

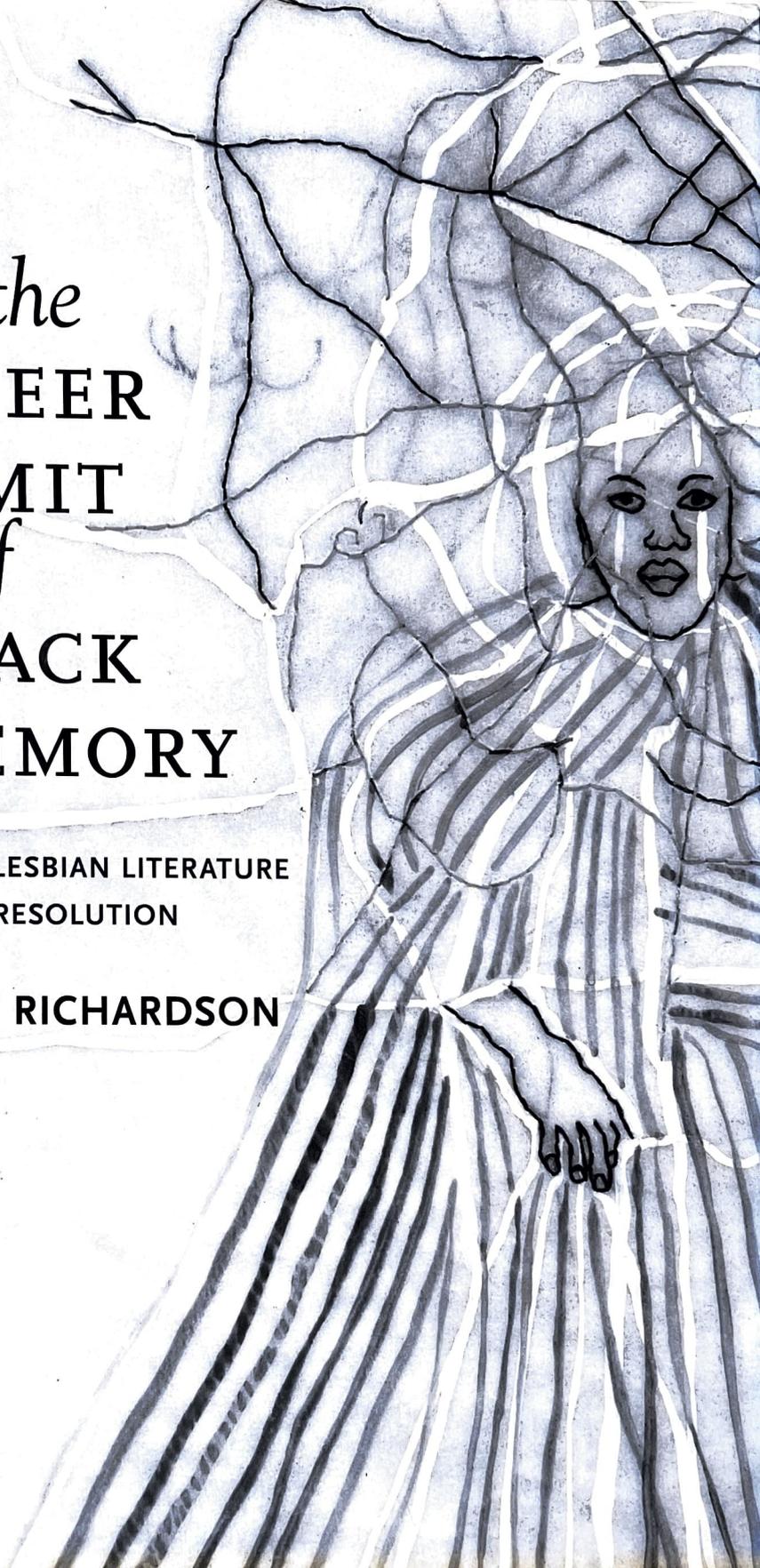


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**QUEER  
LIMIT  
of  
BLACK  
MEMORY**

**BLACK LESBIAN LITERATURE  
AND IRRESOLUTION**

**MATT RICHARDSON**



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## INTRODUCTION

### Listening to the Archives

#### Black Lesbian Literature and Queer Memory

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

Walking through the doors, I feel a sense of anticipation; I want the museum to be as beautiful and expansive as its name. Sun streams into the lobby from the clear glass windows that make up the building's outer wall. Unlike most other places in San Francisco, Black people are working in the museum. The first thing

that catches my eye is the writing on the walls above the gift shop. The walls speak, asking the visitor to engage in a collective practice of remembering, imploring us to not forget our past and to honor our ancestors. Inscribed on the walls, the words “reinvent,” “remixing possibilities,” “transform,” and “creativity” yell to me as I make my way across the lobby. These are the properties that Black queers bring to the Black experience. We reinvent our bodies, renaming ourselves according to the genders we create, regardless of anatomy. We remix the possibilities of Black kinship, making family across boundaries not determined by blood. We transform Black culture through unique local and diasporic practices. I am excited. With these concepts guiding the museum, I anticipate queers to be central to, or at least a significant part of, its representation of diaspora. The entrance to MoAD stands in opposition to the rotunda at the National Archives. That room tells a story of national beginnings from the perspective of the colonizer; the imposing figures of the founding fathers nobly stand in peaceful contemplation of the beautiful nation they built. But it is a story fraught with lies, deceit, betrayal, hypocrisy, genocide, forced labor, and rapacious violence—all obfuscated by an illusion of order. MoAD, in contrast, is about diaspora, privileging a perspective of origins outside the nation-state, locating Africa as the Black homeland and emphasizing continuity. Though it is important to note that recent scholarship has focused on Black diaspora as a practice of shared discontinuities and processes of imagination,<sup>1</sup> I feel some comfort in this vision of connected histories and shared beginnings, and I want to belong to it despite my critique of this perspective.

The museum’s permanent collection is a set of exhibits that puts African dispersal into a global context. It sets the tone for the museum itself, situating its priorities in relation to remembering the story of slavery and colonialism from the perspective of four themes: origins, movement, adaptation, and transformation. The front wall of the building is a glass window that allows one to see outside from the staircase, which leads to all the floors of the museum. Next to the staircase is a three-story photograph of the face of Africa, or more precisely, the face of a little African girl. This photograph is the literal face of the museum; because of the glass wall, it is visible from the street and transforms the front of the building into an impressive tableau. The original photograph was taken by Chester Higgins Jr. and incorporated into a photomosaic titled “Photographs from the African Diaspora,” a composite of over two thousand individual photographs. The mosaic is a significant archive of Black memory and is a permanent part of the museum.<sup>2</sup> The pictures line the staircases between the museum floors. They are beautiful; they move me with their sheer force of evidence in numbers. Each one touches an affective punctum that is temporally situated through the setting.

clothes, hairstyles, and other visual aspects of the subjects.<sup>3</sup> Each photograph tells a story—mothers and daughters, men in military uniform, weddings, funerals, spiritual ceremonies, Black men with children, men and women dancing, children at play, men and women at work. They tell me a story that I already know, one of pride and joy, resistance and endurance, family and love. The photographs also talk back to the ever-present narrative of the broken Black family, which is challenged and reconstituted in many forms on the museum wall. There is a phonic materiality to the visual. I think of Fred Moten's insistence on the photograph that screams as part of a mournful/political practice.<sup>4</sup> I am reminded that the purpose of the project is to provide what Hirsch and Spitzer call "points of memory" or "points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal memory and cultural recall."<sup>5</sup> They are included in the infrastructure of the museum in order to make an argument or a point about Black memory.<sup>6</sup> The photographs argue for closure on the enduring questions regarding the inherent pathology of the Black family; they yell that the accusations are untrue, that Black families do exist. Representation of a normative resolution to the question of Black familial pathology requires the suppression of any echo of queerness. In this context queerness would be unmelodic, improvisational, unpredictable, and irresolute.

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

In MoAD the photographs and the figures together tell a narrative that binds the body to normative genders and to heterosexuality. The heterosexual matrix, as Judith Butler has explained, is the logic that links biology to gender presentation/expression and sexual object choice. The expectation

is that these qualities—*anatomy, gender, and sexuality*—predict each other through a linear progression.<sup>7</sup> The visitor experiences this logic first by way of the images on display in the photomosaic. Then, figures at the top of the stairs remind us of the proscribed biological basis of the familial and communal representations and again offer us a resolution to the accusations of Black familial pathology and gender aberrance in the biologically based nuclear family.

Further down the hall from the figures is an interactive set of stations where a visitor can take an auditory and visual tour of Black musical history: gospel, blues, jazz, hip-hop, reggae, and more. I notice myself creating my own version of a queer story in the existing cacophony of sounds and images. As Cheryl Dunye so eloquently states at the end of *The Watermelon Woman*, “Sometimes you have to create your own history.”<sup>8</sup> There is a queer materiality to Black musical performance that is missing from the exhibit. Where is Sylvester on the soundtrack? Ma Rainey’s “Prove It on Me Blues”? Joan Armatrading? Or Luther Vandross? The richness of Black queer performance disappears, and with it goes the expansive potential of embodied knowledge.

Queers threaten mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility.<sup>9</sup> The MoAD permanent exhibit is connected to a larger diasporic aim to resolve the trauma caused by dominant positioning of Black people as sexual deviants who have “incomplete, deviant and ruptured” families.<sup>10</sup> Black queer people, as Evelyn Hammonds suggests, are dangerous to the collective, for we are a reminder of the accusation of sexual deviance and gender aberrance that we have fought so long to deny, decry, and defend against.<sup>11</sup> The wall provides evidence of the nuclear family; the figures tell a story of clearly defined and bifurcated genders; the musical archive exists without any queers. It is a call to remember our past, a gesture to history, and an entreaty for the future, but one that does not figure the queer in the Black past or, by extension, the future. As I look upon the permanent exhibit, it becomes clearer and clearer that I am the “constitutive outside” of what is understood, celebrated, and remembered about Blackness.<sup>12</sup> As the exhibit is careful to demonstrate through images from around the world, it is clear that the imperative of normativity is not located solely in the United States but is a condition that spans the diaspora.

As I ended the process of writing *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, I returned to this beginning and realized, finally, that I had written the book to trace a (narrative) mosaic of Black queerness that would have cracked the walls of MoAD that afternoon. In this volume I have gathered novels and short stories that point to what is irresolute and irresolvable about the Black

relationship to normative definitions of gender, sexuality, and family. Here, “irresolute” takes on the connotation of something unfixed, with movement and potential, while “irresolvable” refers to how Blackness remains structurally positioned as “Other” in dominant understandings of the human, which, as Sylvia Wynter argues, cannot be resolved through respectability and civility.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the politics of respectability and civility structures Black memory in mainstream Black representations and institutions (such as MoAD) toward a narrative of resolution and normativity. I wrote this book taking Hortense Spillers’s call to “insurgent ground” seriously, and in that spirit, I argue for an embrace of the messiness of Blackness.<sup>14</sup> MoAD: in these pages, I imagine that these letters can also stand for the Messiness of the African Diaspora, in all of its queer glory.

Black people have a fever for the archive.<sup>15</sup> At the time of this writing, construction is underway for a Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.<sup>16</sup> Even this will not break the fever—a dis/ease manifest as much in the physical structure of large institutions as in the conventional and familiar narrative of memory reified through the archive. Achille Mbembe defines the archive first in terms of “a building, a symbol of a public institution,” and then the “collection of documents” that are housed there. He concludes that “[t]here cannot therefore be a definition of ‘archives’ that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored there.”<sup>17</sup> This “entanglement of building and documents” is exactly what I have endeavored to underscore: it is at the root of Black expectations of recognition of collective past and present struggles that culminate in official state resolution of grievances.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the authority and recognition that is associated with archives, their creation is also a method of defining the collective. As Mbembe argues, the institution has an “architectural” power that produces an “inescapable materiality” and an instantiating imaginary.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the archive is no more than a

montage of fragments [that] creates an illusion of totality and continuity. In this way, just like the architectural process, the time woven together by the archive is the product of a composition. This time has a political dimension resulting from the alchemy of the archive: it is supposed to belong to everyone. The community of time, the feeling according to which we would all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership: this is the imaginary that the archive seeks to disseminate.<sup>20</sup>

For disaffected people, the autonomous creation of physical institutions becomes an important alternative to the distortion of their histories at the

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

As a departure from the institutionalization of the national archives, and even MoAD, I consider a different archive. This archive consists of a group of novels and short stories that are a diffuse, mobile, and decentralized set of literatures written by Black lesbian-identified authors from around the diaspora. These literatures project a range of embodied queer practices and identities into a past seldom collectively recalled Black departure from sexual and gender norms as a method of resistance to oppression. The group of texts examined here creates a counternarrative of history wherein multiple forms of deviance—sexual and gender variance, for example—are part of a repertoire of everyday acts of pushing back against the overwhelming epistemic violence that situates Blacks as nonhuman Other.<sup>21</sup> The novels and short stories are artifacts of denied memory and performances of the “strategic absences” (68) and revised tropes of popular history, particularly representing those who are “intentionally missing, hidden or not saved” by archiving institutions.<sup>22</sup> As José Muñoz and Diana Taylor have noted, although there is an inherent relationship between the repertoire and the textual, embodied performance is often “banish[ed]” to a subordinate category of “ephemera” in relation to the supposed stability of the materials in a traditional archive.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the texts gathered here acknowledge the profound impact of performance in constituting Black queer memory, pointing toward the centrality of embodied knowledge.

Standing in MoAD, I seemed to be at an impasse of desires. The desire to be recognized as part of Black memory is antithetical to the Black desire to be considered “civilized,” and nonpathological (normative).<sup>24</sup> One way to resolve this impasse is to represent the queer as normal as possible—as homonormative and transnormative.<sup>25</sup> Another strategy is to remind Black people that Black culture and history are already imbued with queerness. While there has been some documentation and discussion of Black gay male history and representation, Black lesbians and transpeople have not received as much academic attention.<sup>26</sup> For the Black lesbian writers who have taken on the challenge of re-remembering the past, the Enlightenment framing of Blacks as the sign of sexual excess continues to affect Black collective memory. Black lesbian renarration of the past explores the “curious tension[s],” to repurpose Gates,<sup>27</sup> between Black desires for normativity that are enacted through politics of respectability and civility, and the realities

of queer experience that are central to Black cultural life; between “authentic” Blackness and the “inauthentic” Black queer; between historical evidence and queer imagination; and between bifurcated gender categories and expansive queer gender identities. These tensions are worked out through queer vernacular epistemologies, or forms of expression, that comment on and resist the oppression of queer sexualities and genders, as well as create queer kinship networks, communities, and alternatives to diasporic displacement.<sup>28</sup>

## Irresolvable Genders

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

—Sylvia Wynter “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being”<sup>29</sup>

Why Black lesbians? In some ways, this question is at the heart of the matter. Historically, Black has been inextricably tied to the queer—the lesbian in particular. According to Sander Gilman, the dissection of Black women’s reproductive bodies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to the refinement of the distinction of the lesbian as an inherently deviant group with genitalia as excessive as the mythical Hottentot apron.<sup>30</sup> The Black female body has historically been irreconcilable to white society in relation to notions of womanhood. Even as Black women reconstructed the category to reflect their own needs, they were simultaneously subject to brutal scrutiny under the scientists’ knife.<sup>31</sup> According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, race provides gender’s “power to mean.”<sup>32</sup> An extension of Higginbotham’s argument recognizes that Blackness obscures the meaning of biological sex as well. Nineteenth-century anatomists looked for the definitive proof of Blacks as the “missing link” between apes and humans through the dissection of Black women’s bodies, with special consideration of their genitalia, “locat[ing] racial difference through the sexual characteristics of the female body,” namely, a fascination with an imagined phallus in the form of an elongated clitoris to match the lengthened labia majora.<sup>33</sup> The Black becomes the aporia between sex and gender such that the two never meet in any fashion that would satisfy the dictates of normative heterosexuality. The supposed lack of physical distinction between the sexes was thought to indicate a low moral character<sup>34</sup> and to manifest in a morbid sexual appetite that included homosexual attraction. As Sharon Holland has observed: “It

appears that the words *lesbian* and *black* are forged in blood, in physiology, and ultimately in racist science.”<sup>35</sup>

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

Black lesbian authors contribute to the category of the “queer,” especially in their representation of gender diversity, but also in their insistence that Black culture is inherently non-normative, which is why deviance along gender and sexual lines is so threatening—it exposes the futility of our claims to rights and inclusion based on shared normality.<sup>38</sup> Roderick Ferguson has placed women of color feminism (and Black lesbians as central to this project) as providing a major alternative to neoliberal normativity. He states that “women of color feminism attempted to dislodge interpretations of racial domination from the normative grip of liberal capitalism.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he argues that women of color feminism is an epistemological, social, cultural, and political formation that challenged the “normative hues” of oppositional movements, including civil rights, women’s and Black power movements.<sup>40</sup> My analysis of the fiction in this book shows that Black lesbian writers are beneficiaries of and contributors to a reconceptualization of Black resistance to include gender variance as well as sexual transgression and the epistemological frameworks that forge those practices. As C. Riley Snorton has pointed out, Black lesbian feminism is a tradition that is based on a racial critique of gender categories. The work of early Black feminist

writers and activists paved the way for a reimagining of Black embodiment along gender lines.<sup>41</sup> It is therefore no surprise that literature by Black lesbians gives an unprecedented accounting of the sexual and gender diversity of Black communities. They contest what Rinaldo Walcott calls a “narrative of coherency” about Black gender<sup>42</sup> and instead represent Black embodiment as unlimited and imaginative: butches/studs, straight transmen, femmes, bigender folk, women-loving-women, transwomen, drag kings, gay men, bisexuals, feminine transmasculine/masculine transfeminine people, and gay-attracted transmasculine people.<sup>43</sup> For Black people to claim gender at all is brave given the array of violences enacted physically and epistemologically to strip us from gendered being. Thus to claim such an assemblage of creative interpretations of the self is also dangerous in its dizzying audacity and flagrant noncompliance with the terms of our dehumanization.

## Negated by the Negated: Disremembering the Queer

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

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*<sup>44</sup>

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

respects, dead to Black memory and that this literature is an archive that pays respect to the ancestors and to the “dead,” creating a way to grieve those who have gone unclaimed.

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

According to Freud, dissociation occurs as a result of intrapsychic conflict. The ego actively represses memories of traumatic events in order to “protect itself from experiencing the painful affects associated with them.”<sup>48</sup> This reflex to self-protection re-emerges on a collective level with the process of dissemblance, wherein Black women do not reveal details about their sexual lives out of their distrust of the archives.<sup>49</sup> The insidious, poisonous violence of the idea that Blackness represents sexuality and gender gone wrong has affected the Black collective unconscious to such an extent that it is an act of self-care *not* to know its own members. Trauma situates Blacks in a peculiar predicament in relation to the past, such that dissemblance is necessary to keep certain events of violation hidden and unspoken. I further contend that part of the effect of trauma is not only to keep elements of the past hidden but also, as an added measure of self-protection, to *disremember* them—to erase them from collective memory. The Black collective unconscious, as Fanon saw it, is bombarded by the values of the colonizer to the extent that it turns to self-hatred. The result is that the Black queer is the “phobogenic object,” the anxiety-producing mnemonic that signals to the unconscious that it must protect itself from remembering.<sup>50</sup> A phobogenic object that threatens to unearth the amnesic defenses created through repression, the queer becomes dead to Black memory.

