there is hardly a clean-cut division between lesbian and southern grief, and in fact I often found them to overlap in surprising ways during our discussions. In an interview I conducted with longtime friends Jewelle Gomez and Dorothy Allison, they reflect upon their influence on each other’s writing, weaving together the personal and the fictional as fluently as they do the personal and political:

JG: *Bastard Out of Carolina* was the first book I ever read that revealed the damage that can be done by sexual and physical abuse. It preceded the #MeToo movement by many, many years. When I would go to readings with Dorothy, women would come up to her and throw themselves into her arms sobbing. I know that was exhausting for her. She created a place for these women to reveal to themselves what had been done to them. And for me, I wanted to write something that has as much of an impact on women, of whatever generation, as that. [...]

DA: I wanted to redefine what was unspeakable. The kinds of stories we wanted to write, the kinds of connections we wanted to make, weren't what everybody else around us was necessarily doing. Some of the stuff we write, we're being naked. We're addressing the subjects that we are most afraid of, and in the early years of feminist writing and publishing, that was the goal: to actually be explicit about subjects that everybody else was avoiding. Also to be personally relevant and revelatory. How am I going to get Jewelle to talk to me about what she thinks about butch/femme relationships if I don't write about the most problematic aspects of relationships? I mean, we're all working from damage. I take that as a given. Some people, when they hit that line of damage, hide. And some of us get mouthy. Mouthy works for me.

JG: One of the things mainstream culture is discovering now is that the damage from the system of slavery—enslavement in this country—has never healed. It's a festering wound inside of every person of color, not just Black people. *And* inside every white person. It's a wound. And until we as a culture and as a community start to debride the wound—I'm in medical mode now—open it up, dig out the poison, it's just not going to work. We just keep paving it over. That's one of the things that I was trying to do with *The Gilda Stories*: show what happens to a girl—even though she's escaped from slavery, and she's got power over life and death—how having been enslaved can still damage her two hundred years later. I think looking at what has damaged us is the only way to go forward. What has damaged us as poor people, people of color, as lesbians. Any of the damage that we live through, if we can't address it, then we can't help ourselves, and we can't help the next generation.

DA: Our work is all, on some level, about trying to become a real person. [...]

Though neither Gomez nor Allison explicitly mentions the South in this exchange, both refer to the “line of damage” that drives their most well-known work, both of which have deep associations with their relationships to southernness. Allison left the South to put distance between the life she wanted for herself and the murderous conditions of poverty and abuse that defined much of her life in South Carolina. Jewelle Gomez never lived in the South herself, but she has extended family from Mississippi, one of whom she featured on the cover of *The Gilda Stories*; and while the institution of slavery was certainly not restricted to the South, slavery and its afterlife continue to be defining elements of much literature set in the region. For obvious if not entirely accurate reasons, the American imaginary shaped through our stories tends to relegate the wound of slavery to the South, making the region both a real and imagined site of collective suffering. Allison and Gomez’s most widely-read works are novels that prominently feature the region and its wounding effects, and both writers confront the damage these effects have had on their relationships—including the lesbian relationships and communities they have spent a lifetime fighting to protect. In addressing the “subjects [they] are most afraid of” and doing their part to “debride the wound,” they make it possible for more people to take up the brave and difficult grief work that can precipitate both individual and communal healing. As fulling, life-saving, and politically radical as lesbian relationships/communities may be, they can (and do) perpetuate cycles of violence like any other. Lesbians also can (and do) perpetuate the cycles of idealization and nostalgia that can flatten our relationships with each other, ourselves, and our histories, making it nearly impossible to undertake collective grief work.

It is worth noting that Gomez and Allison reference their fiction as their primary mode for confronting some of the deepest, trickiest wounds. Fiction holds to power to both reveal and protect a writer’s vulnerability, and that semi-permeable connection to a writer can make it easier

for readers to place themselves in a narrative. Readers of a novel—even an autobiographical novel like *Bastard Out of Carolina*—understand that they are not peering directly into a writer’s life from a separate vantage point. They are entering a shared imaginary, much like dreams Gomez’s vampires gift to humans in exchange for their blood. Fictional narratives take on lives beyond their original creators much more easily than nonfiction can, as evidenced by the collectively-created universes of fanfic that branch out of a source text. My decision to approach the genre as a form of life writing raises questions about the biographical and archival relevance of speculative or otherwise imagined narratives; fiction seems particularly apt for considering the region’s association with storytelling and with tactics of evasion, made apparent by the regional idiom “bless your heart,” a phrase that often hides patronizing critique beneath its polite veneer. While evasive tactics are frequently used in service of white supremacy, homophobia, and other dominant ideologies associated with the region, such linguistic and aesthetic strategies also hold much potential for upholding what Glissant refers to as “the right to opacity” for oppressed populations (189).³⁴ As one form of storytelling, fictional literature allows writers to explore personal landscapes without laying the actual circumstances of the personal open to readers and vulnerable to harmful cooptation—an approach taken by Ann Allen Shockley. Alternatively, Gomez’s investment in fictionalized archives seems more concerned with raising concealed histories from the dead than it is with protecting anyone’s privacy. For those histories for which there are no material archives—due to exclusionary silencing practices, the intangible nature of the history, or otherwise—fiction can stand in as a semblance of the past. *The Gilda Stories* archives a history that’s “not unlike” what may have actually happened in the past, and it also

³⁴ Glissant, Édouard (1997). *Poetics of Relation*.

mythologizes that history via a cultural trope that can feel both ancient and contemporary: the vampire.

Vampires continue to enjoy a variety of representations in popular culture largely thanks to the staggering popularity of Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, a series that also made Louisiana (and especially New Orleans) a hotbed for vampire lore set in the United States. Rice's depiction of the plantation space is, like the vampire, marked by an unsettling combination of romance and horror, two of the most common distortions that can seep into long memory—especially where grief is involved. At the center of this unsettling combination lies a pith of truth, a piece of ourselves that we can more easily recognize in the past rather than the present, perhaps because we find it unbearably terrifying yet seductive. With Anne Rice's plantation space, the site of a brooding romance between two white gay vampires, this pith has something to do with the dangerous temptations of benevolent white patriarchy, a lie that fueled rationalizations of slavery in the U.S. In *The Gilda Stories*, on the other hand, Girl-Gilda escapes the plantation and finds sanctuary in a Louisiana brothel run by a benevolent white madam. The differences between an antebellum brothel and an antebellum plantation abound, with one of the most notable being that the madam pays her workers. Since sex work was one of the only professions available to women that paid well enough for her to live without a man, then the pith of truth at the center of this romance could have something to do with the seductions of economic equality, one of the core issues of prominent second-wave feminist organizations like NOW.³⁵ In its bid for respectability, NOW and many other feminist organizations steered very clear of sex work, so Gomez's depiction of a vampire-run brothel as a site of kinship and monetized erotic labor speaks to the romance and terrors of sex work in a country marked by its legacy of destroyed

³⁵ Under Betty Friedan's leadership NOW also took an exclusionary stance towards lesbians, with Friedan going so far as to refer to lesbian feminism as "the Lavender Menace."

kinship networks and unpaid/devalued labor. In Gomez's story of the past, the South (particularly Louisiana and Mississippi) is but a container for the Girl's grief over everything lost to this legacy. In becoming a vampire, she embodies this grief, moving it away from its origin point without ever entirely severing the thread.

