
Dissertation

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Abstract

For most of the twentieth century, black writers represented African Americans as sexually proper in realist forms as a means of combating racist discourse that considers all black sexuality depraved. In the 1960s and 1970s, black literary realism became explicitly associated with the Black Arts Movement’s heteronormative politics of black authenticity and pride. During the 1980s, however, many African American writers openly identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT) explored black queer experiences in a range of literary forms, including performance poetry, realist fiction, and speculative fiction. *Black Shamelessness* considers this range of forms, finding literary genre to be critical terrain for the exploration of black queer politics. 1980s black LGBT writers like Alice Walker, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint challenged the expectations of black literature by queering the archives of black realism with realist celebrations of queer sexualities. Meanwhile, writers like Audre Lorde, Samuel Delany, and Jewelle Gomez composed non-realist texts that question the value of queer subjects being folded into black literary realism. *Black Shamelessness* thus finds that black LGBT writers can be categorized in part by their relationship to realism and their responses to the politics of black authenticity. While some reproduce the conventions of realism to either parody, queer, or broaden the concept of black reality, others find realism too sutured to the politics of sexual normativity to be used for a queer-positive project. Black LGBT writers of the 1980s continuously pointed to the
relationship between sexuality and black authenticity in order to interrogate the privilege associated with words like “real” and “authentic.” Both terms can be appropriated to enforce an ideological tyranny that operates by tacitly implying the normativity—and therefore the rightness—of heterosexuality and gender propriety for African Americans.

Furthermore, Black Shamelessness also argues that the major publishing industry and mainstream audiences have historically expected black writers to compose realist texts endorsing heteronormativity. Black LGBT writers’ frequent investment in independent, identity-based presses allowed them to reach specific black and/or LGBT audiences not hailed by the major publishing industry. Although the writings of Samuel R. Delany, Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker have been studied individually for their contributions to science fiction, black gay culture, and black feminism and womanism, respectively, no study before Black Shamelessness has considered the roles genre and publication venue played in shaping their articulations of black queer experience, nor has another study considered them alongside other under-studied black LGBT writers like Jewelle Gomez and Assotto Saint.
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Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... ii-iii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. iv
Vita ............................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents ....................................................................................................... vi-viii

Introduction. Surveying the Ground of African American LGBT Writing, 1982-1991................................................................. 1-86

Black Sexuality and U.S. Political Rhetoric of the 1980s............................... 18-29
The Politics of Respectability, Pride, and Invulnerability.............................. 29-36
African American Literature, Genre, and Shame............................................. 36-46
Re-Valuing Marginalized Communities and Texts in 1980s U.S. Literary Criticism ................................................................. 46-52
Black Queer Studies and the Critique of Canonization................................. 52-62
1980s African American LGBT Publishing...................................................... 62-69
Articulating Shamelessness.............................................................................. 69-72
Notes and Bibliography......................................................................................... 72-86

Chapter 1. Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s The Color Purple................................................................. 87-125
Articulating Sexuality and Opposing Salvation.............................................. 91-105
Chapter 2. Packaging Black LGBT Life-Writing: Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and Samuel Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water*

Packaging and Publishing while Black and Queer

Distributing through Major and Independent Presses

Lorde’s *Zami* and the Critique of Realist Autobiography

Delany’s Legendary Celebrity in *The Motion of Light in Water*

Conclusion: Disruptive Legends

Notes and Bibliography

Chapter 3. Queering the Neo-Slave Narrative: Samuel Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*

The Queerness of Enslavement

Afrofuturism and the Desire for Race: Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*

The (Neo-)Slave Narrative and the Vampire Novel: Gomez’s *The Gilda*
Stories...........................................................................................................208-223
Conclusion: Contesting the Aesthetics of Black Literary Realism........223-225
Notes and Bibliography.............................................................................225-236

Chapter 4. Embodying Black Gay Poetry: The Cinematic Corporeality of Essex

Hemphill and Assotto Saint.................................................................237-286
The AIDS Crisis and the Idea of a Black Gay Burden.........................240-247
Essex Hemphill and Black Gay Performance Poetry...........................247-266
Assotto Saint’s Refusal to Regret.........................................................266-278
Conclusion: Re-Narrating AIDS and the Body.....................................278-279
Notes and Bibliography.......................................................................279-286

Conclusion. Articulating and Circulating Shamelessness.....................287-293
Notes and Bibliography.......................................................................293

Comprehensive Chapter-by-Chapter Bibliography............................294-326

An amazing number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) African American writers published and performed work in the late twentieth century, especially between 1982 and 1991. Not since the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s had such a large group of same-sex desiring African Americans simultaneously found occasions and venues to publish and perform their writing. Remarkably, black LGBT writers published during a decade known in the United States for its political conservatism on issues of gender, race, and sexuality. From 1981 to 1993, Conservative leadership dominated U.S. politics with the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. The racism and (hetero)sexism that circulated in national discussions of black sexuality—discussions which pathologized black families and rarely addressed black LGBT issues directly—inspired many LGBT African Americans to write about their experiences and perspectives, so as to enter their voices authoritatively into discussions of black families, black sexuality, and racism.

This dissertation considers the conditions under which and the concerns with which the first movement of openly LGBT African American writers managed to emerge in literary discourse of the 1980s. By attending to the particularities of various publication and circulation venues of the decade—including the major literary publishing
industry, the major science fiction publishing industry, independent African American publishing, independent LGBT publishing, and independent black gay film—I survey a wide range of networks through which black LGBT writers surfaced in U.S. literary discourse despite the overwhelming invisibility of black LGBT concerns and issues on the mainstream political stage. By attending to black LGBT writers’ choices of form and genre—including autobiography, biomythography, the epistolary novel, performance poetry, science fiction, and the vampire novel—I determine the aesthetic discourses in which LGBT African American writers participated. Specifically, each of the writers I consider negotiated a relationship with literary realism, the aesthetic form most associated with and expected of African American writers. While the writers I consider made similar statements about the values of black LGBT communities, lives, and practices, they staged them differently and for different audiences. I argue that their varied publication venues and relationships to literary realism demonstrate the range of distribution and aesthetic options available to late-twentieth century African American writers, as well as the costs of those options. Furthermore, I argue that a black-authored text’s relationship to realism, as well as its publication venue, determines its ability to queer the established boundaries of literary blackness.3

In terms of content, each of the writers considered here explored what I call the value of shamelessness. They cultivated an ethic of black queer shamelessness that responds critically to ethics of black pride and (sexual) dignity that characterized African American writing of the 1960s and 1970s, especially that of the Black Arts Movement. Luminaries of the Black Arts Movement like Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, and Hoyt
Fuller frequently advocated racial dignity and pride as the major goals of black literary representation. In 1968, Fuller wrote that

the black writer, like the black artist generally, has wasted much time and talent denying a propensity every rule of human dignity demands he possess, seeking an identity that can only do violence to his sense of self. Black Americans are, for all practical purposes, colonized in their native land, and it can be argued that those who would submit to subjection without struggle deserve to be enslaved. (1856)

Fuller argued that black people in the United States had historically been denied any sense of “human dignity” due to institutionalized systems of racist bias and violence that require African Americans to assimilate into limiting social roles. As such, he implored black people to cultivate proud, stable, and self-determined black identities as correctives to the virtual selflessness and abnegation consistently imposed on black people by white supremacist culture. For other Black Arts Movement writers, including Baraka and Cleaver, some black people’s willing “subjection” to racist impositions of selflessness took on sexual connotations. They were particularly vicious toward black male homosexuals, a group they considered inherently interested in interracial romances and all too willing to sacrifice individual dignity in exchange for them. In a now infamous essay on black gay writer James Baldwin from *Soul on Ice* (1968), Cleaver attacked Baldwin and all black male homosexuals when he characterized them as “outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of
their miscegenation is not the little half white offspring of their dreams” (102). The image of black male homosexuals “already touching their toes for the white man” positions black male homosexuality as willing, perverted subjection to white domination. The black gay male writers I consider here challenged Cleaver’s characterization of black gay men as in constant search of and submission to white partners by representing black men in sexual and caretaking relationships with one another. Furthermore, and perhaps more radically, they considered how a shameless embrace of vulnerability and egolessness, as well as the open articulation of histories of black violation, could actually level damage to discourses of (hetero)sexism and racism that operate by continuously emphasizing the need for distinct, impenetrable racial and sexual identities.

Cleaver also cruelly regarded lesbianism as the epitome of sexual “frigidity” (184), an unwillingness to open oneself to the penetration of men that Cleaver believed was natural for women. Positioned as the opposite of black male homosexual willing subjection, the (black) lesbian was, for Cleaver, “a frigid woman, a frozen cunt, with a warp and a crack in the wall of her ice” (184). Cleaver’s statements reveal that he reserved the supposed value of impenetrability for men only. As such, he conferred with Stokely Carmichael’s 1964 statement that the only position for women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is “prone.” Black lesbian and bisexual women writers of the 1980s responded to the over-determined status of black women as “prone” to male penetration not by representing invulnerable black women, but rather by emphasizing images and ideas of black and white men and women as mutually “prone” to, or dependent upon, one another for their identities.
In terms of form, each of the writers I consider here engaged in some way with the notion of black authenticity and its literary corollary, what Gene Andrew Jarrett calls “racial realism.” Jarrett explains racial realism as U.S. literary discourse’s compulsion that African Americans write texts that “portray… the black race in accurate or truthful ways” (1). Various authorities have enforced this mandate throughout the twentieth century, Jarrett says, including “William Howells in the 1890s, Alain Locke in the 1920s, Richard Wright in the 1930s and 1940s, and Amiri Baraka in the 1960s and 1970s” (1). Some of the writers I consider—Alice Walker, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint—adhered to this mandate by reproducing some of the conventions of black literary realism in order to queer predominant images of black communities. Other writers I consider—Samuel Delany, Jewelle Gomez, and Audre Lorde—challenged the assumption that narrating black experiences as “real” was a valuable endeavor. They found the conventions and mandates of black racial realism problematically sutured to heteronormative and masculinist ideologies of racial authenticity and thus refused to uncritically reproduce them. In effect, they composed in non-realist, speculative genres like biomythography, fantasy, and science fiction to critique black literary realism and the major publishing industry’s requirement that black writing offer documentary-like entrée into black life.