One of the consequences of the stealing of Black bodies and cultures for the transcontinental slave trade is that Black people are profoundly concerned with historical memory, or how historical narratives live in collective memories of the past. Given centuries of grotesque distortion of Blackness in every form of representation (history, law, literature, philosophy, film, public media), for Black people, one of the only available resources of historical documentation is memory. Two beautifully poetic essays, Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s “Black

Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” are useful guides through the choppy waters of making use of fiction as an alternate archive when collective memory falters. As Hartman suggests, for certain Black subjects the formal archive is a “casket,” a grave, a “death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property . . . [and] an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”<sup>51</sup> Telling a story about lives (and deaths) of abject people is a process of insurgent counterhistory and reclaimed memory. The pathway to the thoughts and the “picture of the everyday life” of the forgotten is a route forged through the imagination of those looking for them.<sup>52</sup> When the formal archive fails and (collective) memory is a catacomb of the worthy dead, or what Judith Butler calls “grievable life,”<sup>53</sup> then “sometimes [one] has to create [one’s] own history.”<sup>54</sup> I have stated elsewhere that any picture of the quotidian that reveals so-called deviant behavior is excised from any formal accounting of lived experience as a measure of self-protection for the individual and for the collective “self.” Therefore, Black women and Black queer people have a reasonable distrust in the archives.<sup>55</sup> The desire to “retriev[e] what remains dormant”<sup>56</sup> and “[listen] for the unsaid,”<sup>57</sup> leads to the impulse to find recourse in different sources of knowledge. In this case, the archive of knowledge is found not in a particular edifice or set of official documents, but through the fictional accounting of a dispersed set of practices, discourses, and feelings available to the imagination in order to utter the “unspeakable.”<sup>58</sup> The Black lesbian fiction analyzed in this book is a method of addressing the violence of excision from Black memory and of Black queer self-articulation. It is also a history counter to humanism, creating, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley describes, a “new geography . . . of sexual, gendered, transnational and racial identities” and a “queer, unconventional and imaginative archive” of resistance.<sup>59</sup>

In this volume, I look at acts that both resist the dominant oppression and simultaneously entangle the protagonists in forms of domination. I offer this as an expansion of Cathy Cohen’s definition of resistance that emphasizes that “political resistance is the intent to defy laws, interactions, obligations, and normative assumptions viewed as systematically unfair.”<sup>60</sup> In addition, I want to stress that I do not want to suggest that resistance is always meant to result, or does result, in the overturning or transcendence of current structures. Rather, resistance is simply pushing back against these structures. Blacks who do not attempt to conform to dominant standards of heterosexuality or who dare to define their own genders are clearly moving against the basic conditions of our enslavement and colonization. The boldness of this enterprise is made even more intrepid given that this is an analysis of Black queer resistance imagined from the perspective of dispossessed and disenfranchised poor and working-class communities. As Cohen

states, there is potentially much to be gained in Black Studies more broadly by paying attention to those who “are reminded daily of their distance from the promise of full citizenship.”<sup>61</sup>

## Reconstructing History: Historiographic Literature

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

—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*<sup>62</sup>

As suggested in Dionne Brand's quote from *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Black memory is filled with the fiction of empires. These texts challenge the normative strains of Black memory for its colonized fictions of a past without queers. They enact what M. Jacqui Alexander describes as an “expansive memory” of the past.<sup>63</sup> Expansive memory, as Alexander defines it, is not “bound by the limits of time, enclosed within the outlines of a map, encased in the physicality of body, or imprisoned as exhibit in a museum,” nor is it bound, I would add, by definitions of sexuality or the limits of genre.<sup>64</sup> I identify this work as *expansive historiographic* literature, meaning texts that comment on and re-imagine the past, but without concern for historical verisimilitude. Expansive historiographic texts are not bound by the thick description and period detail that historical fiction demands.

My idea of historiographic fiction is partially adapted from literary scholar Linda Hutcheon's term “historiographic metafiction,”<sup>65</sup> which is concerned with the postmodern “incredulity towards realism.”<sup>66</sup> Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction accounts for fictional work that resists realist conventions while maintaining a self-reflexivity about the act of writing fiction and the act of writing history. Her definition relies on the interplay between history and parody in order to assert that “both history and literature [are] human constructs.”<sup>67</sup> The work that I analyze in this book departs from Hutcheon's definition precisely in its ability to offer commentary not necessarily through parody but through recreations of standard refrains of Black memory. The juxtaposition of historiographic and anachronistic (or expansive) representation emphasizes the temporal contradictions of the texts in their own performance of queering Black time and space.<sup>68</sup> They simultaneously offer reverence toward history and push back against it through rebellious narratives that insist on interfering in the familiar

heterosexual and normatively gendered story of the past, creating anachronism by centering queers who “don’t belong” in the historical narratives as they are currently known. From slave cabins and cane fields to juke joints and jazz clubs, from the neighborhood organizing meeting to the revolutionary assembly, Black lesbian fiction trespasses on the imagined gender and sexual normativity of the spaces of Black self-making—telling their histories with a queer difference.

The fiction analyzed in this volume irresolutely moves “with and against” the normative version of Black memory such as the ones in the permanent exhibits in MoAD. Historiographic fiction performatively<sup>69</sup> queers the temporalities associated with particular historical narratives, often interfering in established timelines.<sup>70</sup> For example, Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet* refers to Black presence in Scotland during the turn of the twentieth century, well before the 1950s Windrush era, thereby disrupting the conventional narrative of Black migration to Scotland.<sup>71</sup> The texts also blend temporalities, at once recreating the patterns of speech, dress, and other details from a bygone era and mixing them with the vernacular expressions or tone that suggests the contemporary period in which the text was written.<sup>72</sup> Though Laurinda Brown’s *The Highest Price for Passion*, for example, is set on a nineteenth-century plantation, its characters approach each other in a blending of nineteenth- and twenty-first-century speech, thereby imagining a language for the contemporary complexities of woman-to-woman sexual desire that has its roots in slavery’s ways of meaning.<sup>73</sup>

## Vernacular Epistemologies

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

—Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”<sup>74</sup>

These texts situate vernacular modes and folk traditions that have been used to resist racism as queer aesthetic forms. These practices have allowed African diasporic communities to survive despite brutal and rapacious anti-Black violence and socioeconomic exploitation and deprivation. Black lesbian writers use this rich tradition and highlight that vernacular practices have always included explicit commentary on heterosexism and gender oppression. In doing so, they have created representations that not only challenge racist and misogynist hierarchies but also push the boundaries of Black politics to consider forms of sexual and gender nonconformity as part of a Black

tradition of resistance to anti-Black oppression. Furthermore, by representing stories of the working-class masses of Black queer people, they establish an archive of Black queer voices “from below” that are very rarely heard anywhere else.<sup>75</sup>

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

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

The Black queer ancestor is an unimaginable figure in mainstream diasporic memory. That she does not exist is a fiction of domination, an effect of trauma that has made her illegible even in alternative archives. To speak of her, one has to be creative and seize the means of archival production while pointing to her absence in written history and in memory. Black lesbian writing, then, is a practice of historical commentary, a trespass against demands of evidence, finding recourse and voice through the creation of imaginative counternarratives and embodied practices. *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* tunes into the complicated way that novels and short stories by Black lesbian writers take up the trope of voice and engage with Black vernacular written performance and phonic cultures, amplifying their voices to resonate with and trouble the established heterosexuality and gender normativity of Black memory. Black feminist writer Ntozake Shange’s classic *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*

laments the desire to hear a “Black girl’s song.”<sup>78</sup> In these instances the content of a Black girl’s song expands to explore the lives of transgender women, femme gay men, butch lesbians, and so on. In other words, Black lesbians remix what is expected from a Black female voice and sing a decidedly queer song. The practice of remixing is a task that requires new epistemes. As Sylvia Wynter argues: “the re-writing” of the subject “must necessarily entail the un/writing of our present normative defining of the secular mode of the Subject.”<sup>79</sup> This book considers Black lesbian deployment and development of vernacular practices and discourses as a basis of knowledge for the revision or “un/writing” of the normative Black memory, which has been especially challenged in these texts through the representation of gender-variant or transgender characters. As Karin Knorr-Cetina says in *Epistemic Cultures*, there are cultures that “create and warrant knowledge.”<sup>80</sup> I identify the slave narrative, blues, jazz, performance, the erotic, and the spiritual to be Black vernacular sources of knowledge that are critical tools for re-remembering the past.

Epistemology is a politically relevant practice. Black queer literature represents real-world changes in the way that we know things, a shift in knowledge. I underscore fiction and imagination’s ability to assert *potential* into systems of knowledge. This is admittedly not the work of the first-hand account. However, the act of reimagining has just as much to do with reminding us that there are those who are being lost in the present, who are slipping out of memory before our eyes and at the tips of our fingers, as it does with populating the past with forgotten subjects. Reimagining is the process of taking something that has already been conceived of and recreating it with new elements, thereby infusing the past with difference. These texts rely heavily on embodied knowledge to attest to the ways that Black experience can be restaged, “heard, remembered, and understood.”<sup>81</sup> Reimagining the past gives us the ability to say now what was unsayable then. The “already said” is resurrected into a possibility that could help in reimagining the ever-unfolding present.

Black queer cultures come into being as a result of and despite violence and displacement. Recent works by Darieck Scott and Gloria González-López argue that violence is a productive site of knowledge. Scott asks readers to stop avoiding “uncomfortable questions” in order to examine Black abjection as a form of epistemology, from which he considers how “pain or discomfort” is put to “multifarious uses.”<sup>82</sup> In focusing on the point of violation, Scott argues for the “value [in] identifying with violated ancestors.”<sup>83</sup> The site of suffering is also a site of release of internalized domination. In “Epistemologies of the Wound: Anzaldúan Theories and Sociological Research on Incest in Mexican Society,” Gloria González-López describes

the importance of what she calls the collective wounds as an “epistemological location” that she identifies as a space of irresolution that, in “the midst of complex ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions,” allows transformation.<sup>84</sup> Reimagining past violences and sites of resistance has the potential to remind those of us in the present to be aware of those falling around us: falling into violence, falling into mass incarceration, falling into despair. It could help us to remember what it is about the moments of erotic pleasure and creativity that are such valuable sources of knowledge.

## Archives: Using New Epistemes, Revising Traditions

What are queer versions the Black past? If Black people living during and around the time of the diaspora were to listen to Black queer voices, what would they hear? The texts that I discuss in this volume reenvision Black poor and working-class communities through a politics of improvisation as opposed to a politics of respectability. In jazz, the improvisation solo moves with and in contradistinction to the melody. In similar ways, these texts work with and against the politics of respectability and normative gender categories to create an irresolute revision of those traditions.<sup>85</sup> They deliberately rework the beloved tropes of the neo-slave, migration, and diasporic narrative—replacing the assumed normative genders and heterosexuality associated with these genres with main characters that are queer, bodies that do not conform to their biological function, pleasures that come from unexpected places, and sexualities that eschew the homo/hetero binary.

Slavery is the door through which this analysis of expansive historiographic fiction enters. Through readings of four contemporary works about slavery, generally known as neo-slave narratives—“Louisiana, 1850” by Jewelle Gomez, “Miss Hannah’s Lesson” by LaShonda Barnett, “The Champagne Lady” by SDiane Adamz-Bogus, and the novel *The Highest Price For Passion* by Laurinda D. Brown—I consider the neo-slave narrative as a form of vernacular epistemology, which foregrounds the role of desire and pleasure in literary and historical narratives of female sexual abjection. These texts reimagine the psychosexual dynamics of the plantations, especially the sexual servitude between female slave and slave owner (who, it is too often left unsaid, *can also be female*); they expose the intimate nature of bondage and comment on racial passing as a gendered practice. These works are particularly significant given the centrality of slavery in African American literary scholarship and the lack of attention to issues of homoerotic desire in the peculiar institution. I analyze the focus on woman-to-woman sexual relationships in slavery as part of the authors’ attempts to recuperate agency

for the Black female slave. Using these short stories, I posit that representations of sexual relations between Black and white women in slavery function as a way to reimagine Black women's resistance to racial and sexual abjection. The mulatta (often depicted as "tragically" not white enough and eschewing Blackness) shows up in many of the narratives of same-sex desire represented in this volume. In the neo-slave narratives I have gathered here, the mulatta is depicted as an "undead" personage situated between the social death of slavery and liberal subjectivity.<sup>86</sup> She is a figure that represents the potential of Black femininity, yet she refuses heterosexual resolution and is transformed into a complex figure of sexual agency.

The mulatta figure also emerges in *Her* through the main character, Sunshine/Kali. In Cherry Muhanji's revision of the migration novel, the characters' embrace of irresolute genders and sexual relationships provide them with a method of resistance to abjection. *Her* also introduces the blues as an epistemological practice embodying Black queer memory, both as a queer aesthetic form and as a counterpublic space wherein Black sexuality and gender identity are reimaged through performance. Muhanji's novel constructs a blues of mobility, repetition, and improvisation that infuses bisexual, lesbian, and gender-transgressive narratives with both a Black cultural foundation and a queer predilection for boundary crossing. The novel's main female character, Sunshine, has a male alter ego named Kali. Sunshine/Kali uses the blues to enact a gender transformation in the middle of the novel and to subvert traditional expectations of the "tragic mulatta" trope. This second chapter of *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* (like the third chapter) expands on previous scholarship that has documented how African American women blues singers of the early twentieth century used the blues to express female masculinity and desire for other women.<sup>87</sup> I suggest that in Black lesbian fiction, the blues functions as an epistemological framework through which (trans)gender practices are reimaged for transfeminine as well as transmasculine people, thereby expanding the ways in which Black femininity and womanhood are imagined and understood. As a novel, *Her* is a theoretically sophisticated text in its formulation of African American migration involving multiple points of transformation. Movement happens on a number of levels as Blackness is represented as a dynamic and living cultural and political practice that is evidenced in the characters' literal and symbolic transitions across boundaries.

Throughout the texts, the characters' processes of transition are documented through performance, commenting on history through the vernacular. For example, the reinscription of the blues in a queer context in *Her* both revises the migration genre, including the traditions that form its foundations, and reinterprets the historical archive to foreground the influence of

performance in the formation of Black queer communities. The third and fourth chapters of this book also centrally locate performance as a practice of vernacular epistemologies and as a space that allows for nonbinary gender identities to be affirmed and for variant sexual desires to flourish. As Jill Dolan argues, performance “provides a place where people come, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”<sup>88</sup> However, instead of enacting what Dolan calls a “radical humanism,” these texts question Enlightenment humanism as a framework for Black queer self-fashioning.<sup>89</sup>

Sharon Bridgforth’s two published books—*the bull-jean stories* and *love conjure/blues*—as well as her currently unpublished play, *delta dandi*, are set in unspecified African American rural southern communities, resituating the blues and the juke joint as a “queer space”<sup>90</sup> in the heart of African diasporic spiritual traditions. As Bridgforth stated in our 2009 interview, she considers herself a griot (historical storyteller) illuminating and retelling familiar stories, but with the forgotten queer subject at their center. My chapter devoted to her work demonstrates the ways that the divine is embodied in her texts, marking the text’s aim to archive ancestral memory in the body of the reader/audience/performer as well as its meditation on how the written word can itself become an embodied and divinely inspired performative instrument.

In both Bridgforth’s work as a whole and in the novel *Her*, the early and mid-twentieth century are remembered respectively as times when rural and urban Black communities created counterpublic, working-class places where performing the blues meant expressing sexual and gender fluidity not only for the performers but also for the audience members.<sup>91</sup> These authors reimagine the blues space as providing a respite from the racial exploitation of industrial and agricultural labor by offering a place where Black queer people could have their own gender identities and sexualities without fear of condemnation. The blues and the spiritual work in partnership in Bridgforth’s plays and texts as interconnected epistemologies that make it possible to queerly reenvision transatlantic flow of ancestral memory.

Scottish author Jackie Kay’s 1998 novel *Trumpet* is an occasion to consider Black migration on a larger scale through the cross-Atlantic circulation of culture, specifically jazz, and its contribution to the construction of gender for diasporic Black communities. *Trumpet* is a fascinating example of the diasporic narrative, a text that explores the past, present, and future effects of the transatlantic transit and trade of African bodies. The novel’s main character is Joss Moody, a Black transgendered man born in Scotland of a white mother and an African father. The novel resists resolution; the revelation of Joss Moody’s female birth causes a scandal that rocks the world

of Moody's wife and son, disallowing the narrative to rest comfortably in normativity. *Trumpet* is set entirely in Scotland and England yet continually challenges the notion of a Black subjectivity bound to the nation-state through its use of jazz as a diasporic signifier that ties Black (queer) people together across the diaspora.

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

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

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

*The Queer Limit of Black Memory* concludes with a meditation on the effect of the dissociative process in which the Black queer is repressed in Black collective imagination. One consequence is the inability for Black

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

# SEEK THE ROOTS: AN IMMERSIVE AND INTERACTIVE ARCHIVE OF BLACK FEMINIST PRACTICE

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline . Feminist Collections : a Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources; Madison Vol. 32, Iss. 1, (Winter 2011): 17-20.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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## ABSTRACT

It's a queer thing to sit alone in a room amidst the rubber-band-bound diaries of poet warrior Audre Lorde reading scribbles toward post-mortem instructions. In 1978, four years after Lorde wrote and discarded these words, Barbara and Beverly Smith warned their fellow Black lesbian feminists not to depend on public and academic archives for their survival. Among other things Gumbs discusses the process of seeking and growing the roots of Black feminism through new media-enabled, community-accountable archival practice.

## FULL TEXT

"When I have been dead four and a half seasons, dry my words, seek the roots where they grow, down between the swelling of my bones..."

-Audre Lorde in her personal diary for 1974, archived at Spelman College

It's a queer thing to sit alone in a room amidst the rubber-band-bound diaries of poet warrior Audre Lorde reading scribbles toward post-mortem instructions. In 1974, eighteen years before she died, Audre Lorde wrote the epigraph above, a sketch that was never included in a published poem or essay, and in 2009, seventeen years after her death, I copied it down and kept it close.

It's a queer thing (and by queer I mean unlikely, magical, and against the current of the reproduction of oppression) that the work of a Black lesbian teacher mother warrior poet is even preserved in an archive on a college campus, so I take the event seriously. How does one ethically and effectively engage an archive of morbid thoughts and threatened utterances from the pens of dead Black feminists? What framework allows us to share traces of un-actualized projects, out-of-print masterpieces, and forgotten victories?