The connection between archival research and an unquenchable desire for access to the past can also manifest as a magnification of that which once seemed inconsequential to those who experienced it. An archive's ephemera becomes particularly salient here: the flyers, ticket stubs, memos, post-its, unlabeled photos, or other quotidian remnants of the past can take on new life in the hands of a zealous researcher, perhaps ballooning into a fetish object that tethers us to our historicizing desires. In the context of queer histories sought out by queer researchers, an attachment to these fetish objects probably says a lot more about a researcher's present-day relationship to the past than to the actual occasion that produced said object. If, as Heather Love suggests, a defining feature of queer culture has been its "stubborn attachment to lost objects" (7), then we might ask what it is about archives that attract queer researchers—what attachments are we stubbornly clinging to? This may be an impossible question to answer, especially since so much of what drives desire and attachment happens at the level of the subconscious. Still, I venture to suggest that the queer (and particularly lesbian) obsession with both archives and vampires has something to do with a queer longing for an immortal erotic connection that links us together across time and space, a collective intimacy that speaks to a hidden reserve of power. With the vampire comes the fear that fully revealing our power might cause our undoing. This fear is not irrational or unfounded—to make one's self known is to make one's self vulnerable, hopefully for better but possibly for worse.

Such are the dangers and possibilities that come with the decision to carry one's grief rather than leave it behind. Based on my own experiences with devastating loss, I understand that an intimate relationship with grief, while painful, also helps me stay open to possibilities of love and connection. Yet this intimacy can quickly turn into a tether: a tempting pull towards an inaccessible past; an obsession with returning to a less painful, pre-loss state that feels like home. Gilda understands this danger, and just before she turns the Girl into a vampire, she gives her a somewhat cryptic warning:

“What I ask is not an easy thing. You may feel you have nothing to go back to, but sooner or later we all want to go back to something. Usually some inconsequential thing to which we've never given much thought before. But it will loom there in our past entreating us cruelly because there is no way to ever go back. In asking this of you, and in the future should you ask it of others, you must be certain that you—that others—are strong enough to withstand the complete loss of those intangibles that make the past so alluring.” (43)

What makes this piece of advice particularly interesting is the insistence that the most maddening pulls toward the past are often precipitated by a memory that takes on new meaning, growing much larger than the original, “inconsequential” experience of it. An unquenchable desire for the beloved past inevitably reshapes memory, oftentimes by magnifying details, encounters, or other pieces of an experience that once seemed mundane. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as sometimes memory—and especially collective long memory—needs to be reshaped or magnified to make room for details that were too hastily overlooked. In *Wayward Lives and Beautiful Experiments*, for instance, Saidiya Hartman extrapolates from soulless court documents the inner lives of black women in Philadelphia and New York at the turn of the twentieth century. In *The*

Gilda Stories, Gomez extrapolates the inner life of a formerly enslaved person who would otherwise remain nameless and forgotten. Both of these histories are fiction, and both are true and necessary.

Even so, Gilda's warning that the Girl must be "strong enough to withstand the complete loss of those intangibles that make the past so alluring" if she is to enter the immortal life touches on the grief that usually accompanies such deeply personal, emotional attachments to the past. For archival researchers, this grief often arises from a feeling of having lost something which we never had in the first place: perhaps a sense of historical community, or a figure of queer parentage/mentorship, or a close circle of movers and shakers who inspire each other toward sociopolitical change. I find one of the most vexatious aspects of this queer archival grief to be the fact that I may not have ever known I had something to grieve had I never encountered its possibility in the first place. In opening myself to queer love and its legacy, I also open myself to the realization that the long history of its existence has been willfully kept from me most of my life—and there were many times when I really could have used that sense of having a past so I could better imagine my future. In a way, queer archives are like a dream gifted to us by a vampire in exchange for our blood, and to dream is to open one's self to the potential grief of never having realized what we know is possible. In a way, the archive is like a dream gifted to us by a vampire in exchange for our blood, and to dream is to open one's self to potential grief of never having realized what we know is possible.

Fiction, too, can stand in as an archive of grief. After the death of her great-grandmother—one of her primary parental figures—Gomez sought to create a mythology where the people she loves could live forever. This fictive archive creates a fictive kinship network that informs our subjectivities that are always fictive yet no less real. This is the praxis of being human that Sylvia

Wynter speaks of when she argues that humans can “autopoetically” create kinship “through the medium of our retroactively projected origin stories or cosmogenies” (199). Gomez creates a counter-cosmogony in which she transforms the vampire from a cultural metaphor for the fears of intimacy with a terrifying Other into a vehicle for articulating the fraught—and potentially transformative—lines of power inherent in making kin of/with our beloveds, even those who have died. *The Gilda Stories* presents as a novel, though it does not offer a monolithic or linear narrative but instead a relational network of stories that resemble Donna Haraway’s cyborg narratives in that they “are actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies” and refusing “the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life” (113). The fictional world of vampires speaks to an emotional reality, one in which grief can only be unburied and processed through speculation and dreams. This realm where the people Gomez loves “can live forever” has much in common with the realm of archival research—in both cases, there is the strong possibility of having to mourn something we never had in the first place, whether that be vampiric immortality or intimate contact with a community of the past. In creating an everlasting dreamscape for those she loves, Gomez creates space to grieve that which she has already lost while also making herself vulnerable to additional stages and shapes of mourning. To dream, to speculate, to reach out and make kin across impossible spans of time and space requires the strength to withstand the incessant cycles of love and loss.

Dreaming does not necessarily mean losing one’s self in the fantasy of reclaiming that which has long passed out of reach. Gilda’s warning to the Girl also carries with it the assertion that despite the strong pull toward the past that accompanies any sense of loss or longing for that which may have been, it is impossible to return. Still, the past tugs away. When the tug backward has something to do with love, to deny it is to forsake the threads that connect us to each other

across time. The Girl may never be able to return to those she has lost, but that does not mean she needs to sever their connection in her. She carries memories of those she has lost; even with those earliest memories of connection for which she has the fewest words and images, she senses them with other parts of her body-memory: the feeling of holding “a hand of a woman that she knew was her mother,” for instance (Gomez 18). However, when the pull toward the past has something to do with pain or trauma, to turn away from it is often an act of self-protection—of running from a wound that continues to shape one’s perceptions and experiences nonetheless. Sometimes we need to avoid looking backward to survive, but other times, temporarily returning to the past is a necessary part of the healing process.

An insistence on reckoning with the wounds of the past without centering one’s identity around them is characteristic of the ways in which the writers of this project have approached their attachments to the U.S. South. For her part, Jewelle Gomez has never lived in the South, but she set the Girl’s birthplace as Mississippi because she has extended family from Gulfport. The first section of the novel takes place in Louisiana, the American hotbed of vampires, and the novel ends with Girl-Gilda traveling even farther south toward Peru in hopes of reuniting with her family. In Gomez’s dreamscape, the pull toward the South is full of both danger and hope: Girl-Gilda must leave her birthplace to escape slavery, and she must travel farther south than she has ever gone before in her search for a safe, livable space for her and those she loves. Though Girl-Gilda avoids Mississippi on her way to Peru, “almost unconsciously, as if bounty hunters might still be searching for the girl she had been” (243), she retains a physical connection in the form of the native soil she must carry with her wherever she goes as protection from the sun.³⁶ Keeping literal contact with the soil from the birthplace to which she will never return is what

³⁶ While not as commonly used as some, the trope of using native soil as protection from sunlight does appear elsewhere, and as early as Stoker’s *Dracula*.

enables her to move through the world as mortals do. Keeping in close contact with her southern upbringing is necessary to her survival, yet this relationship is not bound up in anything resembling a nostalgic longing for Mississippi. She frequently longs for “the remembered face of her mother” (42),—an instance of looking backward that transforms a person into an inflated image—but she does not ever long for Mississippi. She grieves for her mother (her home), but not for the state that imprisoned her family. Still, her connection to this place remains, and connects her to others despite the deep pain and fear she associates with it.