Black Shamelessness builds on growing critical interest in historicizing black gay male culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Most recently, Simon Dickel’s Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and 90s (2011) examines how Joseph Beam, Steven Corbin, Samuel Delany,

*Black Shamelessness* differs from these recent studies, though, by considering the 1980s performances and writing of black gay men alongside those of lesbian and bisexual African American women. Precedents for such work can be found in Robert McRuer’s *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Gay Identities* (1997), which considered the work of various U.S. gay and lesbian writers together, including that of Randall Keenan and Audre Lorde. *Black like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction* (2002), edited by Devon W. Carbado, Dwight McBride, and Don Weise, is also one of this dissertation’s major inspirations and—indeed—is the anthology in which I first read the names of many of the
writers I consider. Along with the critical anthology *Black Queer Studies* (2005), edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, and *Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Writing* (2007), edited by G. Winston James, *Black like Us* motions to the necessity of considering queer sexuality’s gendered inflections amongst African Americans if we are to take seriously McBride’s claim that “whenever we are speaking of race, we are always already speaking about gender, sexuality, and class” (“Straight” 87). It follows that when we speak of sexuality, we speak simultaneously of gender.

Importantly, none of the writers I consider in this dissertation self-identified as transgender. The contemporary transgender movement did not develop in the United States until the early 1990s (Love 149), shortly after the scope of this study ends. While today “transgender” is usually used by a community of people who self-identity with the term in order to connect with others whose gender expression does not conform to the expectations of their assigned sex at birth, the term continues to operate in a somewhat broader sense that I use in this dissertation. Heather Love explains that “‘transgender’ can overlap with other terms such as transsexual, cross-dresser, transvestite and drag king and drag queen. It is sometimes used to refer to butch and femme lesbians as well as effeminate gay men; it can be used to describe people who choose to live outside the two-gender system, identifying as both male or female, or neither” (149). I highlight the transgender concerns of 1980s black LGBT writers who, at times, identified as neither male nor female (Audre Lorde, see chapter 2) and considered the benefits of transgender experiences (Jewelle Gomez, see chapter 3).
I use the other terms of my analysis—including “African American,” “black,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “lesbian”—carefully as well, given that the issues of gender, racial, and sexual self-identification are major themes of 1980s black LGBT writing. Joseph Beam’s anthology In the Life (1986) emphasized the importance of a “black gay” identity that announced its subject’s racial identity before his sexual orientation. In Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), Audre Lorde identified as both a “gay girl” and a lesbian but also explained her identification with the word “zami,” a Carriacou word “for women who work together as friends and lovers” (255). The cultivation of terms that describe racial identity, sexual orientation, and political commitment simultaneously was also important to Alice Walker, who in 1983 used the term “womanist” to describe herself and her simultaneous struggles with classism, racism, and (hetero)sexism. More recently, E. Patrick Johnson has explained his identification with the word “quare,” a term from southern African American Vernacular English describing someone who is sexually peculiar or strange. Thus, since the 1980s proliferation of black LGBT writing and publishing, identificatory terms have been major points of concern, conversation, and at times contention amongst black LGBT writers and between black LGBT writers and other groups. I use the terms “black LGBT,” “African American LGBT,” “LGBT African American,” and “black same-sex desiring” at various points throughout this dissertation when describing the group of writers I consider as a means of gesturing to the ever-changing state of racial and sexual identification in the 1980s and today. The “LGBT” acronym is meant to historically ground my archive of writing in the 1980s. The acronym emerged in the 1980s—originally as “LGB”—to gesture to possible coalitions amongst
bi- and homosexual men and women. I use the acronym in this dissertation aware of its ongoing and complicated history, especially amongst African Americans. Importantly, all of the writers I consider connected to some part of the acronym due to their own public proclamations, their association with LGBT presses, and/or through other paratextual material. I respect the importance of self-identification; however, I also approach the concept of identity with a queer sensibility that understands identity as fluid, fluctuating, and ever-reconstructed. Thus I interchangeably use the terms “black” and “African American” with the understanding that this study is limited to the writing of black people within North America. I use the acronym “LGBT” when referring to self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as a group but use the term “same-sex desiring” as a way to describe homosexual practice and possibility rather than identity. I use the term “queer” not to denote LGBT people specifically—though they do frequently fall within its purview—but rather in reference to a given sexual identity or practice that differs from the often unstated norm of white heterosexual domesticity that has circulated throughout U.S. history.6

In addition to following the lead of the *Black like Us* and *Black Queer Studies* anthologies, my decision to bring African American LGBT writers together in this study results in particular from the non-fiction of Jewelle Gomez and Essex Hemphill. In the 1980s and early 1990s, both writers were invested in making connections between black lesbians and gay men in particular. For example, in his introduction to *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), Hemphill said that, after the first renaissance of African American writing in the 1920s,
the second Renaissance in African American literature occurred when black women claimed their own voices from the post-sixties, male-dominated realm of the “black experience,” a realm that at times resembled a boxing ring restricting black women to the roles of mere spectators. What black women, especially out black lesbians, bravely did was break the silence surrounding their experiences. No longer would black men, as the sole interpreters of race and culture, presume to speak for (or ignore) women’s experiences. Black women opened up new dialogues and explored uncharted territories surrounding race, sexuality, gender relations, family, history, and eroticism. In the process, they angered some black male writers who felt they were being culturally castrated and usurped, but out of necessity, black women realized they would have to speak for themselves—and do so honestly. As a result of their courage, black women also inspired many of the black gay men writing today to seek our own voices so we can tell our truths. (xxvii)

Hemphill acknowledged black gay male debt to black feminist and lesbian writing. While in the above quotation he positions black (lesbian) feminism as a phenomenon of the past on which black gay men of the 1980s built, he nevertheless established a connection and shared point of contention between the writing of black gay men and black (lesbian) feminists: namely, heterosexism amongst African Americans in general. Additionally, an unstated but perhaps obvious shared concern between the black gay writers and black
(lesbian) feminists Hemphill mentions is a general concern with racism and its effects on African Americans.

In 1993, Jewelle Gomez admitted that,

In some cases, Black gay men and lesbians have chosen to find no common ground and reject exploration of that which history has provided us. U.S. culture encourages that separation. Men huddled together in front of televised football or wrapping themselves in the pursuit of the perfect dance floor are each a different side of the same attempt to exclude women from male life. And lesbians, certainly more than our straight sisters, often find it easier to reject the rejector than to continue to knock on a closed door. (57)

Still, Gomez suggests that in many cases, black gay men and lesbians comprised a community together. She says,

Until the mid-1980s the public worlds of [white] lesbians and gay men remained relatively separate. Except for the annual pride marches held around the country, we shared few cultural events, clubs, or political activities. But for Black lesbians and gay men the world was not so easily divided. The history of oppression remained in our consciousness, even for some who were too young to really remember The Movement [of the 1960s]. And since we often were not fully accepted into the white gay world, we frequently socialized with each other. We hung together in the
corner at cast parties and invited each other over for holiday dinners
knowing the food would taste just like home. (*Forty-Three* 52)

Conceiving of black LGBT writers as at “home” with one another thus comes from
Gomez’s claim that—at particularly critical or just plain festive times—black gay men
and lesbians convened and broke bread. This dissertation considers the 1980s in
general—given its political conservatism and its dubious distinction as the decade during
which AIDS was named as such, but also its moments of exciting potential with regard to
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conversation with one another and is inspired by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying
Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) and its assertion—
probably known by most if not all of the writers I consider—that black writers have
always commented on one another’s work through their own by repeating and revising
particular concepts and tropes. Such a conversation literally occurred between Gomez
and Hemphill, according to Gomez, in the late 1980s. She wrote,

> Several years ago I spent an afternoon riding the train up from
> Washington, D.C. with … Hemphill… When the train pulled out the
> conversation started with “Girrrrrl…” in that drawn-out way we can say,
> and rolled through the writing of Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, and James
> Baldwin, the U.S. economy, the treachery of politicians, Luther Vandross,
> disco, white people in general, and a few specific ones we knew, and
> broken hearts. We touched these things that have deep meaning for us in
an unguarded way, using the familiar gestures and music of our fathers, mothers, and grandmothers. It was a synergy not so different from my intimate conversations with my best friend, Gwen, when we were in high school… Essex and I revealed ourselves to each other as writers, as a man and a woman, as brother and sister. We took each other in unreservedly. And we had barely begun before the train pulled into the station and we kissed goodbye. (54-55)

I think of this dissertation as an extended version of the train ride between Gomez and Hemphill, only with added passengers: Samuel R. Delany, Audre Lorde, Assotto Saint, and Alice Walker. I consider where the tracks of their different trips met up as well as when their destinations differed.