In 1978, four years after Lorde wrote and discarded these words, Barbara and Beverly Smith warned their fellow Black lesbian feminists not to depend on public and academic archives for their survival:

One thing we know as Black feminists is how important it is for us to recognize our own lives as herstory. Also as Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will ever be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now.<sup>1</sup>

And by the time these words were available to readers, the urgency of the presentism the Smith sisters demanded was cruelly validated by the horrific murders of twelve Black women, day after day and week after week, in Boston during the first three months of 1979. When I have been dead four and a half seasons, dry my words, seek the roots where they grow...

There is a queer ecology to the practice of digging for and growing from roots that are never writ "miniseries large" (à la Alex Haley), but rather are grounded in unmarked graves, circumscribed by death, burn-out, and obscurity. But we, contemporary Black feminist thinkers, farmers, grassroots greenthumbs, are queer ecologists. Consider this article an introduction to the process of seeking and growing the roots of Black feminism through new media-enabled, community-accountable archival practice.

### "Four and a Half Seasons": The Concept of Eternal Summer

In a time when the planet is preparing to stop tolerating our collectively destructive capitalist relationship to life, resources, and the future, the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind project (see [blackfeministmind.wordpress.com](http://blackfeministmind.wordpress.com)), based in Durham, North Carolina, is a specific example of how to orchestrate an intimate, profound, and living feminist praxis. Eternal Summer is an in-between season, queer to the academic time of production and symbolic of the heat and imagined freedom of the season between harvest and planting. This multimedia-enabled educational movement is an example of an ecological approach as a necessary alternative to an economic approach to the planet that reifies capitalism as a resource model and disrespects the vitality of other resources, especially spiritual and emotional resources and the wisdom of oppressed people.<sup>2</sup> Through night schools, potlucks, podcasts, Internet videos, a public-access-channel TV program, an Internet TV station, an ongoing interview process, travelling workshops, blogs, and zine publications, the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind makes published, out-of-print, archived, and previously undocumented Black feminist strategies, poems, essays, newsletters, and practices accessible to a diverse community of parents, teachers, workers, organizers, and writers.

In the tradition of Ida B. Wells, Kitchen Table Press, and radical women-of-color bloggers, we use every means necessary to make our love accessible to our wider community of comrades and kindred spirits. We are thrilled by the resonance and participation that folks around the United States and the world have found in these projects that we created out of ancestral inspiration and our own local specific necessity. When we had the "Summer of Our Lorde" and read an essay by Audre Lorde and had discussion potlucks every month, like-minded people participated through the blog and had their own gatherings in the Bay Area, New York, Chicago, and D.C., and some folks even continued with an Autumn of (Gloria) Anzaldua. The School of Our Lorde (a night school in Alexis's living room in Durham) has satellite campuses in Tuscaloosa, Chicago, New York, and Fayetteville and webinar participants as far away as the Rio Grande Valley and Cairo. Queer feminist organizers at Meem, a queer feminist organization in Beirut, Lebanon; at Fahamu, an LGBTQ organization in Nairobi, Kenya; and at the LGBTQ Shakti Center in Chennai, India, are using the multimedia educational tools and their own versions of the practices to support their amazing and specific work! Long-distance lovers all over the world also donate to Eternal Summer, mobilize resources at their schools, jobs, or organizations to hire Alexis to do workshops, lectures, or trainings, buy educational materials, donate proofreading, share connections, and give abundant advice and love.

### "Dry My Words": Preservation Toward Presence

So we dry words that were once flesh and blood and soak them like medicinal tea. We use Audre Lorde's syllabi from the Lehman Teacher's College and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in the School of Our Lorde unit on teaching and accountability; June Jordan's long-out-of-print children's books, book reviews, and speeches, in the June Jordan Saturday Survival School for families in Durham; nineteen weeks of video-blogged activities to go along with Lucilie Clifton's published poems about telling the hard stories and facing child sexual abuse, in the ShapeShifter Survival School; newspaper-clipping versions of June Jordan's love poem to Fannie Lou Hamer, published in the New York Times after the Civil Rights heroine's death, for the "Love Against Genocide" unit of the Juneteenth Freedom Academy on Love Poems; digitized Linda Tillery albums for the Eternal Summer Potluck Brunch about Black Lesbian Feminist Organizing in the 1970s; podcast activities with high-school-aged women on Sapphire's out-of-print book of poems *Meditations on the Rainbow*. We dry found words, steep and drink and share them like tea, like their healing powers could purify and renew us from the inside out. And they do.

### "Seek the Roots": An Intellectual Imperative

The availability of information about the writing, teaching, correspondence, and activism of Black feminist literary figures that forms the core of the Eternal Summer canon is thanks to the queer (and by queer I mean unlikely, magical, etc.) practice of archiving the work of some specifically recognized and broadly published Black women, despite the predictions of the Smith sisters. In particular, the Dionne Brand Papers in the National Archives of Canada, in Ottawa; the Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara Papers at the Spelman College Archives in Atlanta, Georgia; the Lucilie Clifton, Thulani Davis and Broadside Press, and Alice Walker Papers at the Emory University

Manuscript and Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia; the Cheryl Clarke Papers at the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives at the Schomburg Center at the New York Public Library; the Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and African Ancestral Papers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York; and the June Jordan Papers at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have been crucial to my own access to unpublished and historical information.

I consider it the least we can do, those of us with access to the time and resources to spend days and weeks in established archives reading letter after note after journal after manuscript of Black feminist writers who have institutional archival space; those of us who spend their dollars on out-of-print, dog-eared Black feminist books sold on eBay by the nephew of the Black feminist bibliophile we never heard of; those of us with the audacity and connections to track Black feminist elders down and ask them how they did it and what they think; those of us reflecting every day on what we mean by queer and intersection, and by power, faith, and future. It is the least we can do to honor the instructions of Audre Lorde, seek the roots, to heed the admonitions of the Smith sisters to document ourselves now, in ways that include, affirm, and activate our whole communities. The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist mind is part of a biodiverse ecology of Black feminist interactive and immersive archival projects, root sources, and life-cycle participants.

#### "Where They Grow": Beyond Survival

In the tradition of Black feminists who were not content to wait for the reliability of historicity or institutionally validated importance, contemporary Black feminists are using the moment-to-moment updatable technology of blogs, interwoven with other forms of new media and creative and community-building educational events, to create an experiential archive of Black feminist practice.

In other words, the roots grow here at [mobilehomecoming.org](http://mobilehomecoming.org), an experiential archive that spreads interviews of queer Black elders via Internet video toward a series of nationwide replay events that teach the everyday practices of softball, healing circles, jam sessions, literary salons, and rent parties as community-building process.

The roots grow through the examples of immersive Black feminist archival work online, which include the documentary work of Black feminist scholars to chart their under-represented research topics even while they are researching their dissertations, such as [mississippiappendectomy.wordpress.com](http://mississippiappendectomy.wordpress.com), an online archive where Serena Sebring, a Ph.D. student in sociology at Duke University, compiles information about women of color and coercive sterilization in the United States as she finds it.

The roots grow through [nunezdaughter.wordpress.com](http://nunezdaughter.wordpress.com), where a blogger and Black feminist Ph.D. candidate who goes by the name Kismet articulates and demonstrates her theory of history and social justice. The roots grow through [elleabd.blogspot.com](http://elleabd.blogspot.com), where Elle, a labor historian, self-identified southern sistorian who was honorably named "history provost of historical revolution" by fellow Black feminist blogger Black Amazon, offers historical insight based on the lives and resistance of working Black women in the United States to support an ongoing narrative about labor, maternity, resistance, and justice. The roots grow through <http://grou.ps/quirkyblackgirls>, a self-contained social network coordinated by Moya Bailey and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, where quotations from historical Black feminist texts, archival letters, and poems form the root of weekly inspirational messages and discussions.

The roots grow through [superhussy.com](http://superhussy.com), where Black feminist single mother Aeisha Turman creates content designed to intervene in the conversation about Black women, sexuality, and self-esteem. They grow through [problemchylde.wordpress.com](http://problemchylde.wordpress.com), where a Black feminist lawyer provides poetic and practical insight on injustices faced by Black women and girls. And they certainly grow through the Crunk Feminist Collective ([crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com](http://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com)), a group blog inspired by the publishing emphasis of the 1970s Black feminist lesbian socialist Combahee River Collective, which consists of a group of self-identified "hip-hop generation feminists" who provide immediate and savvy critique on the complicated forms of oppression that hip-hop generation feminists face.

Although several of the bloggers who coordinate and generate content for the above sites have connections to academic institutions, the activity of these blogs speaks to the rejection of an academic timeline for the

distribution of information that has been too long repressed, covered over, and ignored, and which the authors of these blogs find urgently valuable for the ongoing organizing and daily lives of the communities to which they are accountable. For these reasons, some of the most productive and active new media archivists online are Black feminists who know firsthand about the ugliest faces of oppression in our times. We are INS raid survivors, single mothers, navigators of poverty and ableism, and survivors of sexual violence, and we are warriors.

It follows then, that the online archive of Black feminist practice not only is rich in information, but also transforms information into critical and visionary contexts for action. For example, Black Amazon, aptly named blog persona of intellectual and performer Sydette Harry, continues the struggle of Black feminists in the 1970s who spoke out against the marginalization of women of color in the feminist media (a trend that continues in the feminist blogosphere) and the continued misrepresentation of women of color in popular media more generally, generating almost daily critique and insight at *Having Read the Fine Print...* ([guyaneseterror.blogspot.com](http://guyaneseterror.blogspot.com)), while women's studies doctoral student Renina uses her blog *Model Minority* ([newmodelminority.com](http://newmodelminority.com)) to provide Black feminist insight on hip-hop culture and evidence for her visionary mantra that "Black girls are from the future."

New media forms of Black feminist archival practice are now being engaged by multiple generations of Black feminist scholars and activists, such as public intellectuals Melissa Harris-Lacewell ([princetonprofs.blogspot.com](http://princetonprofs.blogspot.com)) and Duchess Harris ([sisterscholar.com](http://sisterscholar.com)) and, by the time this article is published, *The Feminist Wire* ([www.thefeministwire.com](http://www.thefeministwire.com)), a collaborative project featuring a diverse team of writers coordinated by the intergenerational Black feminist and womanist duo Hortense Spillers and Tamara Lomax, and even on Twitter by Black feminist historian Treva Lindsey who tweets at [@divafeminist](https://twitter.com/divafeminist).

This set of examples, which could also be called a resource list for any scholar wanting on-the-pulse information about the directions and directives of contemporary Black feminists, is not merely the online life of traditional academic work or a supplement to the "real" research practice highlighted by peer-reviewed journals and in monographs. It is evidence of a crucial strategy of survival: the transformation of information and communication into access, power, community, and visionary practice.

## Footnote

### Notes

1. "'I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand': Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978" in *Conditions 4*, *The Conditions Collective*, 1978.
2. For more on an ecological approach, see "this is what it sounds like (an ecological approach)," in *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8.3, Summer 2010 ([www.barnard.edu/sfonline/polyphonic/gumbs\\_01.htm](http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/polyphonic/gumbs_01.htm)).

## AuthorAffiliation

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## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Feminism; Poets; Literary criticism; Blacks; Gays & lesbians
<b>People:</b>	Lorde, Audre
<b>Publication title:</b>	Feminist Collections: a Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources; Madison
<b>Volume:</b>	32
<b>Issue:</b>	1

<b>Pages:</b>	17-20
<b>Number of pages:</b>	4
<b>Publication year:</b>	2011
<b>Publication date:</b>	Winter 2011
<b>Section:</b>	FEMINIST ARCHIVES
<b>Publisher:</b>	University of Wisconsin -- Madison
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Madison
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Madison
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Women's Studies
<b>ISSN:</b>	07427441
<b>Source type:</b>	Scholarly Journals
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	Commentary
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	870749694
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://access.library.miami.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/870749694?accountid=14585">http://access.library.miami.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/870749694?accountid=14585</a>
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<b>Last updated:</b>	2011-11-10
<b>Database:</b>	GenderWatch

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## Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind: A Queer Ecological Approach to the Archive

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

“One thing we know as Black feminists is how important it is for us to recognize our own lives as herstory. Also as Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will *ever* be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now.” -Barbara and Beverly Smith

“I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand”: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978 in *Conditions 4*

Survive long enough. One way to understand the impetus of the Black feminist independent publishing movement from the late 1970s to the early 1990s in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom is as a safeguard against the predicted failure of the archive to document the lives and political work of Black feminists. And while important community, public, and university-based archives prioritize diverse approaches to feminist history issues of funding, access and representation remain. Ultimately, documenting Black feminism *is* activism.

The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is inspired by the mandate of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Black feminists to end the interlocking oppressions of capitalism, racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy and all related oppressions and to enact, respect and celebrate a meaning of life that teaches that all life is interdependent.<sup>1</sup> It is a “by every means necessary” educational approach, accountable to the community, that uses potlucks, partnerships with community organizations, social media networks, podcasts, buttons, t-shirts, videos, public access TV and sidewalk chalk to create spaces for conversations about how critical engagement with the legacy of Black feminism can inform a plethora of social movements and interested learners in the present and beyond.

Emphasizing “summer” as a queer time and space imagined as outside of the academic calendar and the strictures of “school,” this article elaborates on the ecological approach that the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind takes to growing the presence, impact and collective memory of Black Feminism in the progressive and popular consciousness. The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is invented and reinvented by people without formal training in library science (though we are excited that some participants are in library science school right now!). Therefore, this engagement, which is meant to converse with other community archivists and expand

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1 Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind website: <http://blackfeministmind.wordpress.com/>

the meaning of the activity of archiving by creating a record through letters to some of the living and deceased Black feminist activists whose work survives in the *Eternal Summer*, is a description of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* as an educational project, and a treatise about our ecological approach.

*Dear Audre,*<sup>2</sup>

The *Summer of Our Lorde* was an experiment borne of my initiation in the implications of your work, my critique of exclusively academic, and therefore canonized, conversations about knowledge production, and a desire to talk about the depth of your work with people who treasure your words for their own excessive, drastic and desirable reasons. For one summer, for three months, I set up potluck gatherings in partnership with three different organizations:

- UBUNTU-a women of color survivor led coalition to end gendered violence and create sustaining transformative love founded in Durham, NC, in the midst of the Duke Lacrosse Rape Case
- SpiritHouse- an arts based cultural activism organization organizing in Durham, NC to empower those most impacted by the prison industrial complex
- Southerners on New Ground a regional queer liberation organization rooted in working class communities and communities of color which was headquartered in Durham, NC, at the time and is now based in Atlanta, GA

People gathered to read three of your essays. Who knew that an integrated reading practice would encourage people to bring their best minds and their best food, to engage your words as if they could save their lives and transform their communities? Maybe you knew that already from your participation in the Black Feminist Retreats that the Combahee River Collective organized in the 1970s. The phrase from your 1983 essay “Black Women, Hatred and Anger” that “we can learn to mother ourselves” takes on a life of its own, showing up as a resource for a new approach to racial justice, food justice, economic justice, immigration rights, and queer liberation discussions in this city and everywhere that people read blogs. Maybe you could have predicted that, knowing how portable poetry is, how intimately and promiscuously it travels from our lips to where it needs to go.

And maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise that in a university/plantation town,

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2 Audre Lorde, self-identified Black lesbian feminist poet warrior and mother was one of the most acclaimed poets of the late 20th century and an iconic figure in the second wave feminist movement and the Black lesbian feminist movement. She was also an educator trained in library science at Columbia University. Her analyses of difference and power laid the groundwork for third wave feminist critique and has inspired many queer people of color. The Audre Lorde Project, a queer and trans people of color organization in New York and the ALORDE collective, a Black lesbian health collective in Detroit, are two manifestations of her ongoing legacy. Audre Lorde died of cancer in 1992.

no one would want the summer to end. But they didn't. After August, people in the grocery store, in the street, and in the middle of a meeting about something else would ask, when is the next gathering? When? When? It became clear that summer was not over, and that you, "our Lorde," had a sacred role in the lives of our community. You became our Lorde of an awakened need and a renewed faith in the practice of gathering, breaking bread and turning over words in our open mouths and our outstretched hands. The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind potluck series was born from uplifting texts by Claudia Jones, the black communist feminist, from Octavia Butler, the black feminist prophet, from the very same Combahee River Collective.

I wonder what ideas you thought would emerge in your name. I wonder how you feel about all of this, if you had hints of it while you were living your life everyday and sharing it like a sacred text, and rewriting it like a palimpsest. People believe in you, you know. Your words register beyond the intellectual. Queer Black Sunday school, a place to study the sacred texts of your letters to Joseph Beam, and eventually the School of Our Lorde, a night school in your name, allows people who follow you as poets, teachers, activists and publishers to embrace a collaborative methodology, to learn from your victories and your mistakes.

When you used to write letters reflecting on the Black Feminist Retreats to Cheryl Clarke to redistribute you would enclose money for the postage and photocopies that you knew it took to keep the conversation going. I wonder what you would think now of our multimediated community of donors and participants, of the School of Our Lorde webinars and social-network facilitated satellite campuses. I wonder if you imagined that so many people would follow your example, sending small amounts of money towards a collective vision. In a now famous poem that you enclosed "for all of us" in one of your letters to the Black Feminist Retreat participants through Cheryl, you pointed out that "we were never meant to survive." I saw that letter in the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive in the Schomburg Library in New York where Cheryl Clarke, still active, has donated her papers. In this instant and this triumph. I wonder what you would say if you could see the specific ways that your work and the work of other Black feminist activists survives. This instant and this triumph. I ultimately believe that you are smirking and instigating this intimate manifestation everyday.

Love,  
Lex

## **I. Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind**

The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is based in, accountable to, and in love with Durham, North Carolina, a post-industrial southern city in a state with a history of plantation slavery, a contemporary practice of exploiting and targeting migrant workers. Something is happening here that has been happening for too long. Something new is also happening here.

Durham, as a city, has a large Black working class population, a growing Latino population and also a history of Black wealth as defined in the destructive capitalist sense and also as defined in the subversive sense that Nikki Giovanni proposes when she says “Black love is Black wealth.”<sup>3</sup> Durham is also a university city with a history of plantation slavery and migrant exploitation. Although the content of the labor required by the university is for the most part different in content from the labor of the plantations, with the most marked similarities being the domestic facilities and grounds-keeping labor performed by non-unionized workers, the similarities in form between the university and the plantation system as organizing structures, and the fact that local Durham residents refer to Duke University, the largest employer in the city as “the plantation” tells an important story about the reproduction of oppression in the New South iteration of Durham, North Carolina. The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is accountable to these local conditions and seeks to fortify the loving and dynamic relationship between contemporary visionaries and the legacy of Black feminist activism, creativity and thought, specifically through the creation of ritual educational spaces that invite the participation of Black feminist ancestors.