A century after she leaves the South, Girl-Gilda is running a hair salon in Boston’s South End. One of her customers is also from Mississippi, which makes Girl-Gilda feel a special, unspoken bond with her, one that also links her back to the land:

Although she had not been back to Mississippi since the day she made her escape from the plantation, she carried the soil with her, and its scent made it real to her still. Her friendship with Savannah rested on the earth from which they’d come, the place where their many mothers had first been bent beneath the yoke. (130-131)

Through this visceral link to birthplace via scent-memory, Girl-Gilda forms a new relationship with a mortal that she might not have otherwise. While she refers to this shared place of origin as “Mississippi,” she does not describe this shared aspect of their identity as one defined by an imagined community of people within particular cartographic borders; rather, she thinks about the sensory experience of the dirt they shared and the connection they have to a group of people who have been subject to misleading and abusive interpretations of biological lineage, and to a legacy of broken kinship structures. The narrator describes Girl-Gilda and Savannah’s relationship to this lineage in terms of their enslaved mothers—she never uses the word “race” or otherwise refers to their skin color. It is the labor that their family—their mothers—were forced

to do upon the very dirt Girl-Gilda eventually carries like a talisman. During her time running the hair salon in Boston, Girl-Gilda has her first experience of immersing herself in what is increasingly being referred to as the African American or black community, and it is a period of simultaneous comfort and growth for her.

It is also in Boston that Girl-Gilda finally reunites with Bird, her mother-cum-lover, and she comes to empathize with Bird's decision to leave the vampire community for a while to immerse herself in her own indigenous culture. Girl-Gilda interprets Bird's motivation as a temporary need for "tribal unity" (155) to feel whole again after the loss of her partner. Gomez's depictions of communities de-essentialize the concepts of tribal unity and lineage—concepts that have driven American understandings of race, ethnicity, and region/nation—while also acknowledging their power over people and their continued relevance in the lives of nearly everyone. Bird and Girl-Gilda meet each other as equals after a long period apart in which they immersed themselves in their racialized communities of origin, they exchange blood as a sexual act, which transforms their understanding of their own shared sense of family of origin:

This was a desire not unlike their need for the blood, but she had already had her share. It was not unlike lust but less single-minded. She [Bird] felt the love almost as a motherly affection, yet there was more. As the blood flowed from Gilda's body into Bird's they both understood the need—it was for completion. They had come together but never taken each other in as fully as they could, cementing their family bond. (139)

Through this erotic blood exchange, Girl-Gilda and Bird transform their bond to include sexual intimacy, which expands their relationship beyond the traditional dynamic of mother and daughter while still "cementing their family bond." Sex as a spiritual and sensual ritual of embodied intimacy can but does not always overlap with reproductive sex or sex as lust-

fulfillment, and it is this spiritual-sensual aspect that gives Girl-Gilda and Bird the sense of completion they had been longing for. With bodies that are “not unlike” their mothers’, they create a new community rooted in erotic exchange; they create lesbian kinship.

Gomez’s depictions of identity as a combination of overlapping communities share much with Minnie Bruce Pratt’s concentric circles of identity that I discuss in the first chapter, both of which are just two of many non-essentialized descriptions of kinship and identity that came out of radical lesbian feminism. For both of these lesbian feminist writers, both biological family and geography feature as sites of origin that must be reckoned with, but they are only two of the many points of origin that people experience across their individual lifetimes. Gomez’s vampiric blood erotics offer a useful framework for understanding lesbian kinship as a quasi-familial, erotic relationship that is “cemented” through the intimacy of bodily exchange. Moreover, we can read *The Gilda Stories* as a speculative archive of lesbian community, and, I further venture, as a speculative archive of Jewelle Gomez’s lesbian community.

As with many lesbian feminist thinkers, Gomez’s depiction of lesbian community includes more than women who have sex with other women. *The Gilda Stories* places lesbianism along what Adrienne Rich referred to as a continuum that includes “many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (204). A lesbian community under this interpretation can easily include family members. Indeed, the cover of Firebrand’s first edition of the novel (fig. 1) featured a black and white photograph of Gomez’s great-aunt as cover art. The cover of Firebrand’s second edition (fig. 2) featured images that more readily signaled the novel’s vampire content, but such visual signals are noticeably absent from the novel’s initial cover art. The nail marks of dripping blood also make the second edition

much more visually dynamic, hinting at an exciting plot contained within. The first edition appears much more static in comparison, resembling the cover of a photo album—one of the most common and accessible archival objects. “Gilda,” in this case, might refer to Gomez’s great aunt, and “Gilda” can simultaneously refer to Gomez since her name appears just beside the photograph. Miriam Jones likewise argues that the autobiographical design suggests that the novel can be read as an “artifact,” or, in her case, as “a simultaneous sharing, and seeking, of personal and collective histories in the face of a monolithic, exclusionary discourse” (156). This seemingly static imagery beckons the reader into an intimate story-circle and thus contains a different kind of movement other than plot: an intimate exchange between writer, reader, and text.

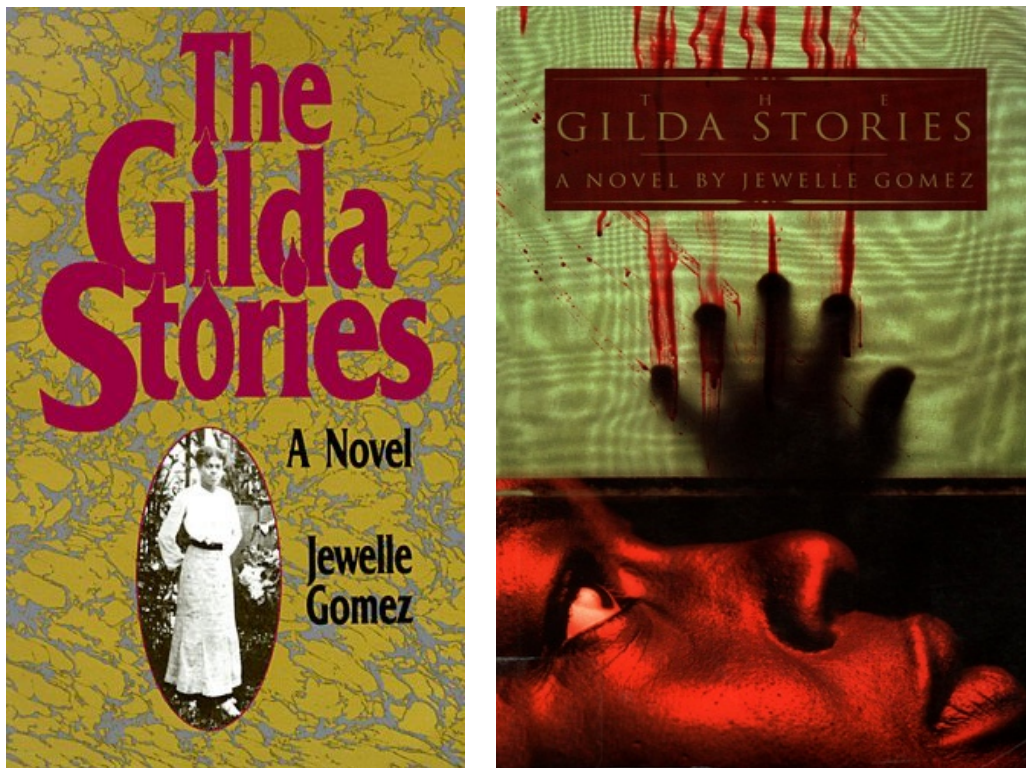


Fig. 1 (left). First edition cover art: Gomez, Jewelle. *The Gilda Stories*, Firebrand, 1991.