When appropriate, I also consider the intersection between the 1980s proliferation of black LGBT writing and publishing and other movements. The proliferation I focus on coincided with several other phenomena of the late twentieth-century writing world, including an increase in the publication of black women’s writing, literary postmodernism, the proliferation of black-authored speculative fiction, and the advent of performance poetry. Not surprisingly, each of the writers I consider in this dissertation can be understood as participating not only in the proliferation of 1980s black LGBT publishing, but also in one or more of these related phenomena.

I bring the work of Delany, Gomez, Hemphill, Lorde, Saint, and Walker together at the expense of other black LGBT writers of the 1980s because it comprises a varied selection of the kinds of black LGBT writing that emerged during the decade. They
represent the varied choices of form, publishing venue, and audience that black LGBT writers made in order for their voices to emerge in literary discourses that had theretofore only been available to a relatively small number of same-sex desiring African Americans. Hemphill and E. Lynn Harris both regarded the 1980s as a “critically important decade” for black gay men’s writing (Hemphill xxiv; Harris xiii) and Barbara Christian noted in 1985 that “Black lesbians, of course, had written before the 1980s. But seldom, until recently, have they identified themselves as lesbian, or overtly written from a lesbian perspective” (4). Unlike their New Negro forebears—and their more recent antecedents like James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry—many African American LGBT writers of the 1980s were invested in making frequent public proclamations about their sexual desires and identifications. They worked to publicly discuss (homo)sexuality in black communities as a means of attesting to its often ignored or debated presence. However, the means they used to represent the presence and significance of same-sex desire amongst African Americans differed significantly, as did the audiences they addressed.

For example, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) is an award-winning text that interjected sympathetic and redeeming portraits of black lesbianism and black female bisexuality into a cultural milieu distrusting of bisexuality, homosexuality, and African American sexuality in general. Walker wrote *The Color Purple* as an epistolary novel and thereby united a heralded realist form—regarded as the genre from which twentieth-century long-form Anglophone fiction originated—with the, at best, ignored and, at worse, reviled topics of black bi- and homosexuality. Walker was already an internationally-acclaimed writer when she published her first novel with explicitly queer
content. As a result, she introduced anti-racist and anti-heterosexist representations of black female same-sex desire to a huge multiracial and sexually-varied audience that, while not necessarily sympathetic to black LGBT concerns, was nevertheless interested in the output of such a major writer.

Walker’s important work in the 1980s to illuminate black lesbianism in a respected realist literary form for a mostly non-African American and/or heterosexual readership had an important counterpart in black LGBT writers who addressed much smaller audiences. Gomez, Hemphill, and Saint published and circulated their work through independent presses and independent film to a mostly LGBT and/or African American audience. While, by the 1980s, Lorde had the same kind of celebrity that Walker did, she—along with Gomez, Hemphill, and Saint—began circulating her writing through independent, identity-based presses. Importantly, Delany, Gomez, and Lorde also experimented with and explored new and/or marginalized non-realist forms of writing for their work. Rather than work in already-respected (and expected) realist literary forms, they chose to present portraits of black queer sexuality in non-realist forms of writing like biomythography, the science fiction novel, and the vampire novel.

In order to understand the form, content, and distribution of 1980s black LGBT writing, I use an approach cultivated in the field of black queer studies by scholars like Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, Cathy J. Cohen, Roderick Ferguson, Candice Jenkins, E. Patrick Johnson, Dwight A. McBride, José Esteban Muñoz, Robert Reid-Pharr, Darieck Scott, L.H. Stallings, and Kathryn Bond Stockton. Black queer studies is an interdisciplinary field with connections to African American studies, gender studies,
literary studies, performance studies, sociology, and queer studies. As part of the larger field of queer of color critique, black queer studies foregrounds an awareness of sexuality and race—and of heterosexism and racism—in the study of culture. More specifically, black queer studies understands heterosexism and racism to be mutually constitutive forms of oppression in the United States. Furthermore, black queer studies attends to the fact that black racialization frequently locates supposed black inferiority in black sexuality. Its concepts are useful for understanding how 1980s black LGBT writers conceptualized and represented supposedly debased racial and sexual identities simultaneously. My dissertation consistently claims that late-twentieth-century black LGBT writing is one site of U.S. literary discourse with some of the richest and longest-sustained reflections on sexuality as the means through which (hetero)sexism, racism, enslavement, and freedom may be experienced.

Black queer studies also interrogates the disciplinary boundaries that typically separate fields like African American studies and queer studies. Black queer studies is particularly invested in questioning the archives associated with both fields—archives that often exclude explorations of queer sexuality from the former and explorations of blackness from the latter. In order to meld these archives, black queer studies assesses the contours of what Roderick Ferguson has called “racialized heteronormativity” (*Aberrations* 18), a term he uses to emphasize the ways in which racism depends on (hetero)sexism to operate and vice versa. This term is itself indebted to Abdul R. JanMohamed’s coining of “racialized sexuality,” which he explained as “the point where the deployment of sexuality intersects with the deployment of race” (94). That is, black
queer studies is invested in establishing archives wherein the complicated relationship between racism and heterosexism is explored. Inspired by this approach, *Black Shamelessness* looks to black LGBT-authored texts and regards them as important sites for examining the co-constitutive condition of gender, race, and sexuality in U.S. culture. I foreground a group of writers especially vulnerable to (hetero)sexism and racism as a means of centering the conversation of both on subjects whose complicated and often terrifyingly intimate experiences with racialized heteronormativity frequently go unnoticed in literary and cultural criticism. The archive of writing I have assembled is certainly not the only place U.S. literary studies can look for late twentieth-century writing about this intersection. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga explored Chicana lesbianism in their writing at the same time Gomez, Lorde, and Walker explored African American lesbianism and female bisexuality in theirs. I make an effort to gesture toward similarities between the group of writers I have assembled and other groups when possible, but sustained engagement with their similarities and differences is beyond the scope of this African American-centered project.

The interrogated disciplinary boundaries of black queer studies have also inspired *Black Shamelessness*’s attention to performance texts, film, and paratextual images in addition to written texts. Examinations of these non-written texts allow for an engagement with authors’ bodies as they are represented on book covers, in photographs within their written texts, and on screen. Attention to the ways in which an author’s physical body is framed within and beyond a written text is an especially important approach to the study of LGBT writers, given that (queer) bodily experiences and sexual
desires may easily be excised from their critical reputations by those who relegate (queer) sex and the body to the private sphere. Most of the writers I consider frequently presented their audiences with images of their own bodies. I take this trend seriously as a comment on the need to attend not only to their written words, but also to their bodily performances and experiences.  

In the rest of this introduction, I weave together analyses of 1980s political rhetoric, U.S. and African American cultural and literary scholarship, and the terrain of 1980s black LGBT publishing in order to construct a useful history and context for understanding my engagement with African American LGBT writers of the 1980s in later chapters. Throughout, I use a black queer studies approach to the histories and material under consideration, or an approach that attends to the specific history of (hetero)sexism and racism associated with and inflicted upon African Americans in the United States. Much of this introduction considers how this specific history informed the development of African American, LGBT, and queer studies programs and departments in U.S. universities, as well as how it informs academic discourses of aesthetics, canonicity, disciplinarity, and genre.

Black Sexuality and U.S. Political Rhetoric of the 1980s

As it has been throughout U.S. history, black sexuality was a topic of interest and concern in mainstream political discourse of the 1980s. In many ways, “black sexuality” is a redundant term, given that sexuality has often been defined and described on and
through black people in the United States and, furthermore, given that “blackness” has
frequently been an experience of sexuality. Darieck Scott explains that,
as we all know, to confront the notion of a “black” “sexuality” is to run, at
top speed, into the puckered but nonetheless sturdy walls of an often
deforming articulation between blackness and the production of sexual
expression and repression in Western societies. As Frantz Fanon elegantly
dissects the matter, Negrophobia is essentially a sexual phobia, because
blackness is primarily associated in Western (and Western-associated)
cultures with perverse, nonnormative sexuality. (6)
Just as they had during the antebellum era and at the turn of the twentieth century,
“blackness” and “sexuality” continued to define one another and continued to define
racial and sexual normativity in late-twentieth century political discourse.12 The image of
black sexuality arose most frequently and prominently in 1980s discussions of black
families. White politicians often regarded the black family as a strained social unit, a
trend that can be seen in part as the result of the 1965 study The Negro Family: The Case
for National Action, also known as the Moynihan Report, which espoused the pathology
of black communities by vilifying the relatively high rate of single-parent female-led
families within them. Democratic politician and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan
found the rate of black single motherhood to be problematic because it consolidated
power with a so-called black matriarchy rather than in the hands of men, the would-be
leaders of black communities. This document cast a long shadow over the image of black
families in various U.S. media of the 1980s. In many ways it was a reiteration of racist
depictions of black kinship that had circulated in the United States and elsewhere for centuries. Rather than challenge the ubiquitous concept of black familial failure, Ferguson says the report used “the history of racial exclusion stretching back to slavery and reconstruction [to] account for the so-called gender and sexual devastations of African American families, devastations evinced by the number of female-headed households” (*Aberrations* 121). The report’s conclusions aided politicians interested in propelling the discourse of black domestic and sexual pathology into the 1980s. Moynihan’s so-called black matriarch certainly informed the image of the “welfare queen,” the particular image of black female domestic and sexual pathology that politicians, among others, demonized in the 1980s.