The ground that nurtures the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind’s perpetual growth and expression through media, educational interactions and interactive research is a transformative activist and organizing community, watered in particular by the women of color, sex workers, survivors of sexual violence, queer and gender queer people and allies who created UBUNTU, a coalition dedicated to ending all gendered violence through the intentional creation of a communal practice of sustaining transformative love.<sup>4</sup> It is also supported by a network of collectives, organizations, and projects committed to racial and economic justice, abolishing the prison industrial complex, growing community-raised healthy food, an intersectional approach to queer liberation, and the creation of a people’s Durham led by working class women of color. The premise of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind and its “by every means necessary” approach is the belief that Black feminist educators, community organizers, writers, and scholars are evidence of a spiritual reality, a revised meaning of life that not only challenges, but also implies an alternative to the deadliness of capitalism.

The Eternal Summer riffs on and points out global warming, peak oil, and the cumulative friction of a global capitalist machine that expends life for profit as evidence that a different meaning of life is necessary now. The good news, or gospel, of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is that **BLACK FEMINISM LIVES** as a spiritual practice, a political legacy and a critical intersectional possibility that people of all backgrounds and experiences have the opportunity to be transformed by when they get with it.

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3 Nikki Giovanni, “Nikki-Rosa” from *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*, 1968.

4 UBUNTU is named for an African concept emphasizing the importance of relationships, essentially translated as “I am what I am because of who we all are.”

The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is revolutionary because it models what is possible in community as transformation. In much the way that the very existence of maroon communities where Africans who had escaped slavery in the Caribbean and Latin America was an alternative space of Black freedom that inspired enslaved Africans trapped on plantations to rise up and rebel, the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind provides loving transformative spaces and technologies sustained by the brilliance of the oppressed genius communities to which we are accountable. The *Eternal Summer* hopes to inspire those working for necessary change within the non-profit industrial complex to remember that we do not need to wait for or pander to foundation funding or a corporately validated organizational structure to create what we need. The most radical danger is here in the already existing genius of oppressed people, constrained by a system that devalues that genius.

We believe that all of that brilliance is available under the right circumstances. Or as Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter says “the ceremony must be found.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore time is the most valued resource in the ecology of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind. Ancestral time, time as community, intentional time, and time across space are what make the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind eternal. Our time together is sacred. “We were never meant to survive.”<sup>6</sup>

*Ancestral Time:* This means both setting intentional time for ancestor attention *and* an understanding of time that acknowledges the presence of all the energy that ever has been. I wake up at five o'clock in the morning, when no one else is interested in speaking to me, specifically to listen for what long noticed or newly announced ancestors will demand, suggest or make known. Kifu Faruq, Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind participant, sustainer and community food justice worker, calls this practice being present to the “dream download.” These ancestors often bring specific instructions, exciting possibilities, and new details for how all of our dreams are possible. This practice provides a miraculous clarity to an eternal day.

*Time as Community:* This means creating sacred and regular times to gather as community and also that our connections and accountability to each other is what makes our brilliance influential and eternal. Along with the energy of our ancestors, the loving energy of the community, the way we bring our whole selves into the room with a spirit of play, and desired intimacy for transformation is another key resource of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind. This is what makes it summer, the heat (sometimes literal) of our bodies in the space.

The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is eternal because it is inter-generational. We are learning to create child-inclusive, parent-supportive spaces. We have consistent participation from elders and babies who remind us to improvise and be present.

5 'The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism' *Boundary II*, 12:3 & 13:1, (Spring/Fall 1984): 19-70.

6 Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival” *The Black Unicorn*, 1978, 31.

The participants own and fund the projects in many ways. Participation itself is the most valuable contribution. Participants and supporters also donate food, shoe racks and coat racks, tea and childcare, reiki sessions, photocopies and art supplies, advice, money (literally enough to sustain the rent and utilities of the Inspiration Station where I already lived), documenting and spreading the word.<sup>7</sup> The ecology of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is ever evolving and folks self-identify their contributions. Many of the most important parts of our interactions are non-verbal. We breathe the presence of our ancestors. They join us in celebration and in warning.

The Eternal Summer process is an ongoing lesson in what is and is not sustainable. Tobacco, the plantation crop that was once the economic base of our city was replaced by gentrified post-tobacco processing plant lofts, and appropriated and commodified knowledge and culture for sale. Durham is a place where we trained ourselves to grow a plant that we cannot eat in order to transform each other into cancer and then built the premier cancer treatment center without functionally shifting the plantation economy of the region. There is much unlearning to do here. The Eternal Summer, a tiny grassroots educational project literally next to a huge university, is an experiment in what nourishment might feel like. We therefore find it important not to get carried away from our routes by trends in the funding world and we take care to make sure that our engagement with national and international contexts is grounded in our local timelines and processes. This is another way of staying present. I am often reminded of this in direct, cosmic, physical and spiritual ways.

*Time Across Space:* We understand our work here as intimately related to a transformation happening at the level of the planet. Our DIY multi-media work through podcasts, a nationally syndicated public access TV presence, online videos, the School of Our Lorde webinars and social networking sites are designed to be intimate, portable space, useful for *and transformed by* communities that are inspired by our work in Durham and accountable to their own local conditions. (And by DIY we mean for real do-it-yourself. There has been no purchase of software for media creation so far.)

In the tradition of Ida B. Wells, Kitchen Table Press, and radical women of color bloggers, we use every means necessary to make our love accessible to our wider community of comrades and kindred spirits. We are thrilled by the resonance and participation that folks around the United States and world have found in these projects that we created out of ancestral inspiration and our own local specific necessity. When we had the “Summer of Our Lorde” and read an essay by Audre Lorde and had discussion potlucks every month, like-minded people participated through the blog and had their own gatherings in the Bay Area, New York, Chicago and DC and some folks even continued with an Autumn of (Gloria) Anzaldúa. The School of Our Lorde (a night school in my living room in Durham) has satellite campuses in Tuscaloosa,

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7 The Inspiration Station is a residential rental in the first intentionally integrated neighborhood in Durham, NC, around the corner from the childhood home of Black feminist Pauli Murray.

Chicago, New York, and Fayetteville, NC, and webinar participants as far away as the Rio Grande Valley and Cairo. Queer feminist organizers in Beirut, Lebanon (Meem); Nairobi, Kenya (Fahamu) and Chennai, India (the Shakti Center) are using the multimedia educational tools and versions of the practices to support their own amazing and specific work! Long distance lovers all over the world also donate to Eternal Summer, mobilize resources at their school, job, or organization to hire me to do a workshop, lecture or training, buy educational materials, donate proofreading, share connections, and give abundant advice, and love.

*Dear June,*<sup>8</sup>

We just finished the first unit of the Juneteenth Freedom Academy on the methodology of Angry Letters and Protest Poems that you practiced so passionately, so brilliantly, sometimes so recklessly. I had more anger than I knew about, I was not fully prepared for how sharp anger can be, how intentional we have to be so that the anger is released instead of settling in our cells like cancer, how careful we have to be that our anger unleashed does not slice the opening throats of our comrades. The next unit is about Palestine, about your insistence on the liberation of Palestine, and your campaign to make the impact of U.S. support for Israeli imperialism against Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon visible. I am excited that so many people are ready to gather in your name. That your example can inspire people to think about solidarity with Palestinian women, and Arab women in general in this time of intense anti-Arab racism as a black feminist act, with a history, your specific legacy.

The June Jordan Saturday Survival School for families in Durham was like you, present, intense, sometimes unpredictable, but very, very clear. Queer families of color gathered to read all of your children's books and present about them to each other. They even drew a rotating mural that is still in the hallway of the Inspiration Station. This mural illustrates their visual interpretations of the theories about children's literature that you expressed in your talk at Berkeley about "The Creative Spirit" and children's literature, which I found at the Schlesinger archive, and your talk at the Howard Writer's Conference in 1971 called "Towards a Survival Literature for Afrikan Children," which Lucille Clifton saved. She was on the same panel, and it ended up in her boxes of papers that are housed at Emory University's Manuscript and Rare Book Library. And listen to how these relationships remake themselves across time: it turns out that in every family that participated in the June Jordan Saturday Survival School, at least one adult was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Lucille Clifton, who kept your essay, was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse too, and as you know, she wrote about

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8 June Jordan was a self-identified bisexual Black feminist poet essayist and teacher. She was the author of several books for children, young people and adults and was the founder of the Poetry of the People curriculum at UC Berkeley. She was also a noted peace activist in solidarity with women in Palestine and Nicaragua.

it in her poetry, and like you, she wrote brave children's books, the Everett Anderson Series that spoke about the problems that children face and their solutions in a brave, nuanced and affirming way. I know you weren't into ALL of Lucille's children's books, because I've read your reviews in the *New York Times*, but the Everett Anderson books seem to really take on the "Survival Literature" model you proposed. And your idea of survival and your connection of that term to environmental accountability COMPLETELY informs the ecological approach of *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind*. And because you were brave enough to write about your experience of physical abuse in *Soldier*, and because Lucille Clifton was brave enough to write about surviving sexual abuse from her father we are now in the midst of the Lucille Clifton ShapeShifter Survival School, an intergenerational process informed by the work of organizations including Generation Five, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and projects like the Atlanta Transformative Justice Collaborative where we are using poetry and storytelling to look at and hopefully end cycles of physical and sexual child abuse in our families and communities, and to end gendered violence period.

Look at what your bravery has made possible. Thank you for speaking your truth.  
 Love always,  
 Lex

## II. An Ecological Approach: A Treatise

In a time when the planet is preparing to stop tolerating our collectively destructive relationship to life resources and the future, the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is a specific example of how to orchestrate an intimate, influential, profound and living feminist praxis. What the project itself exemplifies is an ecological approach based on the principles that: we have what we need (each other); everything is useful, everyone is priceless; we are part of a larger environment that we can relate to symbiotically or destructively; our ecology includes spiritual, physical, practical, social, emotional, technological and intellectual resources.

We offer an ecological approach as a necessary alternative to an economic approach to the planet that reifies capitalism as a resource model, and disrespects the vitality of other resources, especially spiritual and emotional resources and the wisdom of oppressed people. This approach is very much informed by an approach called organic pragmatism wherein participants co-design curriculum and programming, developed and practiced by SpiritHouse, a Durham-based social justice arts organization.<sup>9</sup>

*An ecological approach is beautiful.* It matters whether we face each other in a circle or stand shoulder to shoulder in a line. Spiritual leader, scholar and transnational feminist activist Jacqui Alexander teaches that the spirit responds to an aesthetic. Three-year old spiritual teacher and gender queer baby Jibs (an *Eternal Summer* participant), practices

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9 For more about SpiritHouse see [www.spirithouse-nc.org](http://www.spirithouse-nc.org)

this truth by ritually granting each person in our circle a hug and a kiss at transitional moments in our gatherings. We understand the way we organize ourselves as a creative process, with shapes, visuals, and rhythmic and sonic resonances. In other words, any structure is an expression of an aesthetic that may or may not serve our vision, invite our ancestors or allow energy to flow. An ecological approach means being artists with our lives, our relationships and our organizing such that energy and inspiration move through us. What this looks like, feels like, sounds like, will be different in particular areas of our shared environment and will evolve.

*An ecological approach is accountable.* Because we know that we need each other, and that everything is useful and everyone is priceless, an ecological approach must be accountable to communities and individuals in specific ways.

*Account (a story):* In order to be accountable, it is key to create safe, sacred, informal and regular spaces for the people we are accountable to share their stories or *give an account* of their experiences, visions and insights. People may give accounts through food preparation, song, text messages, body language, showing up or not showing up. The forms that we create and listen for participation must be as multiple as we are.

*Account (a reckoning of resources):* Accountability also means knowing that the people own the project. In an educational project it means remembering that all knowledge belongs to the people. In an activist project it means remembering that the power for transformation lives inside the people. In a practical sense it means the project is owned, supported, co-created by, and transparent with the community it nurtures and grows within. This is very different from giving an account (a.k.a. a grant report) to an outside funding source. The life source of a transformative community project is obviously that same transformative community, ancestors included. A funding source that sees itself as separate can disrupt our relationship to our life source. However when the viability of a project depends on the people activating resources, literally feeding each other, looking for ways to mobilize or siphon resources from their jobs, supporting the project with money that is in no way disposable, the project has to be accountable. We will not sustain a project that we do not see as nourishing in our everyday lives.

Accountability activates us.

*An ecological approach is reflective.* This means studying the herstories in which we are grounded, and by which we are inspired. And also means cultivating a loving practice of self-criticism that remembers that our relationship to the planet is in need of transformation. As poets Alixa and Naima of Climbing Poetree remind us, “raindrops let go, become the ocean.”<sup>10</sup> We are mostly water, so is the planet. The world will only transform to the extent that we ourselves transform. This applies individually to each of us and also to what we create collectively. Our organizations, projects, and initia-

tives are only transformative if they transform. So we honor our vision of a radically different world when we let go of ego and organizational ownership and embrace our purpose in relationship to something much greater than ourselves. Transformation means letting go of who we thought we were, facing painful experiences and our own practices that harm each other. This will almost definitely involve tears.

*An ecological approach means staying rooted.* If we are accountable to and interdependent with our community as an environment, we must also acknowledge that we have the capability to disrupt or harm our eco-system with behaviors that forget or disrespect our interconnection. This means staying, even when it is hard, and transforming our relationships instead of pretending that we can sever them. We cannot live without each other; our connections persist even across death.

*An ecological approach is long-term.* The intentional practice of growing a vision for a lovingly transformational way of life in an economic system that seeks to make our lives and love unthinkable feels ambitious and risky. It is actually as simple as remembering who we are, what life is, and acting accordingly, for the rest of our lives...and with an intergenerationally accountable relationship to the future with us always. Revealing the world we need and deserve within the world we have is an everyday practice of unlearning what we think we know and becoming present to how the miraculous future is already evident here.

# SX

**small axe** a caribbean journal of criticism

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The Small Axe Project consists of this: to participate both in the renewal of practices of intellectual criticism in the Caribbean and in the expansion/revision of the horizons of such criticism. We acknowledge of course a tradition of social, political, and cultural criticism in and about the regional/diasporic Caribbean. We want to honor that tradition but also to argue with it, because in our view it is in and through such argument that a tradition renews itself, that it carries on its quarrel with the generations of itself: retaining/revising the boundaries of its identity, sustaining/altering the shape of its self-image, defending/resisting its conceptions of history and community. It seems to us that many of the conceptions that guided the formation of our Caribbean modernities—conceptions of class, gender, nation, culture, race, for example, as well as conceptions of sovereignty, development, democracy, and so on—are in need of substantial rethinking. What we aim to do in our journal is to provide a forum for such rethinking. We aim to enable an informed and sustained debate about the present we inhabit, its political and cultural contours, its historical conditions and global context, and the critical languages in which change can be thought and alternatives reimagined. Such a debate we would insist is not the prerogative of any single genre, and therefore we invite fiction as well as nonfiction, poetry, interviews, visual art, and reviews.

This issue of *Small Axe* is dedicated to the memory of Aimé Césaire (26 June 1913—17 April 2008), whose luminous writing, whose poetic presence, whose example of the life of passionate political engagement will remain a precious inheritance for Antillean generations to come.

# SX

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# Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory

David Scott

A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone . . .

|

Many years ago I had the privilege of working at the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, doing some very preliminary work on the documents being assembled to form the basis of the Caribbean volumes of the papers.<sup>1</sup> I was then a graduate student just back from nearly two years of historical and ethnographic research in Sri Lanka—in the middle, so to say, of another life, a long *détour* through an island postcolonial state imaginatively constituted (unlike the Caribbean) through a surfeit of memory.<sup>2</sup> (Indeed, this contrast between the seeming *excess*

1. So far a total of ten volumes of the papers have been published by the University of California Press: seven volumes (1–7) devoted to the American series, two (9–10) to the African series (volume 8 is still in production), and a volume to mark the Garvey Centenary in 1987 (*Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*). A total of five volumes will be devoted to the Caribbean series: three volumes on the Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean (excluding Jamaica) and two volumes dealing exclusively with Jamaica. For a sense of the scope of the project, visit its Web site at: <http://www.international.ucla.edu/africa/mgpp/>.
2. That detour produced my book *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). In a very instructive essay, written against the background of his participation in the famous Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) conference in Kingston, Jamaica, 3–9 January 1971, the Sri Lankan novelist James Goonewardene has reflected on this contrast between Sri Lanka and the Caribbean—see his “Nationalism and the Writer in Sri Lanka and the West Indies,” *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): 12–17. Inspired by Kamau Brathwaite’s “Timehri” (*Savacou*, no. 2 [September 1970]: 35–44), Goonewardene contrasts the disillusioned sense of rootlessness that stems from an “absence of ruins” (the title, memorably, of Orlando Patterson’s 1967 novel) with the situation in Sri Lanka where “there are nearly two thousand five hundred years of history from which to dig up our roots” (“Nationalism and the

of memory in Sri Lanka and its seeming *dearth* in the Caribbean has been a long-germinating seed for me.) Robert Hill, the founder and editor-in-chief of the Garvey project, was (I hope he won't mind my saying so after all these years) a most exacting taskmaster; but there was something fecund and enriching going on in the ordinary, daily round of activity in those offices at Kinsey Hall where the project was housed, something rarely-if-ever explicitly theorized, but something I later came to think about in terms of the idea of an *archaeology* of black memory (I first elaborated this idea in the preface to my interview with Hill).<sup>3</sup> I gradually came to realize that embedded in the seemingly quotidian construction of this archive of the mass movement founded and led by Marcus Garvey—its events and institutions and rituals and personalities and correspondence—there was an activity of thinking and imagination that opened out vast possibilities not just of memory but of *counter*-memory: the moral idiom and semiotic registers of remembering against the grain of the history of New World black deracination, subjection, and exclusion. And consequently this activity suggested to me a relation between the idea of an archive, the modalities of memory, the problem of a tradition, and practices of criticism.<sup>4</sup>

One way of approaching criticism is to think of it as a dimension of a community's mode of remembering, an exercise, literally and metaphorically, of *re*-remembering, of putting back together aspects of our common life so as to make visible what has been obscured, what has been excluded, what has been forgotten. I do not mean to suggest by this, however, that criticism's relation to memory is an antiquarian one. Hardly, memory is always memory-in-the-present: the exercise of recovery of the past is always at once an exercise in its re-description, an exercise in arguing with the past, negotiating it, a persistent exercise in the questioning and re-positioning of the assumptions that are taken to constitute that common life. Memory seems to me the distinctive temporal idiom of tradition. And if criticism is a mode of re-remembering, then naturally it will depend upon the assembly and re-assembly of the sources that make memory possible, that keep alive the events and figures, the sensibilities and mentalities, the knowledges and rationalities, that have been part of shaping and reshaping the traditions of who we are. And this practice of recovery in turn will depend upon the construction of an archive, and the distinctive labor, therefore, of an archaeologist.