Fig. 2 (right). Second edition cover art: Gomez, Jewelle. *The Gilda Stories*, Firebrand, 2005

As much as *The Gilda Stories* is described as a black lesbian vampire novel, we can just as easily describe it as an archival object. We build mythos and history through the stories we tell ourselves about the experienced and speculated past, stories and pasts that are both collective and personal, and Gomez wields the seductive power of vampire mythos combined with a speculative history of black lesbian life in America since slavery—a history that she extends into the future. We might likewise view archival research as a method of storying ourselves into both the past and the future. Instead of simply using the archives to preserve or extract knowledge, we can approach them as a sacred and dynamic space, where we exchange stories and other intimacies with many types of kin.

Begetting the Undead

Just as Gomez straddled several socially-recognizable identity categories, she also moved in and out of various creative communities throughout her career. She had initially hoped to pursue a career in television and served on the original staff of *Say Brother*, one of the first weekly television programs for, by, and about black Americans. Eventually, she moved to New York City and transitioned into nonprofit arts management and editorial work. During her time there, she also joined the staff of lesbian feminist journal *Conditions*, where she met longtime friend Dorothy Allison—both of whom were recruited to diversify the editorial board of white, middle-class women. Gomez's career as a writer, editor, and activist was nurtured by the networks and channels opened up by the Women in Print Movement of the 1970s-1990s, intertwining Gomez's political work as a lesbian feminist with her creative and editorial work.

Eventually, Gomez moved to San Francisco and joined the editorial board of *OUT/Look*, one of the first magazines after the 1970s to bring lesbians, gay men, and trans people together.

Gomez's perception of her identity grew out of the various identity-based artistic and political movements that shaped her career and social circles, which she readily attributes to her understanding of what it means to be an American:

My sense of myself grows explicitly out of what it is to have a special 'American' persona. There is a combination of elements that make me individual: "African-American, Ioway, Wampanoag, Bostonian, lesbian, welfare-raised, artist, activist. But the combination is at odds with the monolithic picture many people would like to have of themselves and others. (73, "Transubstantiation," *Forty-Three Septembers*)

For Gomez and many if not most other people who consider themselves American, identity is defined by the racialized, gendered, and classed social categories that tend to be associated with Western liberal humanism. At the same time, Gomez notes the fragmentary nature of these categories and their power to destabilize any unified sense of what it means to be an American. Gomez's ability to work coalitionally hinged on a personal and embodied understanding of the inevitable trappings of separatist politics, which usually collapse under people's (often subconsciously) fluid notions of the relationships between individual and collective identity. Yet the fear of the collective power of marginalized people to separate American identity from some fictional base-line of "normal" continues to drive much of the discriminatory rhetoric that fuels conservative identity politics in this country.

It seems hardly a coincidence that contemporary sympathetic American vampires arose from their coffins at the same time that civil rights movements for sexual minorities were sweeping through the country. Anne Rice's vampires boasted a powerful secret society that ran

the world from behind the scenes, much like the various Illuminati-esque organizations that drive several conservative conspiracy theories (most of which can be easily attributed to anti-Semitism and anti-blackness). Certainly, sexual minorities did and do frequently congregate in spaces concealed from the public eye to protect themselves from violence, which can range from micro-aggression to murder. But Gomez's main character also carries a racialized identity on the surface of her skin, one that cannot be so readily concealed. We can read Gomez's undead vampire as a metaphor for the powerful, semi-secret communities forged by sexual minorities, and we can also read them as a figure seeking agency within the murderous conditions of anti-blackness. These conditions deal death at both the literal and ontological level, thus the vampire's liminal existence between the realms of life and death makes possible a counter-ontology that looks "not unlike" humanity, to riff on Gomez's oft-used phrase. The double-negative offers a useful discursive tool for conferring agency to people who are dehumanized through social categorization, who may then take up semblances of these social categories and wield them for other purposes.

Building from Frank Wilderson, Hortense Spillers, James Bliss, Saidiya Hartman, and other Afro-pessimist theorists who argue that humanism's dependence on anti-blackness to define unique individuality will always render blackness as an incommunicable non-subjectivity, Calvin Warren argues that black queer sexuality presents a particular problem in that black sexual difference reveals a grammatical impossibility for speaking to the ways in which an intersecting subjectivity that is systematically excluded from the human individuality via anti-blackness will also be rendered excessively human through sexual difference—and the violent relegation of difference is what maintains the myth of human individuality. Under Afro-pessimism, blackness cannot indicate human difference because blackness serves as a fungible

commodity whose primary relation to humanism is as symbol of spectacular suffering, an ontological myth perpetuated for the purpose of upholding non-black access to life, and to the status of unique human. However, social categories that render sexuality socially legible (e.g. queer, lesbian, gay) do serve the purpose of defining subjectivity under humanism, albeit as marginalized subjectivities that, in the case of black queerness, are made even more vulnerable to violence. How then, do we speak about the surplus violence experienced by people who occupy social positions that make them vulnerable to being perceived as both pathologically human and not human at all?

Calvin Warren argues that textual erasure can be useful in indicating “the exclusion of blackness” from “terms of human difference” as well as the “necessity of using a grammar that is inadequate.” Warren looks to the case of Steen Keith Fenrich, whose white stepfather murdered and dismembered his black stepson in a rage because “he was gay,” police claimed. The stepfather had carved “Gay Nigger #1” into Fenrich’s skull, communicating both a dehumanization via objectified blackness/numerical designation and a rendering of sexual human difference via the adjective. Likewise, police mentioned nothing of this crime’s relation to race, instead honing in on its purportedly homophobic intentions. In this instance and many others, the state renders anti-gay violence horrifyingly legible, while anti-black violence is ignored entirely. To be murdered for being gay is tragic social punishment, yet to be murdered for being black is so quotidian it need not even be mentioned. Moreover, Fenrich’s relation to his murderer conveys the ease with which horrific violence can easily hide behind family structures. In fact, the family is a primary source of homophobic violence—whether physical or otherwise—in countless queer experiences.

Warren notes that Afro-pessimism has been “uncomfortably silent” regarding sexism and homophobia, indicating a fairly monolithic approach towards the violence of antiblackness (401). In an effort to produce semantic possibility without reinscribing antiblack processes of human differentiation, Warren proposes onticide, or “a procedure that negotiates with a violent [antiblack heritage of humanism] by acknowledging its indispensability and exposing the violence that each sign conceals by unveiling trace structure and the devastating system of value embedded in language” (407). For his part, Warren writes a line through “Gay” to indicate “the interdiction, a ban, on blackness that renders sexuality and sexual identity possible.” If “ontology is made possible by the death of blackness,” then erasure “is a way to claim an impossible difference” and not a performance of what Frank Wilderson calls “a structural adjustment,” a kind of “whitening effect” (407). As a monstrous form of metaphorical erasure, the vampire can communicate “an impossible difference” experienced by people who occupy positions that are simultaneously overrepresented and excluded from humanity via structures of violence.