Ronald Reagan popularized the denigrating term “welfare queen” during his 1976 presidential campaign. To incite fear in potential voters over an African American “underclass” draining the country of its resources, Reagan invoked the image of a sexually non-normative African American woman who deceptively claims to be impoverished and in mourning over her husband’s death. Of this imagined figure, Reagan said, “She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over $150,000” (“‘Welfare’” 51). Reagan’s image of a black woman playing the system by performing the role of a widow grieving for a husband who never existed was particularly callous, since it first demonized the woman for not being in a long-term heterosexual
marriage (and subsequently demonized a load of absent men for not marrying her, leaving her to fabricate four deceased veteran husbands for herself) and then warned that any claims to sexual propriety—that is, to long-term heterosexual monogamy and marriage—on the part of African American women were fraudulent. Additionally, the idea of a woman grieving for a husband who never existed encouraged Reagan’s audience to suspect the emotional expressions and appeals of African Americans who, according to Reagan’s caricature, lie about the sincerity of their emotional relationships. Because this imagined woman’s husbands never existed, it follows that they never actually served in the U.S. military. The veteran’s benefits Reagan’s imagined woman received were entitled neither to black men nor black women, according to the “welfare queen” narrative. Such a schema cast doubt on the patriotism of African Americans, erased the reality of black soldiers from U.S. history, and finally rebuffed claims to U.S. citizenship made on behalf of African Americans.

The potential suspicion that the “welfare queen” narrative engendered toward black claims to U.S. citizenship recalls the legal prohibition against black citizenship in the antebellum era, when enslaved black people in the United States were not considered U.S. citizens. The narrative of black sexual and emotional life enshrined in the “welfare queen” also chillingly resembles racist narratives of black family life circulated during the antebellum era, when enslaved black families were torn apart by masters who sold fathers, sons, daughters, and mothers away from one another for profit and punished those who remained for grieving the loss of a family member. From the master’s
perspective—as well as according to the racist antebellum legal system—any claims to kinship among black people were laughed away, illegible.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), Hortense Spillers responded to the discourse of black matriarchy found in the Moynihan Report and re-circulated by Reagan’s invocation of a “welfare queen.” She found the discourse to be so powerful that it frequently left actual black women’s narratives about their (sexual) experiences unheard in mainstream U.S. political discourse: “Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, [discourses of black matriarchy and the stereotypes they engender] demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (257). Spillers argued that narratives of black (female) domestic and sexual pathology are fundamental to U.S. historiography. In effect she demonstrated that such narratives did not originate with Moynihan or Reagan alone. Spillers suggested that “Moynihan’s ‘Negro Family’ … borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person” (263). Spillers found that such narratives aided the justification of chattel slavery in the antebellum United States and, it follows, aided the justification to reform civil rights and welfare programs in the 1980s, as will be explored shortly. Because African American families, according to the Moynihan Report and to Reagan’s vision of the “welfare queen,” did not resemble a male-led (white) family regarded as normal in the United States, it followed that they were not really families at all. Thus, Spillers explained, “‘Family,’ as we practice and
understand it ‘in the West’—the vertical transfer of bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of ‘cold cash,’ from fathers to sons and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of his choice—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community” (270). According to U.S. political discourse of the 1980s, the vast majority of African Americans were incapable of exercising such a privilege, largely due to so-called black matriarchs unwilling to relinquish power to men.

Significantly, Moynihan’s so-called black matriarchs and Reagan’s “welfare queens,” while sexually deviant, were heterosexual. Cathy J. Cohen writes that the image of the deviant heterosexual “welfare queen” is proof of “the numerous ways that sexuality and sexual deviance from a prescribed norm have been used to demonize and to oppress various segments of the population, even some classified under the label ‘heterosexual’” (42). Since these figures were the major image of black women and black sexuality propagated in particular by Reagan, whose economic and social policies reigned in the 1980s, it follows that many people, then as ever, regarded the sexual lives and experiences of all African Americans—be they bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, or otherwise—as deviant. Thus, when we discuss black queer or deviant sexuality of the 1980s, we must turn our attention to heterosexual African Americans as well as LGBT African Americans, the latter being the group who—in this schema—might most readily be associated with sexual queerness. Cohen points to the unstated, illusory, and vague norm of white domesticity and heterosexuality against which narratives of black sexuality

23
emerged in 1980s political rhetoric and against which black sexuality by and large was positioned as queer.

Reagan’s vilification of the “welfare queen” and Moynihan’s indictment of the so-called “black matriarch” with too much power can be read as reactionary concern to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, according to Ashraf H.A. Rushdy. He explains that,

[w]hen Reagan’s Republicans came to power in the wake of the 60s, largely by employing a political rhetoric appealing to those ‘middle Americans’ alienated by the cultural and social developments associated with the 60s, they began dismantling the remnants of the Great Society ‘entitlement’ programs, themselves last-gasp efforts of a declining New Deal Order. In particular, the so-called ‘Reagan revolution’ attacked the Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (the ‘affirmative action’ that became ‘reverse discrimination’ in neoconservative political rhetoric) and rendered irrelevant those agencies designed to protect newly won civil rights by appointing black conservatives to head them. (132)

Thus—in addition to circulating the image of a sexually deviant African American woman—Reagan, his administration, and his allies enacted economic and social policies that disenfranchised actual African Americans. Framing affirmative action policies as “reverse discrimination,” the Reagan administration ignored a history of U.S. racism and sexism that informed the need for a law like the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the first place.14 After all, according to the narrative of the “welfare queen,” African Americans were...
actually more powerful and wealthier—with “tax-free cash income…over $150,000” a year—than white so-called “middle Americans” had been led to believe in the 1960s.

Reagan’s “dismantling” of 1960s legislation reveals more about the discourse of race in 1980s U.S. politics. The decade can perhaps be considered the first in an era of colorblind racism, when politicians and policy-makers claimed to oppose racism and demonstrated their supposed commitment to an anti-racist agenda by appointing a small number of black conservatives to significant offices. Meanwhile, they simultaneously promoted and passed legislation that disproportionately affected a large group of poor and working class African Americans in a negative way.

Richard Lowy referred to the 1980s phenomenon of colorblind racism as “yuppie racism” (445). He explained in a 1991 essay that many Americans do not view racism as a major problem in contemporary society. It is commonly believed that Civil Rights activism of the 1960s led to: (a) voting rights, fair housing, and antidiscrimination legislation; (b) affirmative action; (c) Black studies programs; and (d) a heightened sensitivity about matters of race which forever challenged and changed dominant-group prejudices and attitudes about the life and culture of minority group members. (445-446)

According to Lowy, “many [white] Americans” regarded the triumphs of the 1960s hyperbolically and believed the “racial problem” of the country had been solved. It was in such a cultural climate that Reagan’s use of a figure like the “welfare queen” could be read as a statement on economic exploitation and sexual deviance rather than a racist
caricature and, therefore, as evidence of ongoing racial inequality in the United States. Reagan’s unwillingness to make explicit the implied vision of white heterosexual domestic normativity against which the “welfare queen” was defined in many ways makes the “welfare queen” emblematic of 1980s colorblind racism. In racializing the figure as black through economic and sexual stereotypes, Reagan was able to propagate racist misinformation without actually using terms like “race,” “black,” or “white.”

According to Michelle Alexander, the Reagan administration’s “War on Drugs” and its attendant media coverage is yet another example of the decade’s colorblind racism. Alexander explains that the War on Drugs is frequently assumed to have developed in response to the prevalence of crack cocaine in inner-city black neighborhoods. In fact the Drug War was launched in 1982, several years before the emergence of crack cocaine in the United States (10). Nevertheless, the War on Drugs and its attendant imagery emphasized the criminalization of black drug-users despite the fact that people from various racial groups in the United States use drugs at the same rates (10). In fact, Alexander says, “[t]he Reagan administration hired staff to publicize the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 as part of a strategic effort to build public and legislative support for the war. The media campaign was an extraordinary success. Almost overnight, the media was saturated with images of black ‘crack whores,’ ‘crack dealers,’ and ‘crack babies’—images that seemed to confirm the worst negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents” (5). Indeed, the three stereotypes Alexander lists combined to form a pathological black family structure very much in line with Reagan’s “welfare queen.” The Drug War’s images, though, were racialized
negatively as black through terms like “crack” and “inner-city” rather than through traditional racial epithets.

The cultural climate of colorblind racism meant that a rigorous discussion of racial inequality was difficult to have in 1980s U.S. political discourse since, as Spillers says, race itself was buried and “[e]mbedded in bizarre axiological ground.” Policy-makers and politicians claimed they did not “see” race. Reagan, for example, wondered why people accused him of racism when he proclaimed that Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War, was his “hero” (qtd. in Alexander 11). If policy-makers and politicians could not “see” race, it follows that they certainly did not see race as a constitutive part of other categories of identity like class, gender, and sexual orientation. Perhaps resulting from the climate of colorblind racism, discussions of black same-sex desire were largely absent from U.S. political discourse of the 1980s. If race and blackness in particular were issues of the past in the eyes of many Americans, then how could a specific phenomenon like black homosexuality even exist?

Additionally, the Reagan administration is by now infamous within LGBT communities of various races for its callousness on the related issues of homosexuality and AIDS during the 1980s. While campaigning for the presidency in 1980, Reagan remarked, “My criticism is that [the LGBT activist movement] isn’t just asking for civil rights; it’s asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I” (qtd. in Shilts 368). Reagan’s explicit homophobia informed his reaction to the crisis of AIDS. When AIDS—initially called the “4H disease” because researchers believed it to affect Haitians, hemophiliacs, heroin
users, and homosexuals in particular—was first identified by medical researchers in 1981, Reagan did not address its existence, perhaps because to do so would require addressing the vulnerability inherent in the social positions of “Haitians,” “heroin users,” and “homosexuals,” all groups that the Reagan administration’s policies and rhetoric demonized and disenfranchised in the 1980s. The administration’s heterosexism and subsequent unwillingness to address the AIDS crisis—combined with its circulation of colorblind racism and its attendant images of a race-less “welfare queens” and “crack whores” that were nevertheless used to demonize black sexual and domestic structures—contributed to a cultural climate in which a population like LGBT African Americans identified with multiple forms of sexual and social queerness often went unnoticed.