An archive, to be sure, is a domain of positivity, of pure materiality. Without the impulse to collect, to order and classify—without the endless compilation and meticulous registration

Writer," 14). If in the one instance the sense of pastlessness has led to a fervent search for a rooted identity, in the other "the plethora of experiences and traditions from which to choose" is precisely the problem (Ibid.).

3. See the preface to David Scott, "The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A. Hill," *Small Axe*, no. 4 (September 1998): 80–84. In the interview itself, Hill gives a fascinating account of the paths by which his Garvey project came into being. In this and the following paragraph I paraphrase several passages from this preface.
4. Much the same could be said of the other two archives Robert Hill has been assembling, the Rastafari archive (that has already yielded quite new ways of thinking about the textual sources of Rastafari theology) and of course the C. L. R. James archive (from which there is much to expect).

of fragments and details (clippings, images, jottings), their assignment to complex lists and inventories, their organization and amalgamation into files and folders, their consignment to cabinets and hard drives—without this impulse to collect, there would be no archive. Collecting therefore is the indispensable, elementary labor of the archaeologist.<sup>5</sup> But the archive has also to be thought of as having another dimension, a more abstract and, so to speak, *meta*-dimension, that is crucial to its identity and function. In the well-known chapter of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* entitled “The Historical A Priori and the Archive,” Michel Foucault challenged us to consider the archive as something held less in museological apparatuses, than in language, in discourse; the archive, he suggested, is more than a collection of materials, more than “the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, an archive should also be understood at the level of a discursive condition of *possible* statements of knowledge, at the level of a *generative* discursive system that governs and regulates the production and appearance of statements—what can and cannot be said. An archive therefore is an implicit and constitutive part of the epistemic background of *any* knowledge, the dense network of allusions, events, concepts, images, stories, figures, personalities, that inhabit the sub-terrain of statements, animating them, giving them sense as well as force. It follows, consequently, that to fully understand a statement (a document, say, a narrative) it is not sufficient to attend to the level of the statement alone; it is necessary to be acquainted with the archive in which the statement is located. And because the archive is not in any simple way already *there* waiting to be read, it has at once to be recovered and described in order to be *put* to critical use. And this is the work of the archaeologist. The archaeologist recovers/describes the archive, and in so doing, participates in the construction of what might be called an *institution of memory* and an *idiom of remembering*.<sup>7</sup>

Anyone who has ever worked at the Garvey project for any length of time will tell you that Robert Hill’s relationship to the documents that constitute the archive he has built up now

5. I remember a distinguished Jamaican professor teaching at an Ivy League university saying to me, in a thoroughly disparaging tone, that Robert Hill is a “collector” (meaning, of course, a *mere* collector). Indeed, he *is* a collector, but what this professor overlooked is that “collecting,” as Hill has been involved in it, is at once an art and a mode of intelligibility. Think of the work now being done on Walter Benjamin’s obsession with collecting. See Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Walter Benjamin’s Archive: Image, Texts, Signs* (New York: Verso, 2007).
6. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 128–29.
7. There is now a growing body of work on the question of the archive. A number of critics even speak of an “archival turn.” Some of this work has of course grown out of the postcolonial critique of historiography. See, for example, Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), and Nicholas Dirks, “Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History,” in Brian Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 47–65. For a broader sampling,

over more than three decades is an unusually intimate one. Many are the stories I heard, while working at the project, of documents becoming detached from their identifying coversheets and straying from their assigned place in the elaborate system of files, and Hill having to be consulted as to their correct location. Unfailingly, he would be able, unaided, not only to correctly identify the document in question but to provide an account of its internal history and external connections, an inventory of the specific activities of Garvey or his associates or their detractors to which it pointed, and a genealogy of the various authorities whose annotations and deletions and comments crowd its margins in a sometimes barely legible scrawl. And the reason, as I began to see only years later, is not simply that these are all documents he has personally tracked down, one after the other, and brought together (though there *is* that too); it is rather that *in doing so* he has developed a distinctive relation to—I should more properly say *sensibility* toward—the very idea of an archive. Documentary records, for Hill, do not have a *merely* instrumental validity; they are not *simply* means to an ulterior end; they are not *just* empirical windows, or data, through which a separable and more real past is glimpsed. Rather, they are for him, above all, a fundamental discursive *reality* in their own right. The documentary records of the Garvey movement have, for Hill, their own structured densities and volume, their own semiotic complexes and patterned voices, their own internal sutures and interconnections and conundrums and paradoxes; in short, their own quasi-autonomous registers of intelligibility that demand, correspondingly, the building up of distinctive strategies of research and distinctive disciplines of reading. And *this* form of understanding is what an archaeological sensibility consists of.<sup>8</sup>

It has seemed to me, then, that part of what Hill's Garvey project allows us to see is the idea of an investigation in which the conventional end of scholarly research—the definitive

see the two issues of *History of the Human Sciences* devoted to the archive: 11, no. 4 (1998), especially the essays by Irving Velody ("The Archive and the Human Sciences: Notes toward a Theory of the Archive," 1–16) and Carolyn Steedman ("The Space of Memory: In an Archive," 65–83); and 12, no. 2 (1999), especially the essays by Patrick Joyce ("The Politics of the Liberal Archive," 35–49), Thomas Osborne ("The Ordinarity of the Archive," 51–64), and Harriet Bradley ("The Seductions of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found," 107–22). See also the special issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999). See too Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), in particular her introduction, "Archive Fever, Archive Stories" (1–24). Clearly a good deal of this has been inspired by Jacques Derrida's meditation on the inescapable paradoxes of archivization, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a fine reading of this essay, see Carolyn Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (October 2001): 1159–80, as well as more generally her book *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

8. See the discussion of the collection and the principles of the editorial process in "The Papers" and "Editorial Principles and Practices," both in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 1 (1826–August 1919) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xci–xcvi, xcvi–cii. On what I have elsewhere called Hill's "poetics of the document," see Scott, "Archaeology of Black Memory," 120–31.

authored monograph—is forever *deferred* (if not displaced), while the discursive conditions of *any* possible monograph are fundamentally transformed by the construction of a new archive of sources and at the same time (in the introductions that frame the collected documents) the organization of a new cartography of the relationship between a life and a movement and the global worlds of their activity.<sup>9</sup> And therefore what it enables is an enlargement of the sources of public memory, a complication of the possible pictures of the past available for remembering, and an enrichment of the possibilities of criticism by which to reshape our present.<sup>10</sup>

## II

Undoubtedly, Robert Hill's Marcus Garvey Papers project would count as an exemplary instance of Pierre Nora's famous *lieux de mémoire*, one of those disparate sites where, as he says, "memory crystallizes and secretes itself."<sup>11</sup> Certainly the archive, that great storehouse of the materiality of the trace, the textual remains, the recorded sound, the visible image, is for Nora one paradigm of the fabrication of modern memorial consciousness. Indeed, Nora's work has had an enormous impact on the emergence in the humanities, since around the late 1980s, of a concerted preoccupation with "memory" as a key concept marking off an attitude toward the past connected to, perhaps, but nevertheless distinct from and in tension with, "history," in its modes of apprehension, understanding, and representation. For many, memory connotes a sense of immediacy, imagination, and authenticity, an auratic sense of the past's presence beyond the temporal constraints of secular-rationalist historical consciousness. The virtue of memory, so it is sometimes said, is that unlike history, it is openly partial, selective, fragmentary, allusive, nonlinear. If history commemorates the achievements of dominant powers, the prerogatives and interests of states and empires, for example, memory recalls, often in the

9. See, for example, Robert A. Hill, general introduction to *Marcus Garvey*, vol. 1, xxxv–xc.

10. This is especially important where memory appears about to congeal into "heritage," that mode of state-sanctioned memorialization that seeks to fix the past in an uncritical attitude of reverence. One might well recall here the furor in Kingston in 2001 over Stanley Nelson's documentary film "Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind" (February 2000). Robert Hill was the executive consultant on the project. There was a sense among some in Jamaica that the kind of exploration of the memory of Garvey engaged in by Nelson (using dramatization as well as archival footage) was "unworthy" of its estimable subject. See Cecil Gutzmore, "That Marcus Garvey Film," *Gleaner*, Tuesday, 15 May 2001, C9. See also David Scott, "The Dialectic of Defeat: An Interview with Rupert Lewis," *Small Axe*, no. 10 (September 2001): 173–74.

11. See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," in "Memory and Counter-Memory," special issue, *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7. (See the helpful contextualizing remarks by Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, in their introduction to "Memory and Counter-Memory" [1–6].) Nora's essay was originally published in 1984 as "Entre mémoire et histoire" and formed the introduction to the first volume of the massive collaborative history of France carried out under his editorship, *Le Lieu de Mémoire* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984), 23–43.

minor key of pathos, the stories of those who have been excluded and marginalized by those powers: the dispossessed, the disregarded, the disempowered.

The rise of memory-work and memory-talk in the academic humanities, needless to say, has a complex ideological history, too complex indeed to be recounted here.<sup>12</sup> But it is hard to completely separate its new prominence from a number of intersecting and mutually reinforcing shifts and trends gathering momentum in the last decade of the fin de siècle. To begin with there is the withering away of the symbology of emancipationist hopes, and the narrative emplotment of Romance through which modern subjects were interpellated into the horizon of “longing for total revolution.”<sup>13</sup> With the evaporation of the secure guarantee of a utopian future-to-come, there has been a reorganization of the temporal frames of our imagination such that the past that once seemed hinged to a progressive movement forward, has now assumed a more intransigent—a more lingering, more *haunting*—presence.<sup>14</sup> The past no longer finds its ready-to-hand Hegelian resolution in the optimistic gesture of “dialectical” overcoming. Shaped in part by this post–Cold War context (a context of shifting *sensibilities* as much as a context of social and political change) is the emergence of new political discourses of repair for past injury and injustice. The last two or three decades have witnessed a rapid

12. For an insightful and skeptical reading of the ideological history of the contemporary uses of memory in the humanities, see Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” in “Grounds for Remembering,” special issue, *Representations*, no. 69 (Winter 2000): 127–50. For Klein, memory has become regrettably hypostatized—it has become anthropomorphically invested with both transcendental agency and the therapeutic magic of re-enchantment. He writes suggestively: “Our use of memory as a supplement, or more frequently as a replacement, for history reflects both an increasing discontent with historical discourse and a desire to draw upon some of the oldest patterns of linguistic practice. Without that horizon of religious and Hegelian meanings, memory could not possibly do the work we wish it to do, namely, to re-enchant our relation with the world and pour presence back into the past. It is no accident that our sudden fascination with memory goes hand in hand with postmodern reckonings of history as the marching black boot and of historical consciousness as an oppressive fiction. Memory can come to the fore in an age of historiographic crisis precisely because it figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse” (145). See also, in the same issue of *Representations*, Idith Zertal’s “From the People’s Hall to the Wailing Wall: A Study in Memory, Fear, and War” (96–126). Notably, Klein’s and Zertal’s essays appear in an issue of *Representations* again devoted to memory. But these essays are on the whole less sanguine about memory’s virtues. As Thomas Laqueur writes in closing his sensitive introduction to “Grounds for Remembering”: “Memory is a means of making loss survivable but it is also therefore a means of allowing the past to have closure. Pain slowly fades; and with closure comes one sort of forgetting, that of critical history. Probably in the world today a bit less memory and a bit more history would not be such a bad thing. Or to put it differently, we might want to concentrate on the task of representing temporal contingencies rather than spatial absolutes, on the history of the political and moral failures, for example, that produced the Holocaust rather than the memory of its horrors” (8).
13. The phrase is Bernard Yack’s and has been now for many years a source of great fascination for me; see his *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophical Sources of Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
14. See David Scott, “Tragedy’s Time: Postemancipation Futures Past and Present,” in Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 199–217; and more generally, David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). An important site for thinking about the “haunting” of the past and its relation to the end of revolutionary praxis is of course Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

rise of a discourse of reparatory justice (“reparatory” as distinct from the two other registers of liberal justice, “criminal” and “distributive”) in a number of cultural-political fields: On the one hand, there has been a renewal of debates concerning “older” instances of reparations claims—from the German historians crisis around representations of the Holocaust and the 1997 Swiss decision to establish a fund for victims of the Nazi terror who lost money in Swiss banks, to the 1988 Civil Liberties Act on the basis of which the US government compensated Japanese Americans for wrongful internment during World War II, to the renewal of a movement for reparations for slavery in the African Americas.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there are the “newer” reparatory claims for repair to victims of catastrophic violence perpetrated by Cold War authoritarian regimes; these—from Argentina to South Africa (and now, importantly, including Grenada)—often derive their justificatory rationale from truth and reconciliation processes.<sup>16</sup> And in all these spaces of debate, notably, justice is inseparable from memory practices, and that domain of memory is framed by a deliberate focus on historical trauma.<sup>17</sup>

Now, Nora has been much—and I think, rightly—criticized for the conserving elegiac tone of his project, the atmosphere of melancholy despair, perhaps, over the postcolonial fragmentation of the secular republican identity of contemporary France. And true enough the project is shot through with a curious enervating nostalgia. But the limitations of the work notwithstanding, what I think Nora helps us to fasten our attention on is the *historicity* of the arts of social memory, in particular the relation between the artifices and contrivances by which we collectively remember the past, and the mobile powers, structures, and sensibilities of the modern order of things. Again it isn’t necessary to endorse Nora’s dubious idealizations of the supposed organicity of premodern life to see the suggestiveness of the contrast he draws between “memory” and “history” as temporalities connected to *different* organizations of social life. “We speak so much of memory,” he says, “because there is so little left.”<sup>18</sup> And there is so little left because the traditional *milieux de mémoire*, or environments of memory, have been systematically disorganized and reorganized by modern powers. There are no longer cultivated arts of memory—“mnemotechnics”—such as were widely practiced prior to the age of printed

15. See Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

16. See Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

17. This literature connecting trauma and memory is a vast—and growing—one. But see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), in significant part a critique of Caruth’s work; Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

18. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7.

books because in the modern world the practice of the virtues does not depend on the training of the faculties of memory.<sup>19</sup>

Not the least significant of the restructuring powers by which the modern world was made, of course, were those trans-Atlantic racializing powers that produced the African Americas—*island as well as mainland*—and the distinctive conditions of subjugated labor and abjected life that constituted New World plantation slavery.<sup>20</sup> There is, needless to say, no need to rehearse here the graphic details of that “peculiar institution.” It is enough for my purposes to attend to the fact that (perhaps as a consequence of the distinctive technologies of subjection and cultural erasure that defined plantation slavery) the question of the past—or anyway the past *as* a question—has been an enduring preoccupation for New World peoples of African descent. Here, for example, is Arthur Schomburg (an archaeologist of black memory if ever there was one!) announcing this preoccupation in the opening sentences of his essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past”:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset.<sup>21</sup>

The register is that of postivist history, to be sure (as any memorializing strategy has necessarily in part to be). But there is an obvious connection between the worry that animates the direction of Schomburg’s appeal and the one that frames Toni Morrison’s reflections on the place of memory in the “literary archaeology” (the phrase is hers) of the slave narratives that shape her work. Here is the startling image through which she evokes the recurrent force of ineluctable remembering:

19. See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For a very useful discussion of Yates, see Patrick Hutton, “The Art of Memory Reconsidered: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 371–92. More generally, see Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993). See also Aleksandr R. Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist: A Little Book about a Vast Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), for a fascinating account of a curious case of almost pathological remembering in which the classical techniques of spatialized mnemonics are employed to help recall large quantities of random material.
20. See helpfully Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Nora’s essay “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” is reproduced here (284–300). See also Christine Chivallon, “Rendre visible l’esclavage: Muséographie et hiatus de la mémoire aux Antilles françaises,” *L’Homme* 180 (October–December 2006): 7–41; and Joanne M. Braxton and Marie I. Diedrich, eds., *Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2004).
21. Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1925; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1968), 231.

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All the water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valleys we ran through, what banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared.<sup>22</sup>

Memory in the African Americas, in short, is inseparable from the rhetoric of that unnamable, unspeakable loss that came with being coercively “straightened out” by modernity’s enslaving powers. And the recurrent “flooding” that memorializes that loss of an irretrievable past is echoed, in different registers, in a wide variety of New World black expressive practices: in, for example (choosing more or less at random), the Burning Spear’s prophetic ode, “Slavery Days”; in Saidiya Hartman’s inconsolable lament, *Lose Your Mother*; in Kamau Brathwaite’s commemorative journey, *Arrivants*; in M. NourbeSe Philip’s mourning-work, *Zong!*; in Kara Walker’s scatological *mise en scène*, “The End of Uncle Tom and the General Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven.”

In exploring such sites of black re-memory I am prompted to pose the following questions: What range of *lieux de mémoire* are recognizable across the African Americas? What practices of remembering—and of forgetting—circulate around them? What modern powers—of the state, for instance, of nationalism, of neoliberalism, of globalization—are invested in them and how do they shape the kinds of remembering and forgetting they urge us to practice? What does the institutionalization of the past in “heritage” do to practices of memory? What critical tools and strategies do we need to acquire in order to more adequately engage and unpack the reproduction of fossilized or repressive or vindictive remembering?

### III

One aspect of the broad terrain of memory-thinking that has particularly preoccupied me over the better part of the last decade—as a dimension, really, of the imagining of the Small Axe Project as a whole—is the relationship between social or collective memory and generations. This, anyway, is how I understand the interviews I have conducted with Caribbean writers, intellectuals, and political actors since 1996.<sup>23</sup> I don’t deny that they can be read in a variety of ways depending on your purposes, but for me they are an archive—a dialogically constituted one—of *generational memory*: another *lieu de mémoire*.

22. Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 198–99.

23. So far, eleven interviews have been published, the most recent of them being David Scott, “To Be Liberated from the Obscurity of Themselves’: An Interview with Rex Nettleford,” *Small Axe*, no. 20 (June 2006): 97–246.

How do generations remember the past, the cultural-political past especially?<sup>24</sup> In a widely known formulation, Maurice Halbwachs (who denied the distinction between individual and collective memory) urged that no memory is possible outside of the “frameworks” used by socially constituted subjects to determine and retrieve their recollections.<sup>25</sup> Memory, in other words, is *inescapably* social, always constructed in particular socially inscribed circumstances through mnemonics embedded in particular social practices of individuality and sociality (in this, one recognizes Halbwachs as a critic of Henri Bergson’s late-nineteenth-century individualistic philosophy of memory). On this view, generations may be said to recollect their pasts within distinct frameworks shaped not only by their direct collective experiences—of wars or riots or political transitions or natural catastrophes—but also by their collective *hopes*. What is the relationship between the frameworks of memory of successive generations? What continuities and discontinuities mark the ways in which successive generations remember the shared past? How does each younger generation, from within the frameworks that shape their own recollections, connect *to*—or disconnect *from*—the collective memories of an older generation? How might that younger generation *learn* to remember in ways that encompass *both* the distinctiveness of their own generational standpoint *and* the difference between that standpoint and the frameworks of their elders, and do so moreover without being imprisoned by the authority of established memory? This sense of an embodied argument (an uneven, unending conflict of moral perspectives) over a shared past and its place in the present, is to my mind a central aspect of the idea of a *tradition*. Memory and tradition are inextricably intertwined. Indeed you might say that in one of its dimensions at least a tradition is an ensemble of agonistically connected frameworks through which successive generations *remember* a shared past and through which they criticize it. On this view, memory is at once conserving *and* a condition of criticism, revision, and change.<sup>26</sup>

As I have said on more than one occasion now, I am acutely aware of being part of an Anglo-Creole Caribbean generation that has no tangible experience of colonialism and

24. See helpfully Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, “Generations and Collective Memory,” *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 359–81; and Ron Eyerman and Bryan Turner, “Outline of a Theory of Generations,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 1, no. 1 (1998): 91–106.

25. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For an interesting discussion of Halbwachs in connection with the work of Phillip Ariès, see Patrick Hutton, “Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities: The Halbwachs-Ariès Connection,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 311–22.

26. There is work to be done here in trying more systematically to connect memory and tradition, but on the idea of a tradition, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). See also David Scott, “An Obscure Miracle of Connection,” in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 106–27, for some discussion of the uses of the idea of a tradition in thinking about intellectual discourse in the African diaspora.

anticononialism, no direct memory of the first singing of the national anthem, no share in the existential anticipation of the certainties and uncertainties that shaped the longing for independence and the expectations of its aftermath. And one particular obsession of mine—given what seems to me the terminal crisis of the Caribbean nation-state projects that grew out of the agendas of nationalism and constitutional decolonization—has been to try to reconstruct something of the discursive terrain of memory of those still-living generations that, through their own direct experiences and their own recollected pasts, imagined the postcolonial futures that are my inheritance. In a formulation, versions of which I keep repeating because it so evokes for me the temporal conundrum of future's past I mean to identify: how does my generation look back through the veil of memories of an older generation, listening to the ways in which its account of the past shapes its hopes and longings for a future horizon of possibility that I now experience as ruin? One generation's futures are another generation's rapidly accumulating past. (This, parenthetically, was my preoccupation in *Conscripts of Modernity* with C. L. R. James's imagination of Toussaint Louverture. The magnificent closing sentences of his preface to the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*—in which he alludes to the proximity of the world around him and to the fact that were he writing in another time and place it would have been a different but not better book—are nothing if not a profound meditation on the disjunctive temporalities of generational memory.<sup>27</sup>) So far as I am concerned, then, these interviews are critical dialogical engagements not because they aim to demonstrate the shortcomings of my now aging interlocutors, the poverty of their particular ways of understanding their pasts (indeed, I have no interest in this style of criticism), but because they aim to reconstruct the “frameworks” (as Halbwachs might say) of their memories in such a way as to help us take the measure of ours.

At the same time, however, it is important to see what aspects of memory neither the Garvey project nor these interviews speak to, perhaps to some degree even obscure. In both instances there is a clear focus on the *formal* reflexive registers of remembering, the way the past is re-presented to us in words and images. However, there are other registers in which remembering figures significantly, those associated, for example, with the whole range of popular (often unrecorded) idioms and performances. But one register that seems to me to bear particular thinking-about (especially because it connects to the problem of a tradition) is that of the body and its diverse habits and acquired dispositions. It is often missed or elided that the body is a memory-machine. As Paul Connerton reminded us many years ago, focusing on what he calls the body's “habit-memory”—or, its *habitus*, to invoke Mauss rather than Durkheim—re-orientes our attention to the ways we preserve the past without explicitly

27. See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Dial, 1938), viii–ix.

re-presenting it to ourselves in words and images, to the social disciplines and rituals and techniques by which the body (in its distinctive postures and gait and modes of adornment) learns to be—and acquires the memory of being—a body of certain kind: a black body, for example. In habit-memory, the past is not “pictured” as such but sedimented into the body.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV

Such, anyway, are some provisional orienting thoughts. I should like to think of the occasion of our “Archaeologies of Black Memory” symposium and seminar (sponsored by the Ford Foundation and held at the University of Miami in conjunction with the Caribbean Literary Studies program and the online journal *Anthurium*) as having constituted a platform on which to connect aspects of the criticism of pasts in the presents of the African Americas in two of its postemancipation formations: the regional Caribbean and the mainland United States. Foregrounding memory and the memory-practices by means of which pasts are remembered, documented, circulated, and made available for the labor of intellectual and artistic work in the present offers a terrain for instructive comparative work and exchange. It has seemed to me that given our particular histories of black disenfranchisement in the Americas the idea of an archaeology of memory has an especial salience. What the sources and modalities of our remembrances are, and what analytics and poetics are required to render them visible or audible is not, I suspect, always self-evident. Our symposium and seminar were directed toward the exploration of this suspicion. The contributions by Saidiya Hartman, Robert Hill, Michael Hanchard, Patricia Saunders, and M. NourbeSe Philip published here, speak in different ways to that occasion’s preoccupations—even if they are not necessarily exact replicas of what was presented there. To be sure they do not require formal introductions from me. They speak eloquently enough for themselves and, in discontinuous ways, to each other. Through the vistas they open up it is not hard to see what a rich vein of potential work this platform has provided. It is our hope that it is one that we—in *Small Axe*—can build on in stimulating future collaborations around the question of black memory in the present.

28. See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Marcel Mauss’s classic essay “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (February 1973): 70–88.

# Love and Lubrication in the Archives, or rukus!: A Black Queer Archive for the United Kingdom



AJAMU X, TOPHER CAMPBELL, and MARY STEVENS

**RÉSUMÉ** Le projet d'archives rukus! a été lancé à Londres en juin 2005 par le photographe Ajamu X et le cinéaste et metteur en scène Topher Campbell. La mission des archives est d'acquérir, de préserver, d'exposer et de rendre accessible au public pour la première fois des documents historiques, culturels et artistiques relatifs aux communautés lesbiennes, gaies, bisexuelles et transgenres noires au Royaume-Uni, et ce, par l'entremise d'une variété d'activités et d'événements (expositions, projections de films, travail d'enregistrement d'interviews, communications, etc.). Le but de cet article est de présenter le travail de rukus! à un public international et de mettre en évidence ses spécificités, comme le fait qu'il soit dirigé par des artistes, qu'il soit sensible aux politiques de la mort et du deuil, qu'il trouve ses origines intellectuelles tant dans le travail de Stuart Hall que dans les études culturelles britanniques, et qu'il établit un dialogue entre les pratiques patrimoniales traditionnelles et les discours dominants relatifs à l'identité noire et queer.

L'article présente la transcription révisée d'une interview qui s'est tenue entre les deux co-fondateurs des archives et Mary Stevens, chercheuse à la University College London. Ce format original a été choisi afin de permettre à Ajamu et à Topher de présenter leur travail dans leurs propres mots et à leur manière. Le choix du format vise aussi à refléter l'idée que la conception des archives est une pratique intensément sociale et qu'elle fait partie d'un processus de partage de la mémoire qui se concrétise seulement à partir du dialogue.

**ABSTRACT** The rukus! archive project was launched in London in June 2005 by photographer Ajamu X, and filmmaker and theatre director Topher Campbell. The archive's mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and otherwise make available for the first time to the public historical, cultural, and artistic materials related to the Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities in the United Kingdom through a variety of activities and events (exhibitions, film-screenings, oral history work, presentations, etc.). The purpose of this article is to introduce the work of rukus! to an international audience, and to highlight its specificities, such as its artist-led nature, its negotiation of the politics of loss and mourning, its intellectual origins in the work of Stuart Hall, and British Cultural Studies more generally, and the critical dialogue it establishes with both mainstream heritage practices and dominant Black and queer identity discourses.

The article takes the form of the edited transcript of an interview that took

place between the two co-founders of the archive and Mary Stevens, a researcher at University College London. This unusual format was chosen in order to allow Ajamu and Topher to present their work in their own words and on their own terms. The choice of format also seeks to reflect the idea of the archive as an intensely social practice, part of the process of fostering a shared memory that emerges only through dialogue.

## Introduction

*Deep in thought and  
Reading works of white men,  
I am sometimes forced to sift  
To give my credence, to my people  
My mind has to rewrite  
What isn't there but was.*

From "In Pensive Mood" by Dirg Aaab-Richards.<sup>1</sup>

### *Mary Stevens:*

"Sifting" the past to recover "what isn't there but was" is not just a solitary reflective endeavour for individuals from disinherited groups, it can also be an act of collective rebellion. For the Black queer community (of which Aaab-Richards can be considered in the UK not just a prophet but also a pioneer activist),<sup>2</sup> doubly marginalized by the splintering of activist historiography into the discrete categories of a heteronormative Black history and an exclusive monochromatic queer history, the act of rewriting through collecting and disseminating the evidence of "what isn't there but was" is particularly urgent.<sup>3</sup> In the United States grassroots Black "queer archive activism"

- 1 In Dirg Aaab-Richards et al., *Tongues Untied: Poems by Dirg Aaab-Richards, Craig G. Harris, Essex Hemphill, Isaac Jackson, Assotto Sainte* (London, 1987), p. 13.
- 2 As well as being a poet, Aaab-Richards was, for example, the first Black Gay Men's Outreach and Development Worker for London's Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project (1985–1989). Aaab-Richards was profiled in a booklet produced by Gay Men Fighting AIDS for Black History Month in 2001, *In the Family: Celebrating the Builders of Black Gay Communities* (London, 2001), p. 7, <http://www.gmfa.org.uk/londonservices/booklets-and-postcards/pdfs/in-the-family.pdf>; a second booklet, *In the Family 2*, was produced in 2002, <http://www.gmfa.org.uk/londonservices/booklets-and-postcards/pdfs/in-the-family-2.pdf> (both accessed on 21 September 2009). The biographical details for individuals provided in this article are mostly drawn from these booklets and readers are advised to consult these for additional information, since these sources were produced from within the Black LGBT community.
- 3 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, 2005), p. 44; Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Memory and Mourning: Living Oral History with Queer Latinos in San Francisco," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, eds.

(defined by Alexandra Juhasz as “a practice that adds love and hope to time and technology”<sup>4</sup>) dates back to the early 1990s and in some cases before.<sup>5</sup> For the Black queer community in the UK, however, “nobody had pulled together this thing called heritage or archive”<sup>6</sup> until artists Ajamu X and Topher Campbell came together to create the rukus! archive project in 2005.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the work of rukus! to an international audience, and in so doing, to juxtapose it with the Canadian queer collections profiled elsewhere in this issue. The rukus! archive project was launched in June 2005 by rukus! federation ltd. rukus! federation is a limited company and charity established in 2000, dedicated to presenting the best in work by Black lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) artists. The archive project is one aspect of the federation’s work and its mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and otherwise make available to the public historical, cultural, and artistic materials related to the black LGBT communities in the United Kingdom. More information about the background to rukus! and its objectives are set out in Ajamu and Topher’s own words in the interview that constitutes the main body of this article. They do not, however, provide a linear narrative of rukus!’s development and various projects; this information – including a useful timeline<sup>7</sup> – is available at [www.rukus.co.uk](http://www.rukus.co.uk).

According to Stuart Hall, “Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the

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Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia, 2008), p. 167.

- 4 Alexandra Juhasz, “Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2006), p. 326.
- 5 See for example Roque Ramírez on the San Francisco Latino Archivo Rodrigo Reyes, “Memory and Mourning,” p. 178. Public institutions have also been active in this area. The Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Cultures, part of the New York Public Library, has been taking in gay and lesbian material since the early 1990s (for example, the papers of poet Joseph Beam in 1991; see Jacqueline Trescott, “Anthology Of a Mother’s Grief; By Finishing Her Gay Son’s Book, She Came to Terms With His Life,” *Washington Post* [17 August 1991]). The Black Gay and Lesbian Archive Project was founded at the Schomburg in 2000, under the direction of Steven G. Fullwood; see <http://www.bgla.stevengfullwood.org/> (accessed on 4 March 2009).
- 6 The interview between Ajamu X and Topher Campbell, the two co-founders of the archive, and researcher Mary Stevens was conducted on 26 November 2008 in the context of a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project based in the Department of Information Studies, University College London, entitled “Community Archives and Identities: Documenting and Sustaining Community Heritage.” The research team comprises Andrew Flinn, Elizabeth Shepherd, and Mary Stevens. The research would not have been possible without the help and partnership provided by our case studies (including rukus!) and many other participants and interviewees. For further details see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/icarus/community-archives/> (accessed on 21 September 2009).
- 7 “rukus! Time Line,” rukus!, <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/25/33/> (accessed on 4 March 2009).

present puts to the past.”<sup>8</sup> In bringing together the creative energy of “an artistic sensibility” with the resistance to monolithic identity categories inherent to black queer lives, the rukus! archive posits a more critical relationship to the mainstream than most. Indeed, in offering competing definitions of the “mainstream” – sometimes the “gay mainstream,” sometimes the “Black mainstream,” sometimes the culture of a dominant elite – Ajamu and Topher’s discourse on their archival practice continually forces us all to question the position from which we speak, especially when we seek to claim authority for that position, for example as academics or heritage professionals.

The call for papers for this special section on queer archives invited contributions that would, among other things, present “an examination of a particular queer collection.” For many grassroots practitioners, squeezing thoughts, energies, and experiences into the restrictive stylistic norms expected of an academic journal article is not an appealing prospect. This may be particularly true of the “repositories of feelings” that constitute gay and lesbian archives where the excess of affect, generated by an archiving practice that is about so much more than the anesthetic process of preservation, militates against the dispassionate analysis academic writing is generally felt to demand<sup>9</sup>; as Topher comments in a moving meditation on the presence of pain and memory in the archive, “somebody else has to interpret, because we’re too deep in it.” However, to attempt to speak on behalf of rukus! would be to repeat the act of dispossession repudiated by Ajamu and Topher, to “describe and prescribe” (and inevitably to proscribe) like so many others before, hence the collective decision to use an interview format to represent the work of rukus!. It should also be noted that this interview was recorded in the context of a broader research project in the Department of Information studies at University College London (UCL), which from 2008 to 2009 used ethnographic methods to explore the relationship between practices of independent archiving and identity construction, specifically in culturally diverse communities. rukus! was one of the case studies for this project and at the time of the interview I had been working in particular with Ajamu intermittently for the preceding six months, attending rukus! events, meeting up for more informal chats about his work and, where possible and desirable, helping out in a voluntary capacity, for example in transcribing audio recordings. This interview took place at UCL on 26 November 2008 and was scheduled for the express purpose of drafting this article. There was, however, an ongoing period of preparation during which time Andrew Flinn and I built trust with Ajamu and Topher, and developed an understanding of their vision and

8 Stuart Hall, “Constituting an Archive,” *Third Text* 54 (2001), p. 92.

9 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham and London, 2003), p. 244.

motivation. We recognize that the interview is an unconventional approach to an academic article, but it is also the fruit of the ethnographic commitment of the UCL team to presenting our case studies on their own terms. Moreover, collectively we celebrate this exceptionality for, as Robert Mills has argued, “translating queer history into the language of public culture will involve a contestation of the very norms in which ... history narratives are currently embedded,”<sup>10</sup> including, in our view, the publicly marginal form of the journal article.

More pressingly, as the transcriber and editor of over ninety minutes of unscripted, three-way discussion, I am acutely aware of the extent to which the translator is a traitor. In their dialogue around the archive, the text that follows conveys only the slimmest indication of the extent to which Ajamu and Topher are engaged in an intensely social practice, in which each continually prompts the other as they recall names, dates, places, and ideas, illustrating in microcosm the process Stuart Hall describes as the “living archive,” “whose construction must be seen as an on-going, never-completed project.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the text’s suppression of laughter and gestures gives even less sense of the joy of the archive so central to the rukus! project; as Topher reminisces about the process of collection, “we had lots of fun, me and Ajamu ... just talking about them days and whatever happened.” More troublingly, I fear that I have imposed an artificial linearity on a much “queerer” temporality.<sup>12</sup> As Ann Cvetkovich argues, “emotional experience and the memory of it demand and produce an unusual archive, one that frequently resists the coherence of narrative or that is fragmented and ostensibly arbitrary.”<sup>13</sup> Yet here the arbitrary resides purely in the erasure of speech through editing. The distortion is to some degree compensated for by the collaborative nature of the editing process, in which an original text was revised in accordance with Ajamu and Topher’s comments, but the orality of the original interview is inevitably lost.<sup>14</sup>

Ajamu and Topher’s discourse requires little gloss. Some key themes can, however, be drawn out. The importance of affect and the characteristic

10 Robert Mills, “Queer Is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture,” *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006), p. 261.

11 Hall, p. 89.

12 For a discussion of “queer temporalities” see Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, nos. 2–3 (2007), pp. 177–95.

13 Cvetkovich, p. 242.

14 The unintended consequences of the intervention of archivist-transcribers in marginalized histories are discussed by Rodney G.S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria* 61 (2006), p. 226.

disrupted temporality of queer archives have both already been highlighted. In terms that underline the close relationship between desire and the archive, Topher notes: “it came more out of an impulse really, lots of impulses, impatience.” The complex trope of mourning is also explored in detail; Eng and Kazanjian’s insight that “the politics of mourning might be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history”<sup>15</sup> provides a way of articulating the complex interplay of mourning and celebration evident in the work of rukus!, at the interface between two categories of identity – “Black” and “gay” – both of which have integrated powerful narratives of loss, suffering, and resistance. Traumatic archives often generate a strong performative dimension, because of “the need to address traumatic experience through witnessing and retelling,”<sup>16</sup> and indeed with rukus!, as Topher explains, “everything has a public face.” Yet emphasizing the archive’s performative quality is also a means to transform what could be melancholic into “a newly imagined tracing of possibility: the chance for fresh exchanges, memories, trips, and encounters.”<sup>17</sup>

Many of these themes will also be in evidence in Black queer archives in North America, or the Netherlands, testifying perhaps to some alternative “norms” around which queer cultures coalesce. The rukus! archive does, however, have some distinctly “British” qualities. Indeed, for Ajamu, the whole project was about “capturing something about being born and raised here” as opposed to in the United States. Perhaps one of the defining features of that “something,” certainly for “the first out Black gay generation,” is the influence of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, and Stuart Hall in particular, whose work has produced “generations” of thought and practice in contexts where traditional modes of cultural reproduction have lost purchase.<sup>18</sup> Much as Stuart Hall fostered a collective rethinking of identity discourses, the work of rukus! (and others whom he inspired) is actively reshaping the public cultures of “blackness” and “queerness.” In the process “one generation’s yearning” is fuelling “another’s learning” (*and yearning*).<sup>19</sup>

*Mary Stevens: Tell me about the background to rukus!*

15 Cited in Roque Ramírez, p. 165.

16 Cvetkovich, p. 242.

17 Juhasz, p. 324.

18 Stuart Hall is perhaps the leading theorist of “race” and ethnicity in the UK who, through his tenure in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University, from 1964 to 1979, was one of the foremost influences on the development of the contemporary discipline of Cultural Studies. For a recent introduction to the impact of his thinking see Claire Alexander, “Stuart Hall and ‘Race,’” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no.4 (2009), pp. 658–87.