I suggest we also read the name of Gomez’s vampiric protagonist as a form of textual onticide that then opens up the character to new ways of being. A runaway slave, “the Girl” is not granted a name until well into the first section, when she undergoes the transformation into a vampire. When the white, brothel-owning vampire named Gilda first finds the Girl huddled on the floor in her barn, she repeats the phrase “come on” as a command to do what she says: “I could use you, gal, come on!” (13). That the Girl is someone to be used indicates her status as commodity, and it is not until Gilda changes the Girl into a vampire that the Girl takes on a name, one her maker chooses for her: also Gilda. Suddenly, Girl-Gilda finds herself to be part of a new family structure, one that reproduces itself through the link of blood and name. Though assuming a white vampire’s name could be interpreted as a form of structural adjustment, the

Girl never achieves the status of human. I propose that we read her name as a semantic representation of the onticide that must take place before the Girl assumes an identity, and we can read the vampire as an identity that conveys the (im)possibilities forged at the intersection of language and human differentiation.

Furthermore, Gomez's vampire mythos holds the potential to disrupt the heteropatriarchal anti-blackness of reproductive politics in the U.S. by divorcing gestation and birth from the reproductive organs of people who are medically designated as female without ever losing sight of the fact that this relationship between sign and signifier persists. Like Haraway's cyborgs, most vampires often "have more to do with regeneration" at the site of profound injury "and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix of most birthing" (116), yet they do not require a clear distinction between regeneration and rebirth. Rather, any type of body is capable of birthing a vampire, and vampyric reproduction helps us imagine what it might look like if those of us who have been excluded or exiled from white patriarchal heterosexual matrices of lineage were to seize the means of reproduction to birth someone who is other than—and perhaps more than—human. As such, Girl-Gilda expresses new discursive possibilities for regeneration/undeath for those whose social categorizations systematically bar them from legible humanism except as objects/symbols of difference, suffering, excess, etc. She is not unlike a human, and in that unlikeness sits the power to create new kinds of lifespans and kin.

Not Unlike a Mother's Love

To birth new discursive possibilities is its own form of parenthood, and there is a long legacy of writers who have turned to literary arts as a form of queer reproduction. In "Calamus," for instance—the most overly homoerotic cluster of poems from *Leaves of Grass*—Walt

Whitman frequently employs metonymy so that his book may serve as an extension of the body—not only his own, but also the bodies of the subjects of his poems and of his readers (who are often one and the same). “A leaf for hand in hand,” he writes of his desire for his poem to transform into a tender moment of physical intimacy between the “boatmen,” “mechanics,” and “roughs” (all of whom would most likely be men). “I wish to infuse myself among you till I see it common for you to walk hand in hand” (122). Whitman imagines the poem, which is also his body, entering the space within and around these men, transforming into a future in which open expressions of physical intimacy are ubiquitous. This form of queer reproduction does not engender children, nor does it result in a clone or copy of the poet. Whitman hopes to spawn intimacy between men—a form of lineage that can expand rhizomatically across time and space.

What often drives an urge to reproduce is also what motivates many writers to invoke the vampire: a desire to connect to lifespans that reach far beyond our mortal limits. Some might call this a desire for immortality—a desperate fantasy of escaping the reaper’s scythe—but I find it more compelling to think of reproductive urges, queer or otherwise, as being driven by a profound longing to “infuse” ourselves among a network of relations—to make communion with a beloved web of existence that encompasses Whitmanesque multitudes beyond our individual lives. Lesbian feminists reading and writing within the Women in Print Movement were also deeply invested imagining queer reproduction, and the 1970s and 80s proved to be a particularly fertile time for doing so. I speculate that one reason for this might be that feminist printing practices and aesthetics during this period were also evolving alongside reproductive technologies. As doctors performed the first in vitro procedures, journals such as *Lesbian Ethics* published numerous articles speculating on the science behind a future where women could become pregnant without men. Queer and feminist scholarship since the nineties has generated

ample critique of the heterosexual logics of reproduction and lineage, spurring conversations about whether or not generational and reproductive models should be abandoned entirely. In my reading of queer motherhood in *The Gilda Stories*, I follow Elizabeth Freeman's reparative take on generational models, especially her point that various technologies and culture industries "produce shared subjectivities that go beyond the family" (64). Certainly, lesbian feminist writers and editors were turning to the technology of the printing press to reproduce and generate lesbian feminist community.

In her wide-ranging study of queer and feminist speculative fiction, Alexis Lothian challenges the easy equation between reproduction and heterofuturity (the notion that queer attachment to reproductive futures only perpetuates heterosexual structures), noting that queer scholarship and activism since the 1990s has largely "tended to either elide feminist critiques of reproductive labor or to take them as a given, moving immediately to the way reproduction can be resisted and alternative temporalities and futurities explored" (9). In response to anti-futurity arguments most readily exemplified by Lee Edelman's *No Future*, Lothian argues that uncritically conflating futurity with children and mothers is to perpetuate "a heterosexual logic of (re)generation in which the future is indeed kid stuff and kids' only meaningful connections are to the presumed-to-be female, presumed-to-be heterosexual bodies from which they emerged" (35). Still, when scholarship categorically ignores "the bodies from which queer and other subjects literally emerge," it also risks participation in "racialized and classed [and gendered] dynamics that elide the question of who disproportionately carries out reproductive labor" (my addition, 35). It is important to keep in mind that reproductive labor includes processes of fetal gestation and birth as well as the ensuing processes of caregiving through which subjects emerge. Women of color continue to perform a disproportionate amount of the U.S.'s caregiving

and domestic labor, and usually for extremely inadequate wages. To overlook these other post-birth processes of embodied reproductive labor in philosophies and aesthetics of futurity (re)produces unchecked whiteness through a mechanics of obfuscation.

Gomez and all of the other writers I center in my dissertation found their audience through the Women in Print Movement and were actively co-imagining a social and sexual identity that could reproduce via print. Though decency laws held sway over some of what lesbian feminists were able to print (particularly those targeted through the anti-pornography legislation of the 1980s), and while middle-class white feminists were certainly over-represented within the movement, these feminist print networks served as some of the most accessible avenues through which lesbians could mass-produce their existence as part of a network much larger than the individual writers. Though digital publishing has since become much more accessible than print, the connection between print books and bodily offspring persists, perhaps due simply to the materiality of the format. Whereas digital networks correlate more with the capacities of the disembodied mind, printed books—both feminist and otherwise—continue to connote (in the words of Deleuze and Guattari), “bodies without organs” (1375).

Moreover, many lesbian feminists were invested in reclaiming and re-imagining the mother symbolic, especially its presence and influence on their sexual and romantic relationships. When Bertha Harris sexualizes the mother-daughter relationship in *Lover*, she imagines a version of queer lineage that crosses lines made taboo by heterosexual reproduction, exploding these relations outward in new directions that might seem monstrous to some, but transgressive or even liberatory to others. When Gomez depicts the Girl’s transformation as a moment of intimate exchange between the Girl and her adoptive mother-figure, she is likewise crossing over into heterosexual taboos: conception happens when the Girl suckles blood from the

mother's breast, and she is suckling a breast as a young woman and not an infant. Gomez paints the strangeness of motherhood in stark relief while also calling attention to the manner in which heterosexual scripts often cordon off or deny that strangeness in an attempt to keep it from bleeding over into other types of relationships. In her essay "Recasting the Mythology," Gomez touches on the motivation behind her depiction of vampiric motherhood: "A child suckling at its mother's breast is not called a predator or a leech, but might not someone from an alien planet see it that way?" (91) Girl-Gilda's vampiric birth, an intimate physical exchange with a mother-figure she loves, is both arousing and off-putting, capturing the seductive yet terrifying manner in which motherhood functions as a cultural myth.