Kathryn Bond Stockton explains this invisibility as the result of “the strained relations between ‘black’ and ‘gay’ at the level of signs, even as ongoing struggles for rights and a health epidemic of epic proportions continued to connect black and gay people” (2). U.S. political discourse regarded both blackness and homosexuality as degraded social phenomena. Conceiving of the two together in one body became impossible for many unwilling to contemplate what would be an extreme social taboo.¹⁵

Black LGBT writers of the decade frequently documented their sense of the social burial ground they inhabited. They addressed their invisibility from images of African American communities perceived as queer but heterosexual and from LGBT communities perceived as medical threats but white. In 1982, Jewelle Gomez remarked, “Not surprisingly, we are the least visible group not only in the fine arts, but also in the popular media, where the message conveyed about the Lesbian of color is that she does
not even exist, let alone use soap, drive cars, drink Coke, go on vacations, or do much of anything else” (Home Girls 110). Within U.S. political discourse of the early 1980s, black LGBT people did not bear specific mention because they were aligned with two groups perceived as distinct and as, for the most part, morally reprehensible: homosexuals and African Americans.

The Politics of Respectability, Pride, and Invulnerability

African Americans have frequently espoused black domestic, gender, and sexual propriety in response to white supremacist accusations of black domestic, gender, and sexual deviance. As a result, the queer realities of black bi- and homosexuality and gender indeterminacy have frequently been excised from representations of “the black community” as a whole and from the archives of black experience constituted by black literary realism. Candice Jenkins has termed this erasure and sublimation a “salvific wish” (125) for black respectability, with respectability working to shield African Americans from shaming accusations of sexual and gender deviance. She explains that the salvific wish is closely related to (and, indeed, springs from) [the] ideology of ‘uplift,’ although unlike uplift in its larger sense, the salvific wish limits its focus to fostering black domestic and sexual respectability. In addition, because the salvific wish has historically placed such a high value on maintaining a protective illusion of black sexual and familial propriety, it has been most interested in observing and policing female
behavior—precisely because the black female body has so often been characterized by whites as the sole source of black intimate or domestic irregularity. Yet it is also crucial to note that the expression of the salvific wish need not be limited to women—even if its disciplinary emphasis attends mostly (or solely) to women’s behavior. (125-126)

While Jenkins cultivates the theory of the salvific wish by reading the ways in which heterosexual African American women do or do not regulate their sexual behavior for the safety or image of African American communities at large, the theory is applicable to LGBT African Americans generally who may police or hide their individual sexual behaviors and desires out of concern for a communal image of heterosexual propriety. Furthermore, the theory applies to African American leaders who ignore or demonize homosexuality and gender indeterminacy as a means of fortifying what is seen as the shield of black respectability. In the 1960s and 1970s, the politics of respectability manifested in the Black Power Movement as the embrace of masculine heterosexuality and its associations with invulnerability, according to Cheryl Clarke. She explains that these “prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement [and the Black Power Movement] era were imposed upon recent converts to blackness, much like the codes of ‘black respectability’ were impressed upon recent migrants from the South at the turn of the twentieth century. The rhetoric of the black nationalist intelligentsia … sharply policed the ‘boundaries of blackness’ to its margins” (14). These boundaries were heavily patrolled in order to keep black queer expressions out.
As a result, black feminist and black queer cultural producers have repeatedly cultivated what Evelyn Hammonds calls a “politics of articulation” (152), which not only seeks to make black queer experiences visible, but also interrogates the conditions under which black queer expressions go (un)heard:

[I]n overturning the ‘politics of silence’ the goal cannot be merely to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a “politics of articulation.” This politics would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act.

(152)\(^6\)

While Hammonds points to the politics of articulation as especially necessary for enunciating radical black female subjectivities, her idea applies to black queer expressions generally due to the fact that the politics of respectability works to muffle all non-normative, non-masculinist speech. In his essay “Loyalty” (1992), Essex Hemphill addressed how gay men in particular were excised from African American history by African American leaders who desired an invulnerable, heterosexual image for the race. Hemphill insists, “It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can’t become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal” (64). Hemphill’s demand for vulnerability—or what he calls “the ass-splitting
truth”—sharply contrasts with the insistence on self-determined impenetrability heard during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This dissertation interrogates “what makes it possible for black women [and black gay men] to speak and act,” or what makes the “ass-splitting truth[s]” of black queerness and vulnerability legible, and finds that genre and publication venue are two factors that determine the audibility of black queer expression.

This dissertation also explores the question, in the words of Judith Butler, of “how a collective deals with its vulnerability to violence” (Undoing 231). Black LGBT writers of the 1980s, conscious that the vulnerability endemic to racial minorities in the United States leaves African Americans subject to violation, imagined ways in which vulnerability could be valued without necessarily leading to violation. Butler says that, when it comes to collective responses to violence, two familiar possibilities—the rigidifying of communal boundaries and more violence—typically win out over the queer embrace of vulnerability:

There is the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself. There is the possibility of becoming violent. But perhaps there is some other way to live in such a way that one is neither fearing death, becoming socially dead from fear of being killed, or becoming violent, and killing others, or subjecting them to live a life of social death predicated upon the fear of literal death. Perhaps this other way to live requires a world in which collective means are found to protect bodily vulnerability without precisely eradicating it. (231)
Black LGBT writers of the 1980s offer the ethic of black shamelessness as this “other way to live” with the realities and threats of violence. Their work repeatedly conceives of vulnerability as a sustainable, and inevitable, communal experience. Rather than regard vulnerability and its attendant social abjection as invitations to violation that must be foreclosed and disavowed, the ethic of black shamelessness explored throughout this dissertation conceives of vulnerability as a source of sustenance that speaks to individuals’ mutual dependence upon and need for one another’s care. Furthermore, the ethic of black shamelessness regards rigidified individual and communal egos as willful obfuscations of the fact that vulnerability, not pride, cultivates meaningful human interactions amongst individuals in a given community and between individuals in different communities.

Admittedly, embracing queerness and its attendant vulnerability can seem counter-intuitive and even counter-productive to anti-racist practice. Already positioned as queer vis-à-vis white heteronormative domesticity, many African American leaders of the 1980s, for example, felt they could not afford to directly address black LGBT experiences. For example, Benjamin Hooks, the executive director of the NAACP throughout the 1980s, was reluctant to address the reality of homosexuality within black communities. In a 1977 Jet article titled “Racism, Not Gays, Still Challenge to NAACP,” Hooks takes a non-homophobic stance toward homosexuality but nevertheless conceptualizes African Americans and gays as separate, distinguishable groups: “There have always been forces attempting to obscure our efforts. This [gay rights] could be a ploy to obscure Blacks’ efforts, but I don’t know” (5). Hooks’s positioning of African
Americans and gays as distinct competitors did not mean LGBT rights were off his radar. In the same article he said the NAACP was considering expanding its “boundaries to include gays” (5). Hooks’s statements suggest that gays are not already under the NAACP’s purview as African Americans and thereby make the implied heteronormative “boundaries” of blackness explicitly clear. His ideas are representative of a political trend that conceives of queer sexuality as unrelated to racial justice. The ethic of black shamelessness, however, conceives of the embrace of queer sexuality and its attendant vulnerability as fundamental to such justice.

LGBT African Americans of the 1980s were also frequently positioned beyond the boundaries of white LGBT and feminist communities. Hemphill discussed the fetishistic way in which white gay communities regarded black homosexuality in “Does Your Mama Know About Me?” (1992), saying,

The post-Stonewall white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the existence of Black gay men except as sexual objects. In media and art the Black male was given little representation except as a big, Black dick. This aspect of the white gay sensibility is strikingly revealed in the photographs of Black males by the late Robert Mapplethorpe. Though his images may be technically and esthetically well-composed, his work artistically perpetuates racial stereotypes constructed around sexuality and desire. (38)

Hemphill saw Mapplethorpe’s treatment of black men in his photography as emblematic of how black gay men were regarded in white gay communities. According to Hemphill,
black gay men did not find a space open to their social complexity in white gay communities. Notable in Hemphill’s statement is his suspicion of Mapplethorpe’s supposed expertise at photographic form and his awareness that, in heralded forms, racism can frequently masquerade as high art. Hemphill explains that some white gay art shared responsibility for circulating U.S. political discourse on black sexuality as deviant, in this case of “Black dick” as larger than the unstated but implied white norm. Hemphill also suggests that queer vulnerability was not necessarily embraced in white gay communities given the unwillingness of a predominant number of white gay men to acknowledge the full humanity of black gay men and, in turn, the ways in which both groups are vulnerable to the frequent violations of heteronormative culture. Rather, white gay men used the headless, sexually-available bodies of black men depicted in Mapplethorpe’s photographs to rigidify their willfully-constructed senses of racial superiority and therefore license to violate racial others.