19 Juhasz, p. 323.

Ajamu: rukus! federation was formed in June 2000. It was launched at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) as part of the Mardi Gras Festival.

Topher Campbell: The original event was commissioned by Valerie Mason-John a.k.a. Queenie, who was the artistic director of the Pride Arts Festival that year.<sup>20</sup> She was actively trying to diversify the festival. And we were thinking about rukus! or talking about rukus! a lot, and this was a way of launching it publicly and very centrally.

Ajamu: I think we had a thousand pounds, didn't we?

Campbell: We were given a thousand pounds. And we conceived this idea of a club-based arts event. We wanted to create an organization as a way of bringing together a lot of the artistic and political forces that we had embraced up until that point. rukus! became an expression of that at the ICA on June 23, 2000.

Ajamu: It is important to mention that rukus! is about how we present our politics more playfully. So the name rukus! is a derivative of the word "raucous." And Rukus is also a well-known African-American porn star.

Campbell: We spelled it R-U-K-U-S because we felt that this would give us a distinctive on-line identity. The exclamation mark also underlines the playfulness of it all.

Ajamu: Lots of Black gay groups have identified themselves as Black-gay-this, Black-gay-that. With rukus! we wanted our own title: "rukus!" can do anything we want it to. We're not restricted to other people's identity categories. Early on I was often asked: Are you a Black archive, are you a gay archive, are you a London archive? And I'd say actually we're all these things, at the same time. Our politics have never been about either/or categories.

Campbell: Neither our politics nor our lifestyles. That's the very thing about rukus!, it's not a singular thing, it's about confusing the notion of simplicity. You have to embrace complexity and diversity when you are dealing with the idea of Black, gay, or lesbian identity. With rukus! we are building our own identity. The idea was always that we would have something that was set apart

20 Valerie Mason-John is an "author, playwright, performer, professional anger-management and self-awareness trainer," <http://www.valeriemason-john.co.uk/> (accessed on 1 September 2009). See *In the Family*, p. 39.

from, and in opposition to, both the Black and the White gay status quo, both in terms of the way that we wanted to define the idea of rukus! and in the way we wanted to express it in the public space. rukus! is not about saying we're victims; we're very much about redefining and replacing ourselves publicly. And we're not anti-White or anti-anything, we're pro.

*Stevens: And so this first event turned into rukus! federation and the archive developed in the context of the federation?*

Campbell: Yes, I think so. But time is a very strange thing. It plays tricks on you. The evolution wasn't steady or linear in a very clean way. It came more out [of] an impulse really, lots of impulses, impatience. I always remember it by thinking about what else I was doing at the time. I remember I was involved in Talawa Theatre Company<sup>21</sup> and creating a manifesto in East London for youth culture, and then I went to the BBC. And so there were places and strands of work going in and out of the conversations that we were having. But [it] is difficult to talk about time in terms of chunks, because time jumps backwards and forwards.

Ajamu: At the time I was living in the Netherlands, so a lot of the early rukus! work was done in cyberspace. But I was also running the Breakfast Club<sup>22</sup> and I was involved in Gay Men Fighting AIDS,<sup>23</sup> as an assertiveness trainer. And I was running sex classes: bondage for beginners, S&M for beginners. But around the 2000 mark I was getting frustrated with the Black gay scene; it wasn't really happening for me. I just felt that the politics weren't that adventurous, that dynamic, that playful.

Campbell: For the record, the context for a lot of Black-identified, non-club-based events was to do with sexual health, research, and activism funded by NGOs, or local government, or health organizations. And so the prism was always quite narrow. But we were, and still are, struggling and battling artists. And we wanted to create something that reflected and sustained the energy of our creative practice. But Ajamu has driven the idea of the archive more than I have.

Ajamu: There are lots of points to be made about why the archive started. One is that a well-known activist had the builders come in. They saw a pile of

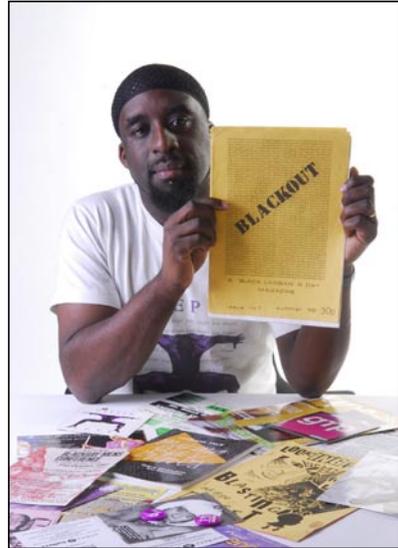
21 Talawa is a leading Black British theatre company, founded in 1989. For more information see <http://www.talawa.com/about/index.html> (accessed on 21 September 2009).

22 A monthly group for Black men regardless of sexual preference. See Ajamu's profile in *In the Family*, p. 8.

23 <http://www.gmfa.org.uk> (accessed on 21 September 2009).

papers and magazines, and they threw everything out. Also, a friend of mine, Tyrone Smith, had just committed suicide. I was left his doll collection and his porn collection. But the idea for the archive actually came about in 2004, when we got planning our own exhibition, “Family Treasures.”

**Figure 1:** Ajamu, co-founder of rukus!, with items from the rukus! archive, November 2007. Image courtesy of Museum of London.



Campbell: We got very excited by this idea and we had lots of fun, me and Ajamu and people, just talking about them days and whatever happened. We’d gossip about what happened to this person or that person. And then stories emerge, about that Pride, or this Pride, or that person, or this person, and you start to realize that the collected memory is not getting stored anywhere. We wanted to reclaim the history and put it centre stage. Reclaiming that history is a political act. Look at James Baldwin, for example. A literary icon, the first superstar writer, arguably. But you still get a complete denial of his sexuality by Black academics and White literary critics who don’t think it is important.<sup>24</sup> Then you look at someone like Bayard Rustin.<sup>25</sup> These are easy people to pick out. On a different scale, like lots of people, I’ve worked in lots of mainstream institutions. But I have a very politicized consciousness around my sexuality and my race, and I’m not the only one. I use myself because I don’t want to talk about other people out of turn. We need to find a way of articulating that difference. The archive can find a way of doing that. You want to reclaim the notion that when you look at Black gay and lesbian history, you are not looking at a separate thing. You are looking at something that is integral to all our histories. Black gay history is the story of somebody’s brother, somebody’s daughter, somebody’s son, somebody’s sister. Or take Brixton, for example: the people in the shops, in the markets, the parties, the

24 James Baldwin (1924–1987) was an African-American writer and civil rights activist, many of whose novels such as *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968), feature homosexual and bisexual African-American characters.

25 Bayard Rustin (1912–1987) was an American civil rights activist and adviser to Martin Luther King Jr. See Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I’ve Seen* (New York, 1997).

cottage, it's all around us. And places like the Brixton Art Gallery were seminal in terms of the Black and the gay experience.<sup>26</sup>

Ajamu: Around 1994 there was also the issue of the “Murder Music” campaign against homophobia within reggae music. For some people, both within our own communities and in the mainstream community, that campaign was seen as being led by Outrage!, a White gay group. We wanted to make it clear that this campaign started back in 1992 with Black Lesbians and Gays against Media Homophobia. There was a generational impetus around reclaiming as well. We were the first out Black gay generation. And I, or we, were just approaching forty and that raised lots of questions about identity and age. Today we're dealing with a younger generation who might never have heard of Linda Bellos,<sup>27</sup> or Valerie Mason-John and so forth. There's work to be done there, and we need to be having public discussions within our own communities, within the Black community, within the White community.

Campbell: The generational thing is important in the wider Black community too. People in their thirties to, say, fifties who are British, born in the UK, have seen their parents or grandparents dying. They've seen their heritage pass before their eyes, so there is a personal stake in this. The argument about archives is being won by virtue of experience. Our generation wants to see its experiences placed in the mainstream. Black History Month is now an institution in the UK. But we want to move beyond the clichés, beyond Windrush, and Notting Hill, and Brixton in the sixties.

Ajamu: And in these narratives about Black history and gay history we were just invisible. There was no representation there. Black History Month is an institution, but it had very few things that were gay in it. Even though it was founded by Linda Bellos! Even if you're talking about the Black arts scene, the history of people who came through that as Black and gay is totally missing.

Campbell: So, why archive? Archiving is a way of achieving some sort of visibility. Personally, one way I found the need for this was working as a

26 Brixton is a neighbourhood in the borough of Lambeth in south London that has been a focus for the African-Caribbean community in the UK, since many of the first wave of post-World War II immigrants were temporarily settled in the area. The majority of individuals and organizations documented so far by the rukus! archive has a strong Brixton connection.

27 Linda Bellos was elected Leader of Lambeth Council (in south London) in 1986. See *In the Family*, p. 14.

theatre director. I can sit pitching an idea or working at a conference, and somebody turns around and says, “Where are the Black directors? Where are they?” or “We don’t have any Black writers. Who? I don’t know anybody.” In this context the archive is a deep political intervention. In future when someone says, “Black gay history, what is it? There isn’t any,” or people from our own community say, “We have no legacy,” we’ll be able to point to the archive and say, “This happened or that happened.” And share that with friends in our circle or family members who are twenty years younger or twenty years older.

Ajamu: There was a big gap around the Black gay and lesbian experience in the UK. I can tell millions of stories about my family and the Black experience. I can tell a million stories about being gay. But in terms of Black *and* gay, a lot of the material I read came from the States. *Brother-to-Brother* and *In the Life*, those books informed a lot of my thinking around what it means to be Black and gay.<sup>28</sup> But for me, they didn’t capture what was happening here. So the archive, or rukus!, was about capturing something about being born and raised here.

Campbell: It wasn’t just about invisibility in history. The early nineties were also a time when the whole Black gay scene was invisible, and the White mainstream and the Black mainstream, if there is such a thing, were anti the idea of allowing us any space. There were a lot of conversations around the club scene about how we could counter that. There were some seminal clubs in the nineties, for Black gay men particularly, some of them for women. One was called Queer Nation, one was the Vox, one was the Velvet Room. The Velvet Room was the first major Black gay club to champion R&B. Playing urban music was a big debate in the White gay scene. And then suddenly Tyrone and Chris [McKoy],<sup>29</sup> and various other people who were DJing started to break in. There was a lot of energy happening around the Black gay scene with people breaking out from their own confines in the gay club scene and redefining the possibilities of what a Black gay man could be. And clubs were obviously and still remain the big social spaces. At the same time 1992 was the first ragga music debacle with Shabba Ranks,<sup>30</sup> which Isaac Julien documented in *The Darker Side of Black* (1993). So we are looking at a breakthrough period in terms of Black gay visibility around music within the mainstream, in a number of different respects.

28 Joseph Beam, ed., *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston, 1986); Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston, 1991).

29 See *In the Family* 2, p. 29.

30 Jamaican rapper Shabba Ranks called for the execution of gay men on Channel 4’s youth show *The Word* in 1992. The presenter condemned his comments but the episode caused a scandal.

*Stevens: What were your other intellectual and political influences?*

Campbell: In terms of thinking about memory, for me the artistic antecedents were people like Derek Jarman.<sup>31</sup> Isaac Julien was an important figure too.<sup>32</sup> And without getting too academic about it, in the eighties there was a lot of thinking in so-called Black mainstream identity politics around hybridity, and notions of difference and diversity, as defined by Black artists, mainly. In publications like *Ten.8*, which we were both reading.<sup>33</sup>

Ajamu: Coming from people like Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer,<sup>34</sup> and David A. Bailey.<sup>35</sup>

Campbell: And Sonia Boyce. And we aren't disconnected from those kinds of discourses. I asked Stuart [Hall] and Kobena [Mercer] to comment on Ajamu's work [for *The Homecoming*, Black Arts Video Project, 1995], which they did. Stuart Hall's mischievous attitude to thinking about identity, race, and social politics is very much in keeping with our approach. He just has a way of articulating difference playfully, mischievously.

Ajamu: Playfully yet seriously. He's a very seminal figure. For our first exhibition, our banner line was "The past cannot exist without its archives." That was Stuart Hall.

31 Derek Jarman (1942–1994) was a leading British experimental filmmaker and prominent gay rights campaigner. He died of AIDS-related complications. For a discussion of his life and work, introducing a special issue of the journal *Critical Quarterly* dedicated to Jarman, see Colin MacCabe, "Derek Jarman: Obituary," *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1994), pp. iii–viii.

32 Isaac Julien (born 1960) is a Black British visual artist and filmmaker, currently visiting professor at the Whitney Museum of American Arts. His 1991 film, *Young Soul Rebels*, which was awarded the *Semaine de la critique* prize at the Cannes Film Festival, features several Black gay characters, and is set against the racial and sexual tensions of 1970s London. For more information see Julien's own website, <http://www.isaacjulien.com> (accessed on 1 September 2009) and also *In the Family*, p. 29.

33 See David Brittain, "Ten.8: A Critical Debate," <http://staff.biad.uce.ac.uk/staff/id003706/ten8/ten8.htm> (accessed on 26 March 2009).

34 Kobena Mercer (born 1960, Ghana) is an art critic and cultural commentator, currently Reader in Art History and Diaspora Studies at Middlesex University, London. For a selection of his publications see [http://www.iniva.org/library/archive/people/m/mercer\\_kobena](http://www.iniva.org/library/archive/people/m/mercer_kobena) (accessed on 1 September 2009).

35 David A. Bailey (born 1960) is a photographer, writer, and curator, currently Senior Curator of Autograph (ABP – Association of Black Photographers), whose collections are now at the heart of the new Archive and Research Centre for Culturally Diverse Photography, which opened in 2008, in a purpose-built centre in London, Rivington Place. See [http://www.iniva.org/library/archive/people/b/bailey\\_david\\_a](http://www.iniva.org/library/archive/people/b/bailey_david_a) (accessed on 1 September 2009).

Campbell: And then we've got another tag line which is "Making difference work," which is also from Stuart Hall. Ajamu was also involved in the Black Unity and Freedom Party.<sup>36</sup>

Ajamu: And Brixton Housing Association.

Campbell: So you had these interminglings of people. And the conversations we had with people who are not necessarily centrally Black and gay have been very important, in terms of how rukus! came about.

*Stevens: You were the first out Black gay generation, but as a generation you were also heavily affected by AIDS. Community archives in gay and lesbian communities have often been linked to trauma. How important was the legacy of AIDS and other traumas in the decision to create an archive?*

Ajamu: Some people might argue that the past will always be about mourning, and part of it can be traumatic. It is traumatic when I think about Rotimi [Fani Kayode]'s<sup>37</sup> [archive] box or Chris [McKoy]'s [archive] box, people who we knew personally, worked with, had long-term relationships with or whatever. But then not all the memories that come with a person and/or a box are traumatic. Sometimes it might trigger stuff that I've forgotten. So I'm not sure if it's about mourning.

Campbell: I remember part of my impetus was a political relation to AIDS and HIV because a lot of people had died in the nineties. A lot of histories were being lost or forgotten. But I think within the Black experience, to which slavery was so integral for so long, there is a level on which pain and memory are very interlinked. This pain, the pain of lived experience is not recognized, and so there's a need to hold it, and store it, and keep it as precious. It's not recognized because there's no language which allows it to be so. If I think about the way in which *we* Black people are described and prescribed in the Western canon, it doesn't allow for the kind of space that rukus! has, a space which is owned by us. Within this space, the personal is really important. These are very personal endeavours. What that might mean, somebody else has to interpret, because we're too deep in it. But people have died. People have died, or been killed, or been forgotten or ignored. Some very fascinating, interesting people in a culture which, for lots of different reasons – not

36 On the context in which the Black Unity and Freedom Party developed, see Ambalavaner Sivanandan, "Challenging Racism: Strategies for the '80s," *Race & Class*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1983), pp. 1–11.

37 See *In the Family*, p. 34. Fani Kayode's work was first published in book form in *Black Male / White Male* (London, 1988).

just racism, but class and poverty – has denied their existence. It can be very painful to go on about that. So there is going to be some kind of mourning, or trauma, or pain involved in the public examination of all this. We're both quite confident, strong individuals in our own right, and we have our own personal stories and scars. But a lot of people don't have the same level of articulation or vision, or connection with any kind of community or past. And I think the archive goes some way to publicly acknowledging the pain and helping people come to terms with it.

*Stevens: In my mind I had set up an opposition between mourning and celebration. But actually they're completely part of the same thing. You can celebrate someone's life at the same time as mourning their loss, can't you?*

Ajamu: Definitely. It goes back to constantly wanting to break down the either/or paradigm. I think historically we bang on always about coming from a position of pain and trauma, and not one of pride and celebration. Celebration is a different way into some of the discussions around who you are and what you are.

Campbell: It's a very Black thing as well, I think, bringing together celebration and loss. Although we're at an interesting stage now. With the performative stuff and "Sharing Tongues"<sup>38</sup> celebration is winning out, I think.

*Stevens: Let's go back to how you began to gather a collection.*

Campbell: We started from our own collections, because we had photographs and memorabilia from our own collections. I was very much into the club scene, and I had loads and loads of flyers for some reason. I used to keep *Boyz* magazine covers,<sup>39</sup> fetish magazines, stuff like that. And I had all these *QX* magazines<sup>40</sup>; if there was a Black person on the covers, you'd generally know who that Black guy was. They were very small, very sporadic representations of Black gay men in mainstream gay culture.

Ajamu: Linked to this, I had always documented Gay Pride, and Black men at

38 "Sharing Tongues" is a rukus! project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to uncover, record, and make available the previously hidden Black LGBT history of London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool, through recording oral and written histories and the production of a CD, booklet, exhibition, and website. For more information visit "Sharing Tongues," rukus!, <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/26/28/> (accessed on 26 March 2009).

39 <http://www.boyz.co.uk/> (accessed on 21 September 2009).

40 <http://qxmagazine.com/> (accessed on 21 September 2009).

Gay Pride, from the 1990s onward, as a photographer. Some people who were photographed are no longer around, and that was another part of the impetus for “Family Treasures.”

Campbell: We tried to get “Family Treasures” off the ground by writing to people like Dennis Carney,<sup>41</sup> and Dirg [Aaab-Richards], and various other people who had been active. We were asking “What have you got?” And nothing came back. Nothing came back.

Ajamu: Nobody responded.

*Stevens: What were you asking for?*

Ajamu: Anything and everything. Anything and everything that had been said about Black lesbians and gays.

*Stevens: Why do you think you didn't get a response? And what changed over time?*

Campbell: There is no one reason. I think you are looking at a maelstrom, you're looking at a kind of conspiracy, circumstances which prohibit you from thinking that what you do and what you have is valuable. Obviously some activists had tapes from when they were on TV, and others had campaign information. But most people just didn't think their material was valuable.