The strangeness of motherhood does not mean it must be avoided in favor of queerer kin-relations, and perhaps it cannot be entirely avoided at all. *The Gilda Stories* models a queer ethics of communal nurturance, an ongoing process in which "motherhood" takes many forms—the nurturing biological mother whom slavery separates from the Girl; the white savior (Gilda) who changes the Girl's life forever, ushering her into a vampiric lifespan before absenting herself via the true death; the reluctant mother (Bird), who unexpectedly finds a daughter in place of her partner, a ward she must now train in the ways of the vampire; and Girl-Gilda, who spends the novel trying to figure out what kind of mother, if any, that she wants to be. It is significant that Girl's birth mother only appears in the fragments of dream or the bodily sensations of early childhood memory while Girl-Gilda's vampiric mothers are depicted in detail. As previously noted, Jewelle Gomez's birth mother absconded from motherly duties, instead leaving Gomez with a grandmother and great-grandmother to raise her. But perhaps more important than the personal significance of this narrative choice is its relevance to a larger cultural disappearance of black maternal labor, which carries its particular generational

significance. In “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” Saidiya Hartman notes that the black mother transfers her legacy of dispossession to her child, and the black maternal figure’s freedom struggle “remains opaque, untranslatable into the lexicon of the political. She provides so much, yet rarely does she thrive” (89). Though the Girl escapes the plantation, her mother dies there, having no choice but to leave her child to her own devices. Yet the mother’s love and care for her survives, gaining an afterlife of its own through her daughter’s memory. In this sense, Girl-Gilda’s connection to her birth mother is a form of queer kinship in that it is affectively carried across time and space and into Girl-Gilda’s vampiric kinship configurations.

Jennifer C. Nash’s recent work, *Birthing Black Mothers*, builds from the body of black feminist scholarship that explodes “biological conceptions of motherhood, theorizing ‘othermothers’ and ‘all our kin’ to foreground communal styles of mothering, caregiving, and being-together,” styles that are generally “not tethered to the biological or the reproductive” (19). In this sense, legacies of black mothering in the U.S. are very often already queer. In just a couple degrees of separation from *The Gilda Stories*, Nash also cites Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ work on the “capacious conception of mothering” that arises from black feminism (19), and Gumbs wrote the afterword to the 25th Anniversary Edition of *The Gilda Stories*. Gumbs recalls how she introduced her mother to the novel, hoping that reading it would open “a portal” between them: “I hoped that reading the novel would give my mother a sense that my life as a queer black feminist is about something more than my choice of partners. It is also about a relationship to time and people and shared space” (254). Through their shared experience of reading of *The Gilda Stories*, Gumbs seeks to bring her own mother into the communal space of queer black feminism. The novel is both the progeny of Gomez and a mother to its readers—in

this case, it births a portal through which Gumbs can share in queer black feminist intimacy with her biological mother.

Black queer mothering also informs Girl-Gilda's relationship to grief, nurturing her through the mountain of loss she inevitably accumulates over her vampiric lifespan. Over a century after the Girl flees the plantation, she finds comfort by looking into a mirror and "seeing her mother's eyes staring back out at her" (Gomez 180). Her mother's ability to love and care for her daughter persists long after death, teaching Girl-Gilda how to carry those she has lost within her body as an archive of their love. Girl-Gilda's sustained connection to her mother is an example of what Christina Sharpe refers to as wake work, or "sitting (together) in the pain and sorrow of death as a way of marking, remembering, and celebrating life." When Girl-Gilda peers into her own eyes and sees the eyes of her mother, who is in turn seeing her, she produces for both of them "an insistence on existing" (Sharpe 11). Girl-Gilda's body also stores the archive of wake work, and her impossible immortality ensures the longevity of such labors.

In fact, it is the mother's presence in the Girl's body-archive that gives her the transfiguring power she needs to survive, an act of care that opens the novel. The first pages are set in a space between dream and reality; the Girl sleeps restlessly, "feeling the prickly straw as if it were teasing pinches from her mother. The stiff moldy odor transformed itself into her mother's starchy dough smell" (9). Her mother's dream-presence transforms the uncomfortable realities of her sleeping conditions, enveloping her in the body-archive of sensory experience. Dream-mother not only comforts the Girl, but she also guides her toward the difficult action she must take outside the dreamscape if she wants to live another day. The Girl "clutched the hand of her mother, which turned into the warm, wooden handle of the knife she had stolen when she ran away the day before" (9). By layering the dream of the mother's hand, a source of love, onto the

handle of what will soon become a weapon in the Girl's waking life, these opening pages establish the terrible reality that mothering quite often involves making difficult and sometimes violent choices for the protection of their kin.

The transfiguring power of her dream saves the Girl from a white man who attempts to rape her as she sleeps. "He started to enter her, but before his hand finished pulling her open, while it still tingled with the softness of her insides, she entered him with her heart which was now a wood-handled knife" (11). Her mother's hand is her heart is her weapon is her source of survival. Because the Girl has no place in her assailant's schema of power, the man does not see his death coming. The blood drains from his body and feels "comfortably warm" on the Girl's skin, which reminds her of the intimacy of bath time with her mother. With the dying man's blood "washing slowly down her breastbone and soaking into the floor below," the Girl feels cleansed, as if she is being baptized into her new life beyond the plantation. This baptism is both horrifying and erotic, and when the Girl finally slips from under the man's body, she moves "quietly, as if he had really been her lover and she was afraid to wake him" (12). Though Gilda officially transforms the Girl into a vampire, the body-archive of her mother guides her toward her first baptism-by blood.

Creating discursive and narrative possibility for an ontologically impossible figure sometimes requires the deaths of those who define themselves against her nonexistence. Sometimes, it is necessary to take violent or otherwise drastic measures to create more space for hope and potential. Later, Gilda foreshadows her decision to meet the truth death after turning the Girl into a vampire by mentioning that years of living alongside humankind render her pessimistic that humanity will ever break its cycles of violent domination. Pessimism can often pave a quick road to death, yet Gilda's decision to end her life is not without hope: she offers the

Girl her identity, her family, her source of power. She places her hope in her progeny, as parents often do. The Girl's reluctance to follow in Gilda's footsteps, coupled with the novel's ultimate trajectory towards a self-destructive humanity, make it difficult to say whether Gilda's hope was well-placed, or whether there is any hope for humanity at all.

By 2050, it turns out that Girl-Gilda has once again become a fugitive: the existence of vampires becomes well-known, and humankind devolves into a dystopic hunt that balloons far beyond the destruction of vampires whose power they both fear and covet. Girl-Gilda receives word that her vampire kin are meeting in Machu Picchu in hopes of guiding anyone who wanted it to safe hiding where they could be together. Gomez describes this safer place as being "south," in the "less industrial lands where it was somewhat easier to remain undiscovered" (240). Girl-Gilda does return to a more rural south, though not to the rural U.S. South from whence she came. This hope for a new home requires her to travel farther south than she ever has before, to a place she has never seen. We do not know what will become of Girl-Gilda and her kin—whether their new southern home will grant them the safety they seek. We only know that "Girl-Gilda was no longer fleeing for her life" (252). In reuniting with the web of kin she built across vast stretches of time and space, she finally finds a place to rest and feel safe, however temporarily.