Furthermore, the specificity of black lesbianism was often excised from discussions of lesbians within feminist discourse leading up to the 1980s, as was the specificity of black women’s experiences generally within the same discourse because of the “the equation of sexual and racial oppression” therein, according to Judith Roof (31). She explains that,

[b]ecause the oppression of lesbians was like the oppression of African-Americans [according to the narrative of oppression circulating in white feminist discourse], African-American lesbians logically came within the aegis of a lesbian feminism that was positioned in the same oppressive
locus as race. If the primary ‘mode’ of oppression for all women is patriarchy and if lesbians are like blacks, then the mode of oppression for all lesbians, regardless of race, is patriarchal heterosexuality. (31)

The inability of white lesbian feminism’s narrative of oppression to account for racism and heterosexism simultaneously created a silence on issues of race within lesbian-feminist discourse of the 1960s, a silence which began to be countered in the 1970s with important texts like the Combahee River Collective Statement, *Conditions 5*, and *The Black Woman*.18 Accounting for the phenomenon of race would challenge the very story through which lesbian feminism was able to enact change within various social and political spheres. Again, thoughtful reflection and challenge to the narrative of a collective’s identity was in this case difficult to accept given that such a challenge would disrupt an only relatively recently realized sense of ego and self.

**African American Literature, “Genre,” and “Shame”**

The political contexts of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s affected the content and style of 1980s African American LGBT writers. The writing of Delany, Gomez, Hemphill, Lorde, Saint, and Walker was also affected by the longer history of African American literature and art. Understanding the layers of “bizarre axiological ground” in which the idea of African American art is embedded requires a brief survey of aesthetics and its relationship to race. Aesthetics has historically been both a sexualized and a racialized discourse. Joseph A. Young and Jana Evans Braziel explain that “[m]any humanities scholars, literary critics, art historians, philosophers, and aestheticians would
refuse such theoretical implications; this refusal we define as an intellectual disavowal that only serves to shore up, stabilize, and reify yet again the convoluted and densely-woven historical nexus race and aesthetics” (5). I add that sexuality is an additional material in the “densely-woven” tapestry that is racialized aesthetic discourse. In his essay “On National Characteristics So Far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime” (1764), Immanuel Kant argued that Africans lack the aesthetic and moral feeling to appreciate and create beauty. He supported his claim by pointing to what he saw as “the ugliness of appearance” of African people, which he also linked to what he saw as African “stupidity” (qtd. in Nuttall 9). Kant, considered one of the “fathers” of Western aesthetics, believed that the appreciation and creation of beauty were contingent upon national and racial identity. His racist argument linked what he considered black moral ineptitude to black aesthetic failure in both physical appearance and artistic production. Kant’s essay demonstrates a history of racism informing aesthetic discourse and, according to Sarah Nuttall, “the integral association of beauty with a form of a largely socially defined ugliness and abjection” (22). Nuttall points out that black social abjection created a discourse of black physical ugliness. Black social abjection—in the eyes of the West—was rooted in black domestic failure and sexual deviance.

Kant’s aesthetic discourse was also sexualized. In “Of the Distinction of the Beautiful and Sublime in the Interrelations of the Two Sexes” (1764), he argued that artistic assessment and creation depended upon a subject’s morality. He believed that the union of one (well-bred European) heterosexual man and one (well-bred European) heterosexual woman created a single and moral subject. This kind of subject was
uniquely capable of ultimate aesthetic production and judgment. According to Kant, then, only European heterosexual relationships were capable of producing aesthetic subjects. The discourse of aesthetics, then, has always been simultaneously racialized and sexualized. Furthermore, it has always been simultaneously racist and (hetero)sexist. That “morality” functioned squarely in Kant’s requirements for artistic aptitude suggests that those positioned as unable to create beauty were regarded as not only ugly, but also shamefully amoral. In effect, those positioned as ugly and/or incapable of creating beauty were and are made to feel shamed by the predominant beauty-granting culture. Aware of the shamefulness associated with both blackness and queer sexual relations in Kantian aesthetic discourse, many African American writers have reflected on two of the terms on which this relationship rests: beauty and shame.

W.E.B. Du Bois confronted the legacies of Kantian aesthetic discourse and their role in negative assessments of African American art. In The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Du Bois argued that the Sorrow Songs—African American spirituals that originated in slavery—were “not simply … the sole American music, but … the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (758). Despite the obvious beauty of the Sorrow Song, according to Du Bois, “it has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood” (758) as a result of racist approaches to black art on the part of white Americans. Du Bois described this racist approach to art in his 1926 essay “Criteria of Negro Art” as “racial pre-judgment” (783). There Du Bois also noted the unfortunate incommensurability of sexual honesty and beauty within African and white American aesthetic discourses. He
explained to his African American audience, “We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes of white patrons. We are ashamed of sex and we lower our eyes when people will talk of it” (23). While Du Bois himself sometimes participated in this public excoriation of sexual expression, his words in “Criteria” demonstrate an awareness that nothing of beauty can come of shame and, subsequently, that art born in and from communities regarded as shameful by the white culture at large—like African Americans always closely associated with sexual deviance—could not be judged or valued fairly.

In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Langston Hughes added to Du Bois’s thoughts on the incommensurability of beauty and shame. Hughes explained that writers of the New Negro Renaissance sought to explore areas of African American life previously uncharted by other black writers when he said,

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too...If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (1314)

Here, Hughes agrees with Du Bois that shame is counterproductive to self-expression. He also confidently states African American beauty as a fact. However, he explores the idea of African American ugliness as well, a concept that resonates unsettlingly with Kant’s
declaration of black aesthetic failure in mind. But Hughes’s statement reveals that he is concerned with neither Kant’s nor Du Bois’s reception of his work. He identifies an audience of the future that understands beauty to be closely associated with ugliness and that expects the inevitable presence of both in a given community. Both Du Bois and Hughes sought to eliminate the shame associated with blackness, sexuality, and black literature in particular.

Many LGBT African American writers of the 1980s seemed to heed Hughes’s advice to shamelessly explore both beauty and ugliness. Thus, the ethic of black shamelessness explored in this dissertation is a response to the politics of black pride that is informed by the New Negro Renaissance sensibilities of Hughes. Black LGBT writers of the 1980s presented anti-racist and queer-positive representations of black queer experiences and their supposed moral and aesthetic failure in literary forms like the science fiction novel, the vampire novel, and performance poetry—forms which are often deemed ugly or marginalized in literary discourse. Already part of the discourse of aesthetic and moral ugliness due to race and sexual orientation, many African American LGBT writers found useful narrative and poetic forms within the realm of the so-called ugly.

African American LGBT writers of the 1980s also adapted Addison Gayle’s important ideas from *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) for their specific concerns. I point out 1980s black LGBT writers’ indebtedness to Gayle, an important figure of the Black Arts Movement, in order to note that black LGBT writers of the 1980s are not directly opposed to writers of the Black Arts Movement, but rather were informed by and
responded to their important work. In his book, Gayle picked up on Du Bois’s concern with racialized conceptions of beauty and, in particular, with racist art criticism. He said,

[Western criticism] aims to evaluate the work of art in terms of its beauty and not in terms of the transformation from ugliness to beauty that the work of art demands from its audience… The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man? The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned arguments as to why he should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron. To be an American writer is to be an American, and, for black people, there should no longer be honor attached to either position. (1917)

Gayle advocated that black artists turn away from white and Western art criticism and traditions. He saw Western aesthetic criticism’s unwillingness to consider a text’s material effects on the world as one of its major flaws. Like Gayle, many black LGBT writers of the 1980s (especially Hemphill and Saint, see Chapter 4) imbued their literary oeuvre with concerns for the material preservation and health of African Americans, especially those living with AIDS. Also like Gayle, other black LGBT writers of the 1980s (like Walker, Lorde, Delany, and Gomez) interrogated what it means to be
considered beautiful in the United States. They challenged operating assumptions about human value that depend upon the inter-related issues of race, sexuality, and beauty. Thus, not only did 1980s black LGBT writers seek to obliterate the shame associated with blackness and sexual queerness in aesthetic discourse, they also sought to obliterate the shame associated with marginalized aesthetic forms and with the queer, black body itself. Importantly, this obliterated shame is not replaced by pride and dignity in 1980s LGBT writing, but rather by shamelessness, or the liberating articulation and embrace of vulnerability.

Their interrogations of the relationships between race, sexuality, beauty, and shame had black LGBT writers of the 1980s challenging the similarities between racial categorization, sexual categorization, and aesthetic form, or genre. “Genre,” like “beauty” is a racialized concept in Kantian aesthetic discourse. Kant wrote substantially about aesthetic “genius,” a term that depended upon the imbrication of whiteness and heterosexuality. He defined genius as “that peculiar guiding and guardian spirit given to man at his birth” (*Critique* 97). Therefore, as Nuttall noted, Kant regarded (European) birth place and (European) familiality as pre-conditions for artistic genius.¹⁹ The term “genius,” according to Braziel, shares the same etymological root and therefore some of the same associations as the term “genre.” Braziel argues that “genre,” too, has always been racialized and connected to the discourse of nineteenth-century aesthetic and scientific racism:

For understanding the imbrications of race and genre, let us return to the root (cultural, linguistic, historical, political, and literary) of the problem:
Both genre and genealogy (like genesis and genocide and many other modern English words) have their root in the Greek term *genos*, which (like many Greek nouns) has a somewhat broad denotation. Its most common (or pervasively documented) meaning is “sort or kind”—from which we derive words like generic, general, generally, and even gender, but also genre. The word *genos* also denotes a family—hence modern equivalents in English, such as genealogy, genealogical, and even more scientifically, genes, genomes, genetic, and genetics. This last meaning is also parallel to a third meaning denoted by *genos*: a race, tribe, or other group of people. ("Genre" 62-63)

Here Braziel explains that “genre” connotes both race and artistic form. Indeed, it connotes a racialized artistic form. Furthermore, “genius”—which also comes from the Greek term *genos*—connotes a racialized artistic aptitude. These terms were, of course, racialized as European for Kant given his belief in the roles birthplace and family play in aesthetic aptitude. This history suggests that aesthetic forms are racialized and, indeed, are defined against one another in the same ways various racial groups are defined against one another.