Ajamu: That's it. As far as I know, this was the first time that we had talked about heritage in relation to our sexual identity, within the context of the UK. So people would say, “it is *just* a flyer.” And so they would dismiss it. Until we started asking, nobody had pulled together this thing called heritage or archive. So we left “Family Treasures,” and it turned into the exhibition “The Queen's Jewels.” Ironically, we got money through HIV work, through the Terrence Higgins Trust.<sup>42</sup> Because at this point, I was a trainer for Terrence Higgins Trust. And we held the exhibition at Positive East in Stepney Green [east London], which is an HIV centre. I was doing a Black men's photography workshop, and they gave us a room.

41 Dennis Carney is a campaigner, freelance trainer, consultant, and therapeutic group worker, focusing on issues around diversity, sexual orientation, and HIV; see <http://www.lovingmen.org/dennis-carney.php> (accessed on 1 September 2009). He is currently Vice-Chair of the Black Gay Men's Advisory Group (BGMAG). For more background, see *In the Family*, p. 23.

42 Terrence Higgins Trust is the leading HIV and sexual health charity in the UK; see <http://www.tht.org.uk/aboutus/> (accessed on 21 September 2009).

Campbell: A group of us helped paint it white for the exhibition. And we hung it ourselves. To gather the material for “The Queen’s Jewels” we hounded people. We went to people’s houses and sat with them.

Ajamu: I had this black notebook actually, and we would walk around asking people to show us what they had and making notes. Our networks were very useful for collecting material. For example Dorothea Smartt<sup>43</sup> and Valerie [Mason-John] helped us get in touch with lots of women that I didn’t know so well, who also had material.

Campbell: We went to Steve’s [Swindells] house,<sup>44</sup> and sat there for ages, I remember, and Dennis’s [Carney]. Again, people would go, “well I don’t know, what is it you want? I mean, there’s nothing here.” And then they’d come out with a box, and we’d go, “Oh wow, that’s great!” or “that flyer,” or “yeah, I’ve got some of those flyers, do you have some from the other time when that happened?” What is interesting, remembering it now, was some of the conversations. It’s very difficult to articulate, but people were working in a very minority maelstrom – a maelstrom which had no mainstream recognition at all. It is very tiring to work in that way, whether you are a community activist, or a DJ, or a club promoter. And then you move on, you get older, and somebody comes along and says, “that was really valuable what you did,” but at the time nobody was telling you it was valuable.

*Stevens: Did you have the feeling that going through the process from talking about archives to seeing items on public display changed people’s attitudes toward their material and their heritage?*

Campbell: Yes, definitely. I remember having a long conversation with Dennis [Carney] and he was quite overwhelmed by the transformation of something that was stuck in the bottom of a box in his kitchen into something slightly iconic. We also went to the *QX* office, and we picked out all the *QX* covers up until 2004, which were Black.

Ajamu: Yes, at this point *QX* was almost on their 500<sup>th</sup> edition, and twenty-nine of its covers were Black.

Campbell: For *Boyz*, we used the covers that I had. They didn’t respond to our request for covers. *Gay Times*, I had loads of covers already, and Ajamu

43 Dorothea Smartt is a writer, poet, and live artist. See *In the Family*, p. 52 and her website <http://www.britbornbajan.com> (accessed on 1 September 2009).

44 Steve Swindells is a musician, journalist, and club promoter.

had some, and various other people had them. “The Queen’s Jewels” evolved into an archive by virtue of the material we had. Because we said, okay, we’ve got media and campaigning, we’ve got club-based stuff. We’ve got activism, we’ve got theatre. For me it was interesting because we had three big panels of club flyers over twenty years, from 1983, which was incredible, because people are always complaining that there is nowhere to go!

Ajamu: We had something from the first Black gay play in 1986. And we also had an obituaries section, with some of the men who died as well. There were forty-three pieces.

Campbell: We suddenly had all this stuff. We had no publicity machine, we sent out a small press release. And there wasn’t very much take-up on that. Obviously *QX* said something, and I think, *Boyz* said something? Because we had their covers so they were interested.

Ajamu: And there was a line in the *Pink Paper*.<sup>45</sup>

Campbell: No photographers came out. In a way we were “victims,” we were treated as if it were some sort of minority issue that doesn’t really matter, by both the Black and the gay press. We never expected *The Voice* or *The Nation* to turn up.<sup>46</sup> But I think for me the frustration remained that we didn’t reach out beyond the minority.

Ajamu: *The Voice* had had an article on Black Gay Pride in the States. And their offices were just down the road from Stepney Green. And there was nothing in there whatsoever about what we were doing.

Campbell: But the launch was a huge event, a big landmark event. I filmed it and we invited keynote speakers. It was a very moving exhibition for those people who hadn’t had a sense of the history. It was an indication for a lot of people about the strength of the archive and the possibility of it. It was exciting to think about what it could be or how it could be. It was a landmark

45 *Pink Paper* was a weekly newspaper for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. It first appeared in 1987, but since June 2009 has been available only on the Internet at <http://www.pinkpaper.com/> (accessed on 16 September 2009).

46 *The Voice* and *New Nation* were two of the leading, black, weekly newspapers in the United Kingdom. *The Voice* continues to be published every Monday in tabloid format and appears on the Internet at <http://www.voice-online.co.uk/> (accessed on 21 September 2009). *New Nation* has been in administration since January 2009. In 1990 *The Voice* became a major target of the campaigning organization Black Lesbians and Gays Against Media Homophobia for its treatment of Justin Fashanu (see below). *In the Family*, p. 19.

because everybody we had struggled to get involved or who didn't know really what our vision was suddenly saw this array of forty-three pieces in this big room, and saw the wealth of history there. How it connected both deep within personal stuff, like the obituaries, and into the mainstream, with people like Justin Fashanu<sup>47</sup> and Isaac Julian. And I think there was a ripple effect.

Ajamu: And from there we started the process for rukus! to become a charity. At this point we had lots of arguments around using the word "queer."

*Stevens: Why was that?*

Ajamu: We wanted to become a charity because we thought that people would take us more seriously. And we wanted to call it the Black, Lesbian, and Gay *Queer* Archive. And the Charity Commission wrote back saying they didn't think the word "queer" was an appropriate wording because some people might find it offensive. They told us they thought the word was seen as a derogatory term. It's a different world. [To Campbell] We had a meeting about whether or not to use the word "queer" at your house, I remember.

Campbell: We had a board meeting that went on forever. And we dropped it.

Ajamu: We dropped it formally in terms of the objects [of the charity]. But in our publicity it's still "queer."

Campbell: Yes, the Charity Commission thought it wasn't in keeping with the image it allows or something. But I personally don't really care one way or another about queer or not. I think it is a quite funny word to use. I think there was a time when it was important, but I think my personal discourse around it is not that interesting. I'm more interested in bisexuality. The focus on the whole notion of queer just betrays our generation. Queer politics was late, early nineties, in the UK anyway. There was quite a big sense in which the gay mainstream communities were identifying themselves, and reappropriating difference, in a positive way. But I think for anybody who is between fifteen and twenty-five now, it wouldn't have any meaning whatsoever. Personally, I don't mind saying Black, Queer Archive, or Black, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans Archive. There might be people who might mind. But as long as the energy of the archive is there, it doesn't bother me personally.

47 Justin Fashanu was Britain's first million pound, Black, soccer player, and remains the only top level player to have been publicly open about his homosexuality. He committed suicide in 1998. *In the Family*, p. 34.

Ajamu: Me neither, actually. And of course at some point, we might get rid of [the] “LGBT archive” label, and just have “the rukus! archive.”

Campbell: The charity issue also raised all sorts of questions about how do we set up an organization, do we want an organization or is an organization going to tie us down? That is something that we are still struggling with. I’m very anti the notion of being institutionalized by any kind of organization, even by our own organization. There’s no building, there’s no core funding. We now have an editing suite in my house and an office in Ajamu’s house, and lots of the stuff is stored there. We have meetings in both places. We’re registered as a company and we’re a charity, so we have all the legal stuff going on, and that’s all we need really. The struggle obviously is for money, always. We’re not paid for rukus! It’s not a paid job. But I always go on about the other practices that we do, about the kind of work I’m doing, and I want to continue doing that. If rukus! was to subsume everything, that would be unsatisfying for me. The kind of infrastructure and “capacity-building” stuff that comes with an institution is not something that I’m interested in doing. I have a freelance career, and Ajamu has his own other interests and career. It is really about looking at it holistically, in terms of one’s life. rukus! is more of a brand than an institution, and as a brand it’s really strong.

Ajamu: I think for me, when the archive idea started I did have the idea of a centre that would house the archive. But then seeing how other groups run with a building and all the infrastructure that goes with that, it becomes so top-heavy. I guess I like the idea of something being a lot more flexible and more fluid. Otherwise the creativity is lost. For me the notion of an institution also sounds quite serious, although at the same time we are building an institution. But in a different kind of a way, around another kind of a model. I think central to what we do is that we’re artists first and foremost. An artistic sensibility is woven into everything. If I think about an archive, on the basis of things I’ve seen, it’s not pretty, it’s not interesting, it’s not sexy. How to bring in a community of people who might share this view is a big question. Approaching the archive with an artistic sensibility is one way into that.

Campbell: There is a vision that somehow the Black gay and lesbian presence would be more “instituted,” but that’s not the same as us wanting to be an institution. It may be that one day we might do a project with somebody like the Museum of London and have an office there part-time for six months, but that’s it.

*Stevens: It seems to me that the way you think through your organizational model is similar to the way you think through Black queer identities. These things are mobile and they’re fluid, and they’re there to take on what already*

*exists, whether those are concepts or labels, or physical spaces. How did you take this fluid model forward?*

Ajamu: We're very much about being very public; exhibitions and events, that's how people hear about rukus! and the archive. People see and hear what we are doing and that it makes it a living archive and not just stuck in a corner, not doing anything. Putting on events about the archive is very central to what we are doing.

Campbell: I agree. rukus! is a public organization. The archive is important and continues to be, but everything has a public face. "The Queen's Jewels" and "Outside Edge," which Ajamu curated [at the Museum of London Docklands in 2008], are public things.<sup>48</sup> Our focus is on events because each event is a political act, an intervention in its own right. So we did "The Fire This Time," which we called "queering Black History Month."<sup>49</sup> It was a way of saying we're in Black History Month. I'm doing, we as rukus! are doing, a stage play called "Mangina Monologues."<sup>50</sup> I'm cutting a film which is a documentary that archives the "In this our lives" project.<sup>51</sup> I hope to make another short biography film, which is a gay film. We're doing the Zami Conference next year.<sup>52</sup> One day we'll probably have to apply for a grant to archive rukus!.

Ajamu: The thing with "The Queen's Jewels" and "Outside Edge" is that they were very much about campaigns, activism, public stuff. And too often that personal voice was missing from that: who's behind that, how do they think, how do they feel? Our new project, "Sharing Tongues," is about capturing the other side to our experiences. You tend to hear or see the same kind of people time and time again. What we wanted to do in terms of "Sharing Tongues" was to try to collect the voices of people that nobody would have heard about. Their stories and experience are just as valued. Some people might not be out

48 "Outside Edge," Museum of London Docklands, [http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Past/Outside\\_Edge.htm](http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Past/Outside_Edge.htm) (accessed on 27 March 2009).

49 A festival which took place on 21 October 2006; <http://www.firethistime.co.uk/> (accessed on 27 March 2009).

50 "Mangina Monologues – Stories of Love and Lubrication," rukus!, <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/29/1/> (accessed on 27 March 2009).

51 *In This Our Lives: The Reunion*, director Topher Campbell, documents a reunion of the original participants in the first and only national gathering of Black gay men in the UK, the 1987 National Black Gay Men's Conference; the documentary was screened at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival on 2 April 2009, [http://www.bfi.org.uk/lglff/our\\_lives\\_reunion\\_panel\\_discussion](http://www.bfi.org.uk/lglff/our_lives_reunion_panel_discussion) (accessed on 21 September 2009).

52 The Zami Conference was a national gathering of Black lesbians that took place in 1985. rukus! was planning to document a reunion, similar to that organized for the Black Gay Men's Conference.

publicly. And yet, they still might want to contribute in some shape or form. Trust and positivity are very key.

*Stevens: And you've recently decided to deposit your collections in London Metropolitan Archives [LMA]?*

Ajamu: Well I'm personally not an archivist, and I am not necessarily interested in the professional side of things. I think that is probably a good thing. Because it means I can approach archiving without being restricted to a professional frame of reference: "this should be done like this," and so on. Yes, what we do has to be up to a professional standard, and for me I think our material is better placed with an organization that has a history around collecting a community. We thought about this very carefully; [what] I had to ask is which organizations out there have a history of dealing with Black material and gay material. The Hall Carpenter doesn't have a history of dealing with Black material. The Black Cultural Archives doesn't have a history of dealing with gay material. London Metropolitan Archives now has the Jessica and Eric Huntley archive, which is a major Black archive. They've got that and they've got other gay archives there. So I think they are best placed to house what we are collecting. And then they can conserve it and preserve it. And that makes it more accessible publicly. Because I think if you are building up an archive and people ask you "where's it held?" and you say, "well, you know, it's under my bed," people won't see it seriously. It's dismissed as, "well, that's lovely, great," but actually it's not *serious* because it's in your house.

Campbell: I agree. I mean Marx said get your hands on the means of production. We're not holding it at Conservative central office now, are we? We are holding it somewhere which has got the facilities and resources to maintain it. LMA is a huge place and they've got facilities for storage at the correct temperatures and so on. And it's our archive; they're not owning the archive. They've been very, very accessible in terms of our conversations. They gave us an award!<sup>53</sup> And you want to be aligned with the best of the bunch. So there are all sorts of reasons for depositing there.

Ajamu: Also, we've been given people's materials and so naturally, we have to keep them at the best place; it goes back to respect.

53 rukus! was one of the 2008 winners of the Archives Landmark Award (ALA). The award is given by the City of London, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), and Archives for London Ltd. (AfL) "in recognition of innovative and original projects which make creative use of archive material and which make a real contribution to the community;" [http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/LGNL\\_Services/Leisure\\_and\\_culture/Records\\_and\\_archives/The+Archives+Landmark+Award.htm](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/LGNL_Services/Leisure_and_culture/Records_and_archives/The+Archives+Landmark+Award.htm) (accessed on 27 March 2009).

*Stevens: That leads on to the question of how you position yourself in relation to more mainstream heritage organizations.*

Ajamu: I've contacted a few lesbian and gay archives just to say "we're rukus!, we're here, what do you have and can we have a record of it?" For some places, their file over a twenty-year period about the Black and Asian experience is not even one folder. The Black Cultural Archives, they've done nothing whatsoever in terms of the Black gay and lesbian experience. But that may be a generational thing. Some of the younger generation are more open, so we are talking with them. Basically we'll work with any group, as long as they're interesting and genuine, and they're not ticking boxes. Because I've been involved with some groups who want to have their funky little Black projects at the end of it. And I thought "Well [pause] no."

Campbell: We are open to anybody. Because there is a level at which we want to make sure our archive is representative and reaches people. We're open to anybody as long as the agenda is ours. We're depositing our archive at LMA, we've worked with the Museum of London Docklands. But we do things in our own way. Exhibitions like "Outside Edge" borrowed from classic ideas of how to make an exhibit, from memorabilia to audiovisual material. But we don't want it to be too safe. Because we're not safe, or at least I don't think so. We're not massively anarchist, but we're not safe.

Ajamu: We're not anarchists but I think we've got a kind of punk attitude. A kind of do-it-yourself ethos.

Campbell: And we're also quite subversive. I mean in the first exhibition at the Museum of London ["Queer is here," 2006]<sup>54</sup> we just put our logo there, didn't we?

Ajamu: And some of the sex club flyers.

*Stevens: And you could have submitted anything?*

Campbell: We could have submitted a nice portrait of the first Black couple to have a civil partnership or a cover of Justin Fashanu, but we submitted the logo because we didn't want to be easily categorized. With "Outside Edge" they gave Ajamu a lot of rein. But he still subverted it. We couldn't get the

54 See <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Past/QueerIsHere.htm> (accessed on 26 March 2009). The exhibition is discussed in more detail in Mills (see note 10 above).

Black Perverts Network archive posters in the exhibition, but he put them in the symposium as part of a display, and so unfortunately for them they were now fifteen feet high! There's always a bit of mischievousness in us. rukus! is the finger up at the same time as the embrace and the kiss. "Love and lubrication" is our sign-off at the same time as "Fuck off, we'll do what we want." We're not far away from the punk generation of the seventies, so there's a kind of shiftiness and abrasiveness about the way that we are.

That abrasiveness is important, because part of our history is a very unpalatable history, and that needs to be recorded. The history of Brixton cottage, the sex parties, of violent and difficult relationships, of relationships between different Black communities, and of what's now been called gay racism, which is what the White community has done, systematically, to disempower Black clubs and to stop the Black presence happening. There's a lot of stuff which isn't nice, which doesn't sit easily in museums and community events. And doesn't sit easily with our memories either. It was not some kind of halcyon trajectory from invisibility to visibility. It's born out of a struggle, from being refused entry to clubs, to clubs being closed down because they're Black. And you don't get money for talking about that sort of thing. Although perhaps "Sharing Tongues" will bring some of that to light, in terms of the earlier struggles.

*Stevens: It can be argued that there are risks associated with keeping difficult memories alive. Paradoxically, archives and museums have often been seen as places where you put things so as not to have to deal with them.*

Campbell: Yes. That's interesting territory, I think.

Ajamu: Yes, very interesting territory. One of the other dangers of the archive is that you carry all this stuff in your head. You can tell people their lives. You can say, "we know you were there" because we've seen a photo or a document.

Campbell: Yes, people say certain things about where they were and where they were not, in a good way and a bad way.

Ajamu: Although some people in their forties will just naturally have forgotten things, and for some people the archive fills in the gaps.

*Stevens: What would you like to see rukus! achieve now?*

Campbell: I think I would like to see these histories and these stories emerging in "mainstream" teachings about Black history in schools and colleges, and in higher education. It doesn't need to be such a mystery.

Ajamu: That's why a CD and a booklet from the "Sharing Tongues" project will be going out to schools. I have this vision that some years down the line, there's a teacher talking about Black history and gay history. And he's talking, talking, and this one Black kid goes, "well, what about this sir? Because this happened too."

*Mary Stevens:*

With this progressive and hopeful vision of a future in which young people are inspired to challenge their educators to produce and promote more diverse and inclusive understandings of British history, the interview drew to a close. Projecting the idea of the rukus! archive into the future reminds us that, as Stuart Hall noted, "an archive may be largely about 'the past' but it is always 're-read' in the light of the present and the future."<sup>55</sup> So far as the present is concerned, there can be little to add to Ajamu and Topher's regular sign-off to the friends and supporters of their work with rukus!: "Love and lubrication!"

55 Hall, p. 92.