When We Touch

A year before I began this chapter, my friend Lisa died unexpectedly. Her roommate came home from a weekend with her partner and found Lisa in bed—she had died in her sleep from what we would later find out to be an undiagnosed heart condition combined with an epileptic seizure. Lisa, a towering trans lesbian who called herself "The Purple-Haired Tramazon," had been a fixture of so many communities in Memphis, and especially for local

performers, artists, and LGBTQ+ people. She had worked tirelessly to create more creative, loving, empowering spaces for trans people and queerdos like her, and she was a big reason I found myself calling Memphis home. Since she died during COVID-19 quarantine, it felt like I might never have a chance to experience Lisa-sized love and care ever again. From the depths of social isolation, it felt to me like my hope for a collective queer future in Memphis had come crashing down. These feelings were not rational—no one person should bear the responsibility of keeping an entire community intact—but they were all-consuming nonetheless. Grief’s relentless pulsations ballooned and collapsed my sense of time with a pain that felt both immediate and eternal.

After a couple of months, Lisa’s roommate posted on Facebook with a call for help: she needed someone to come and remove Lisa’s mattress. The roommate had sorted through the rest of Lisa’s belongings, but every time she touched the mattress, she felt like she was on fire. I had a van, so I offered to come pick up the mattress and donate it somewhere (it was a really nice one, and Lisa hated wasting perfectly good things!). As soon as I crossed the threshold to Lisa’s room, I burst into tears. I felt my friend there, sitting within and around me...but she was also gone. Here I was, in her room for the first time since I had seen her last, trying to force myself to come to grips with her absence even though traces of her presence remained all around me.

The rest of the day, it felt as if Lisa were right behind me, trying to tap me on the shoulder. I do not mean this literally, but I am also not being entirely figurative—it felt like she was touching me, over and over again, insistent on grabbing my attention. I made a strange proposition to my partner—we had already planned to take the van to watch a movie at the drive-in theatre that night, and I asked if we could leave Lisa’s mattress in the back so we could lay on it. Bless her, she agreed. I just needed to embrace Lisa, or feel her embrace. I needed to touch her

in some way. Perhaps, just as a Proustian madeleine can activate a memory as if it were happening in the present, I needed to activate Lisa's traces within me. I needed to keep her alive in this highly imperfect, somewhat monstrous way. And it helped, a little. I began to feel more than pain when I thought about Lisa. I remembered her big warm hugs, her unrestrained cackle of a laugh, her soft, loving eyes.

It is a deeply human experience to revive the dead via sensory contact with their remains—and what are remains if not an archive of a life past? Losing kin can feel like losing a piece of ourselves, and we might easily find ourselves digging around to find any crumb remaining that could prove to us that this devastating loss is not final, total, or eternal. In “The Only Lasting Truth,” Tananarive Due recalls the moment she heard about the death of Octavia Butler—whom she refers to as the “matriarch” of a “very small family” of black speculative fiction writers that includes Gomez, Delaney, and others. Immediately, she attempts to contact Butler on the phone:

I called Octavia's home number and listened with a pounding heart as her phone rang. Once. Twice. Three times. I delighted—for just a bare instant—when the ringing stopped and I hear her voice.

On her answering machine. Already distant, clearly a recording. But Octavia's voice.

I stammered a message. *What to say? Are you alive or dead?* “I've...heard something...and I was hoping to speak to Octavia....” I stopped, nearly sobbing. In that instant, I understood the futility of the act. We cannot call the dead on the phone. (179) Due's tense switch in the last sentence of the first paragraph—from “stopped” to “hear”—communicates the hybrid temporalities conditioned by the death of a loved one: upon hearing

Butler's disembodied voice, she recalls, in the past-tense, a feeling of delight that is carried within her body in the present-tense sensory experience of hearing her Butler voice. Though her logical mind knows this voice is a recording of Butler as she was in the past, Due's emotional, embodied experience of Butler's memory stirs up the hope that maybe, somehow, she can speak to her mother-figure. Though we cannot call the dead, we can sense them among and within us.

Gomez, like Due, seems aware that while writing cannot resurrect dead bodies, it can discursively resurrect memory and history and implant them into social imaginaries to inspire visions of belonging that span the past, future, and present. By writing *Girl-Gilda* into existence, she activates a sense of historical continuity that, to many, has been shattered by the grief of generational trauma. Gomez also enables readers to activate cultural memories via their unique relationship to the text, and while some of these revived histories and memories may be experienced in a more cerebral way, they can just as easily be experienced within the body. What traces do these pages leave behind? What do you feel when you run your finger along a page or hear the dialogue as if it were being whispered into your ear?

In an essay appearing in *Luminescent Threads*, an anthology commemorating Butler, Gomez remembers watching an astronaut land on the moon with her great-grandmother, an Ioway woman born in 1883: "At the same time we were told in school all the Indians were dead." She refers to that moment as "the period into which we were launched by President John F. Kennedy." From then on, "[s]pace became part of our lexicon; we all imagined a future totally different from our present." Her use of passive voice in "we were launched" suggests a lack of agency and consent to being propelled into this "new age," yet the rupture also fills her with anticipatory excitement (n.p.). This excitement must live alongside the mourning wrought by

erasure, a violence that prevents these indigenous histories from entering the grand narratives of common knowledge.

Yet there is also something to be said for the potential one can access in space between the stories we tell based on our own experiences and the stories people tell about us. Gomez connects her memory of this moment of realization that her experience differed radically from other people's perceptions to the feelings inspired by reading Butler's work:

I appreciated the friction between the known and the unknown, and the energy it created in life and writing. Between what the teachers said and who I knew sat at home on our couch was a world of possibility. (n.p.)

Like Due and Butler, Gomez writes in that mythical space between individual and collective knowledge, where we often connect via dream, symbol, narrative, and imagination. Gomez imagines a life and an archive for the dead she never knew, resurrecting the Girl from stories of death and disappearance.

When it comes to the grief of losing a personal relation—a lover, a friend, a family member—then we often seek out storied spaces that blend shared historical narrative and individual attachment as a way of feeling less isolated in our suffering. In “Pardo: Searching for a Name”—a poem in her most recent collection, *Still Water* (2021)—Gomez resurrects her mother through language, both written and spoken:

Say her name out loud and
hear her laughter almost as warm
as a story; big and round,
full of pasts overlapping and
contradicting each other.

It's a name I'll remember
now that the women,
my small nation,
are all gone. (100-101)

When Gomez speaks her mother's name, the "pasts overlapping" all converge into the sense-memory of hearing her mother's laughter—a sound so full and human that it can hold multiple, often contradictory stories. It is that multiplicity of narrative that Gomez seeks "to fill the empty room" inside her (99), connecting her to the "small nation" of women she has lost.

Well after her mother's death, Jewelle participates in her own naming ceremony and walks away with "Ka Ana Tuk Amuk," meaning Still Water:

Still Water—for moving slow through stone,
leaving my trace embedded in rock, in sand,
on the pages of lives.
Still Water who touches all shores
past and present, in my journey to the ocean
even as I seem unmoving. (105)

While Minnie Bruce Pratt invokes the ripples in water to describe her sense of self, Gomez references the illusory properties of water. The calm waters of a crystal-clear mountain lake may seem unmoving, but water is never truly motionless. Somewhere, a small stream trickles away from the reservoir and joins the vast, deep, and mysterious ocean of stories that link us.