The terms “genre” and “genius”—as well as aesthetic discourse more generally—continued to be racialized into the twentieth century. Russ Castronovo explains that, in the decades before World War I, white academics in the United States believed beauty was capable of “inspiring civic feeling, educating citizens, and organizing political attachments into coherent form” (6). In the late 1890s and early 1900s, aesthetic theory
was understood as a project that could keep social order. Aesthetics courses were required for students at all major U.S. universities and, for non-students “who knew a lot about social reality but little of aesthetic pleasure, university extension courses sought to disseminate ethical lessons bound up with beauty” (31). These lessons, according to Castronovo, taught turn-of-the-century white Americans about the importance of form as a method for order. There was a beautiful way to approach even quotidian activities like doing hair or building a fence. The discourse of aesthetics also directed people’s desire for art to classical music, theater, and painting rather than “commodified entertainment such as magic lantern shows, peep shows, cheap stage productions, dime novels, and shoddy lithographs of the old masters” (32). Thus, the discourse of aesthetics directed people away from forms associated with working class communities and sexual exposure.

This discourse situated African Americans beyond aesthetic and ethical order. As a result, the “genre” associated with African American cultural production was not really regarded as an aesthetic genre at all, but rather as what Toni Morrison has called “rich ore.” She writes that, “[f]rom the seventeenth century to the twentieth, the arguments resisting [the idea of black art] have marched in predictable sequence: 1) there is no Afro-American … art. 2) it exists but is inferior. 3) …it is not so much ‘art’ as ore—rich ore—that requires a Western or Eurocentric smith to refine it from its ‘natural’ state into an aesthetically complex form” (2302-2303). Assumptions of unsophisticated but rich black “naturalness” have continuously positioned black-authored writing in particular as straightforward historical documentation rather than mediated and stylized art. Through this assumption developed the expectation of realism in black-authored writing.
Historically, black writers have either fulfilled or thwarted this expectation, according to Gene Andrew Jarrett, who writes, “[D]emands for racial realism perpetuated the discrepancy between what the public expected of African American literature and what black authors intended to write or actually wrote. Frustrated by this discrepancy, certain black authors tried to break the chains of reality by writing *anomalous* fiction that resisted and sometimes critiqued the conventional restriction of authentic African American literature to racial realism” (2, emphasis Jarrett’s).

This dissertation focuses on the anomalous work of Audre Lorde in the genre of biomythography, Samuel Delany in the genre of science fiction, and Jewelle Gomez in the genre of fantasy. It also explores the queer realism used by Alice Walker, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint. *Black Shamelessness* finds black writers’ consistent negotiation with realism to simultaneously be a negotiation with the politics of sexual normativity. Broadening the scope of who is representable in black literary realism, as well as challenging the value of being narrated as “real,” are ways of examining what Judith Butler calls a “livable life.” Butler writes, “When we ask what makes a life livable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life” (*Undoing* 226). That is, assumptions about what makes life valuable and viable determine whether any particular portrait of life is realistic and/or worth representing. Genre in general—and literary realism in particular—are critical sites at which the boundaries of black communities are imagined and articulated given the dubiously privileged role black literary realism has played in the history of African American writing. Black literary realism is terrain on
which the values of authenticity, pride, shame, and shamelessness are either espoused or challenged.

Re-Valuing Marginalized Communities and Texts in 1980s U.S. Literary Criticism

As black LGBT writers of the 1980s remarked upon and sometimes queered the prideful boundaries of blackness through their negotiations with literary realism, 1980s scholars of U.S. literature participated in their own re-mapping by changing and expanding the kinds of texts one could study and teach under the aegis of “American literary criticism” to include African American and LGBT texts. In effect, they questioned the assumptions that had determined the meanings of beauty, value, and viability in earlier Americanist scholarship. However, rarely did their questions allow for the buried social world of people who were both African American and LGBT to surface. In 1985, Annette Kolodny reflected on the state of U.S. literary studies when she said,

Two decades of unprecedented scholarship and criticism have excavated lost authors for our reconsideration, delineated literary traditions of which we had been previously unaware, and raised probing questions about the very processes by which we canonize, valorize, and select the texts to be remembered. In the wake of all the new information about the literary production of women, Blacks, Native Americans, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians; and with new ways of analyzing popular fiction, non-canonical genres, and working-class writings, all prior literary histories are rendered partial, inadequate, and obsolete. (291)
Kolodny’s remarks reflect a growing awareness in the 1980s among many scholars of U.S. literature that a body of writing once referred to confidently as “American literature” could no longer be invoked with certainty as objective, inclusive, and whole. The so-called canon war forced scholars of U.S. literary studies to reassess how a long history of U.S. racism and (hetero)sexism informed literary aesthetic discourse. Kolodny’s list of previously ignored or misjudged groups includes not only communities of people but also genres of writing like “popular fiction” and “working-class writings,” probably a reference to writing readily available outside of bookstores like comics, fantasy, romance novels, and science fiction. Kolodny explained that, unlike an earlier model of U.S. literary studies that assessed the success of a given text by examining what it had in common with already-canonized texts and, therefore, whether or not it contributed to a shared, communitarian vision of the United States, “the new scholarship asserts its central critical category not commonality but difference” (293). That is, the literary value of a text would no longer be judged on its resemblance to already-valued texts; instead, its difference vis-à-vis already-valued texts would be canonized. The anti-hegemonic intention of such a move notwithstanding, the approach of canonizing a text for the sake of its difference closely resembles the aforementioned fetishizing of black male sexual difference and deviance from a white male-centered norm described by Hemphill in white gay communities of the 1980s. To fetishize is to focus on and respond to a particular element or singular part of a given object. The act implies an inability or unwillingness to recognize the complexity of the whole and/or multiple sites of difference simultaneously. That is, the “list method” of inclusion popular during the 1980s
unfortunately represented its various items as parallel rather than potentially intersecting. As a result, a writer like Jewelle Gomez—who identifies as lesbian, black, American Indian (Ioway and Wampanoag), and a writer of fantasy simultaneously—becomes a rhetorical impossibility in 1980s U.S. literary discourse despite her very real, material presence in the United States. Consequently, we can perhaps better understand the remarks from Gomez quoted earlier about lesbians of color simply not existing within discourses of power like U.S. politics, the mainstream media, and U.S. literary studies. Marginalized in several ways, their existence became nearly inconceivable.

Barbara Smith made a similar point in her foundational essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977). She began it by saying,

I do not know where to begin. Long before I tried to write this I realized that I was attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous, merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all. These things have not been done. Not by white male critics, expectedly. Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists. And most crucially not by Black women critics, who, although they pay the most attention to Black women writers as a group, seldom use a consistent feminist analysis or write about Black lesbian literature. All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist. (132)
Here Smith explains that U.S. literary studies has its own burial ground for black women’s (lesbian) writing, a graveyard analogous to the one created by U.S. political discourse. One explanation—among many—for the lack of feminist analysis given to black women’s (lesbian) writing at the time Smith wrote is because of a model of U.S. literary studies that, case by case, regarded a singular difference of either gender, race, or sexual orientation as a given text or writer’s sole important “meaning-making” difference. Another explanation lies in Judith Butler’s aforementioned idea of hegemonic visions of “livable lives,” normative visions which do not even conceive of black (lesbian) women writers as existing. Writers like Smith helped scholars to re-vamp their critical approach to difference, demonstrating methods to consider multiple forms of identity simultaneously and thereby make legible texts and experiences previously ignored or reviled.

Smith’s essay drew on the energy of the 1977 Combahee River Collective’s statement—a statement Smith drafted along with her sister Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier. The document developed out of several meetings of a group of black lesbian feminist writers and scholars known as the Combahee River Collective throughout the mid-1970s. The document explained, “The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (272). The Combahee River Collective considered itself to be continuing the work of black feminist forerunners, “some known like Sojourner Truth,
Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown” (273). It is significant that the collective understood the formulation of its concept of “interlocking” systems of oppression as indebted to the activist and intellectual work of African American women who challenged both the antebellum slave system and postbellum white supremacist discourse. The collective’s noted historical backdrop places it and the other writers I consider in direct association with the specific history of African Americans in the United States. And while Smith and her African American compatriots frequently practiced the importance of multiracial coalitions—as I will discuss shortly—they nevertheless understood themselves and their work to be primarily motivated by the particular history of U.S. slavery and its attendant discourses on black domestic and sexual pathology.

The Combahee River Collective’s statement on black feminism—with a particular interest in black lesbianism—emerged in part because of the unwillingness of white feminism to take up the specific issues concerning African American women. The statement explains,

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women’s movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women’s movement is by definition work for white
women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue. (281)

Significantly, the Combahee River Collective was not interested in claiming or “owning” race and racism as its objects of analysis alone. The group encouraged and demanded that white lesbian feminist circles make race and racism their business, as well. The specific “identity politics” (275) that came out of the Collective’s statement developed out of black feminists’ experience of racism within white feminist circles and the belief that African American women could not rely on white feminism to take black feminism seriously: “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves” (275). This vision of identity politics begins to explain why black women writers in particular began to explore phenomena like black lesbianism and intraracial domestic violence in their writing during the 1970s and 1980s, in spite of the fact that such exploration may be seen as the negative and public airing of “dirty laundry” by many African Americans. To be silent about these matters, according to the statement, would be to marginalize once again issues faced by black women specifically in favor of confronting someone else’s oppression.