CONCLUSION

ON CROSSING THE LINE

I have come to realize it is a fairly common experience to feel transformed into an entirely different person by the dissertation-writing process, as has been the case for me. To compound matters, the disorienting experience of having my sense of place, community, and identity fractured and rearranged via COVID-19 and the social isolation of quarantine has made it difficult to remember where I started with this project and what I initially set out to do—because it is, of course, a dissertation driven by questions of place, community, and identity. So much has happened. I am not who I thought I was. Or rather, the stories I was telling myself about who I am are no longer serving me. My sense of self as it relates to the many communities of which I consider myself a part is much more contingent, fragile, and fluid than ever before, which feels equal parts terrifying and liberating. What I know is that I know very little, and the deeper into my project I journeyed, the less I felt compelled to provide clear answers. My initial driving question—“What happens at the intersection of southern and lesbian-feminist identities and communities?”—strikes me as irrelevant to a majority of the dissertation in its current form. Instead, I found myself more interested in asking questions that are both self-reflexive and community-oriented: “Why do I admire these writers so much?” “Why am I so obsessed with the queer cultural histories of this region we call the South?” “What are some of the other types of stories about the past that I can find in the archives aside from those that people have already read?” “How can my dissertation serve the people for whom I write?” “In what ways can I contribute to and care for queer archives?”

The latter two questions crystallized in the existential malaise of quarantine, which, along with its difficulties, allowed so many of us the opportunity to step outside of the status quo and examine the trajectory of our lives from a distance. The unexpected death of my friend Lisa, which was preceded a week prior by the unexpected death of my dog, which was preceded a month prior by the news that my mom had Stage IV cancer, had me grasping desperately for any sense of community I could find—we are not made to exist in isolation, and it nearly impossible to properly grieve in isolation. When I was not on social media taking the edge off my loneliness, I turned to the archives for company. From that point, I found myself thinking of my reading and writing as forms of care work—for myself, for the writers I encounter throughout my project, for the archives we collectively build, and for an imagined queer audience. It has been incredibly difficult to resist nostalgia and hagiography in my writing in the face of such acute loss, and I doubt I have entirely succeeded in doing so. Still, I have tried to witness these lesbians in all their human imperfection, and I have made every attempt to tell compassionate, rigorously-researched stories about their histories without rendering them idols.

The dangers of viewing research about people's lives through the lenses of love and care are manifold, especially when considering the imbalanced power dynamic between researcher and subject. I was in the middle of writing about Ann Allen Shockley when my season of grief began, and it shows. I longed for some level of intimacy with her via a deeper insight into her personal life, but her archive conveyed little about her personal life and a lot about her contributions as a writer and her philosophies of librarianship. I tried to respect this boundary that I sensed, but I over-corrected in some places and under-corrected in others. I overly fixated on the uncertainty of Shockley's sexual preference, which she has long kept a private matter. I avoided delving too far into an examination of the trans aspects of *Celebrating Hotchclaw*

because as far as I can tell, she never used that word herself to describe any of her writing. A year-and-half after writing the first draft of that chapter, I started hormone replacement therapy and began to more regularly identify as both trans and lesbian. I had no idea at the time that I was writing it how much of that tortured first draft was driven by a deep yearning to connect with Shockley over the anxiety of straddling multiple identities and communities that are not mutually exclusive yet are frequently treated as such. Had I stopped obsessing over locating accurate language to describe the identities of Shockley and her characters—which I now suspect was actually an obsession with finding the right language to stabilize my fractured sense of self—I would have had a much easier time witnessing Shockley on her terms from the get-go.

A librarian by day and a writer by night, Shockley built her entire career on the tension engendered by holding together categories that may seem mutually exclusive. As an archivist, she built a sizeable African American oral history collection, a form of evidence that many researchers write off as unreliable even today. In her fiction, Shockley provocatively destabilizes and transgresses some of the most fiercely protected social boundaries in the U.S. In 1987, a year before she retired from Fisk, Shockley published a reissue of her short story collection *The Black and White of It*. This collection included a new story that was also published in that same year as part of the SM-affirming lesbian erotica anthology, *The Leading Edge*. In “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” Shockley renders a fantasy in which a white lesbian plantation mistress living on the down low purchases an enslaved young black woman simply because she is attracted to her. Over time, this attraction develops into mutual love and sexual intimacy despite (because of?) a power imbalance of colossal proportions. The fantasy ends with an abruptness that I am inclined to interpret as tongue-in-cheek when the mistress frees her lover from slavery so they can live

happily ever after. It appears Shockley has quite the taste for camp—one of the tried-and-true sensibilities for slipping taboo transgressions into the public eye under the guise of bad taste.

Nearly all of the writers featured in this dissertation have, like Shockley, found various and often ingenious methods for bringing the taboo of lesbian sex into print. With her campy lesbian genre fiction, Shockley writes queer sex with a refreshingly playful levity, folding pleasure into danger under the auspices of humor. And it was the playful humor of camp that brought me out of my grief-stricken stupor and back into my body. Shortly after I finished my chapter on Shockley, quarantine began to lift in Memphis, and people started gathering together again, many of us feeling starved for shared experiences. I decided to commemorate the death of my friend, a multi-talented performer, by performing in a drag show as a silly trickster cowpunk named Ponyboi. I knew instantly that I had found myself in the right spot when I suddenly remembered what it felt like to play with others—my fellow performers and the audience members. It took silliness to open me back up again to a world outside my head, and it is silliness that allows me to connect with audiences of all kinds through radically visible expressions of queerness.

The recent drag ban in Tennessee speaks to the power of queer visibility—if the Republican Party did not fear the increasing presence of drag, they would probably not have felt the need to push for censorship legislation across the country to accompany the barrage of educational gag orders. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* also opened the door for further legislation that polices what people do with their bodies and what kind of access to healthcare they can have. It should come as no surprise that trans bodies and queer sexualities have been some of the most frequent targets for the increasingly fascist Republican Party. Under this collective fear of censorship, many drag performers have taken to proving that their drag has

very little to do with sex or stripping, a misguided strategy that devalues transgressive performances of queer sexuality and could ultimately embolden politicians to expand the target to cover more ground. I am reminded of similar debates that cropped up during the push to censor and regulate porn in the 1980s—a political moment that had some radical feminists working alongside religious conservatives. While the movement was relatively unsuccessful at the legislative level, Ronald Reagan’s Meese Commission—a panel of anti-pornography politicians appointed to study the harmful effects of pornography—released a report that, while unenforceable, would make anti-pornography rhetoric mainstream, which would have the most drastic effects on queer porn. Even though it was still legal to produce queer porn, distributors began to shy away from it in droves, and many queer people began to self-censor their sexualities and distance themselves from the porn industry in an effort to protect what little privilege they had. As Foucault has made abundantly clear, all it takes is the known possibility of surveillance by a governing authority—whether that authority is actually looking or not—to engender fear and self-regulation in the most vulnerable populations. The appalling legislation coming out of the 2023 legislative session is nothing new—Republican politicians are simply pulling from the ancient playbook of biopolitical control.

But as history shows us, there will always be queer and gender nonconforming people who do not comply, whether overtly or covertly. They might resist by protesting and organizing, by creating subversive art, by forming counter-publics, or otherwise. And I can assure you, dear reader: I will not comply.

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