The Combahee River Collective’s statement also demonstrates that, for many in the early 1980s, the concept of considering multiple categories of identity as
“interlocking” phenomena was new and only recently formalized. By the late 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw continued to formalize a multifaceted approach to identity with her theory of intersectionality from “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989). Crenshaw’s examination of how the intersectionality, or interaction, of gender and race affected black women’s employment experiences informed the approach to feminist and critical race theories of the following decade. The 1980s writers I consider in this dissertation participated in the project of elucidating that one’s identity and experience of identity is informed by multiple social categories simultaneously. However, this approach to studying identity is still only now being examined consistently when it comes to LGBT African Americans in areas like black queer studies.

Black Queer Studies and the Critique of Canonization

Recent work in the field of black queer studies takes up the issue of canonicity as it relates to the phenomena of gender, race, and sexuality. Today’s discussions of canonicity are tied closely to discussions of “disciplinarity,” or the traits that make a particular field of study into a codified discipline in academic discourse. Scholars of black queer studies have focused especially on the unfortunate disciplinarity of queer studies and African American studies as distinct fields. This dissertation uses a black queer studies methodological approach that repeatedly interrogates the normative boundaries of black communities, African American literature, and black literary realism. This dissertation contributes to black queer literary analysis an awareness of genre and
realism’s role in African American literature’s disciplining of sexually normative lives as uniquely livable. Furthermore, *Black Shamelessness* challenges this schema by focusing on queer texts that complicate ideas of black reality, livability, and pride.

Dwight McBride discusses African American studies as having within it, from its inception as a discipline, a “heterosexist strain” (“Straight” 68). McBride understands this strain to be the result of canonizing and institutionalizing pressures from the white academy at large: “It is often the case that in institutional warfare, so to speak, institutions reduce and simplify the identities of the subjects they interpolate. The political privileging of race politics on the institutional level, in this context, had the effect of privileging the category of race in the intellectual identity of African American studies” (85). As a result of privileging the category of race—a category understood by many academics at the time to be discrete from categories like gender and sexuality—within African American studies, an unmarked but highly-regulated norm of gender and sexual propriety circulated within the discipline. The (perhaps unconscious) privileging of masculine, heterosexual experiences was one way for African Americanists to legitimate the field to the on-looking white academy, according to McBride, a result of the academy’s frequent inability to recognize multiple categories of identity at the same time. McBride suggests that black queer studies—with its simultaneous and consistent attention to gender, race, and sexuality—can be a means for African American studies to sustain its potential for revolutionary critique of culture and a means for preventing easy generalizations of the role of African American studies and, thereby, of the possibilities of African Americans themselves.
According to E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, various departments of African American, Africana, and black studies formed in the 1960s and 1970s, “due largely to the efforts of black students and faculty who petitioned, sat in, protested, and otherwise brought pressure to bear on white administrators at predominately white institutions of higher learning around the United States… Not coincidentally, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of this period provided the historical backdrop and social street scene fueling the interventions staged on the manicured lawns of the ivory tower” (3). Importantly, the founding of such departments made the study of African American history, art, and communities—as well as the study of race in general—a reality in many U.S. universities, one which begged the question of the place of race in the curricula and discourse of other departments. However, as stated, the fact that many departments formed with and/or were regarded as having their sole proper object in race meant that other categories of identity like (feminine) gender and (queer) sexuality were sidelined (Johnson and Henderson 3). This history exemplifies the risks of disciplinarity and canonization, especially to identity-based fields like U.S. and African American literary studies. The canonical approach to the study of race in the 1960s and 1970s was to study “race” as if the term did not always already coincide with discourses of gender and sexuality, which it does.

As stated, the process of canonizing or disciplining a particular set of proper objects and/or a particular approach to their study results in the anti-queer process of normalization. Roderick Ferguson has explored canonization as a process of both racialization and sexualization. He understands canonization to be a process that erases
racial and sexual heterogeneity. According to Ferguson, one cannot “discipline” race or sexuality; therefore, race and sexuality belong to no field or discipline in particular (“Of Our” 86). This is an understanding I share with Ferguson and one that is foundational to my project here. As portions of U.S. literary studies sought to include African American writers in the canon of heralded literature during the 1980s, and as portions of African American literary studies seek to acknowledge the experiences of LGBT and same-sex desiring African Americans within its own canon of heralded literature in the present, it behooves us to remember that a field of study cannot simply expand to include the hot topics of race and sexuality. Race and sexuality are not objects to possess. Rather, as Ferguson demonstrates, disciplines like U.S. literary and African American literary studies have always been constituted by the phenomena of race and sexuality.

In “Of Our Normative Strivings” (2005), Ferguson finds an earlier origin for African American studies than do Johnson and Henderson. He suggests that the foundation of black education in the United States is in nineteenth-century “normal schools” (91) where various trades were taught. He finds that the emphasis on industrial education, for African American men and women, was “the name of alliance between sexual normativity and citizenship, a union that would refine and elaborate power through the twin processes of nationalization and normalization” (92). The rhetoric of normal schools regarded industrialization as a moral imperative for African Americans; it suggested that people become moral subjects through industrial education. Such rhetoric, according to Ferguson, reproduced antebellum discourses of black primitiveness and sexual impropriety due to its implicit suggestion that poor or uneducated African
Americans were uncivilized and amoral because of their supposed failure to take up industrial, or “normal,” education (98). Ferguson suggests that the black middle class of the late nineteenth century, a product of such schools, hoped to “inherit modernity by adhering to gender and sexual propriety” (92). If an individual could govern her/himself morally—if they could adhere to gender and sexual propriety—it followed that they could govern or participate in the workings of the state, with gender and sexual propriety seen as a precondition for such governing capability (Ferguson 94). Indeed, according to the rhetoric that accompanied the system of normal school education, racial agency derived from the ability to be morally proper in terms of sex and gender (Ferguson 95). This rhetoric understandably sought to counter stereotypes of black primitiveness and sexual impropriety but, as stated, in effect it scapegoated poor, working class, and/or uneducated black communities as the queer counter-example to black middle-class and aristocratic normativity.

This on-going narrative of black education in the United States manifested in 1980s African American literary studies alongside the critical trend of post-structuralism. In “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext” (1979), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outlined an approach to black-authored writing that informed a range of important African Americanist scholarship of the 1980s, notwithstanding some strong objections (Christian 280; Joyce 290). He wrote,

Ultimately, black literature is a verbal art like other verbal arts.

“Blackness” is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not have an “essence” as such but is defined by a network of relations that
form a particular aesthetic unity. Even the slave narratives offer the text as a world, as a system of signs. The black writer is the point of consciousness of his language. If he does embody a “Black Aesthetic,” then it can be measured not by “content,” but by a complex structure of meanings. The correspondence of content between a writer and his world is less significant to literary criticism than is a correspondence of organization and structure. (162)

Gates found a verbal, written text to be its own “world” with its own unique “system of signs.” Within that world, “Blackness” operates not as a “material object” with bodily existence beyond this verbal world; rather “Blackness” operates as “metaphor” contained within the written, verbal text. According to Gates in 1979, it followed that the relationship between “a writer and his world” is not as important to literary criticism as is the relationship between signs within the writer’s self-created discursive world. Gates explained the reason for his approach as follows:

The tendency toward a thematic criticism [Gates’s term for the majority of African American literary criticism pre-1979] implies a marked inferiority complex: Afraid that our literature cannot sustain sophisticated verbal analysis, we view it from the surface merely and treat it as if it were a Chinese lantern with an elaborately wrought surface, parchment-thin but full of hot air. Black critics have enjoyed such freedom in their ‘discipline’ that we find ourselves with no discipline at all. (162)
Gates found African American literary criticism pre-1979 to be superficial, an unfortunate legacy of white critics’ understanding of black literature, beginning with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives, as “mere” historical documentation and/or sociology. In contrast, he defined his approach as rigorous and penetrating in its post-structuralist focus on the ways signs define one another within a given text.

Gates’s desire for a shift in the critical approach to black literature in 1979 is understandable given the racist history of understanding African American literary productions as unsophisticated historical documentation. Still, his elimination of the body and of a writer’s bodily practices from the ideal African Americanist’s repertoire of concerns presumed either 1) that all writers used their bodies similarly and therefore critical concern with the body was untenable or 2) that while various writers may have differing bodily experiences, those differences do not affect the way a writer chooses to create and/or represent her or his vision of the world. This schema made it easy to write about and teach the writing of James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and Langston Hughes, for example, without considering their queer bodily experiences in the world. Also, the language Gates used in his recommendation for African Americanist critics is telling of a concern with academic propriety as defined by heterosexist, white literary studies: “Black critics have enjoyed such freedom in their ‘discipline’ that we find ourselves with no discipline at all.” Gates offered this statement in the midst of U.S. universities’ founding of African American studies departments, as stated—obviously a time when African American literary studies needed to demonstrate its disciplinarity. Unfortunately, in order to do so, many African Americanist scholars of the 1980s chose
to disavow any undisciplined, queer presence within the body of black-authored writing. The authority of African American literary studies seemed to depend upon this disavowal.

Indeed, the disavowal of queerness has frequently become a marker of disciplinarity and canonicity within literary studies. Samuel R. Delany describes canonization as a process that announces, or “marks,” a particular text’s beauty to an academic audience. To describe this process, Delany alludes to the way geographical locations become tourist sites:

Some sites are conceived, created, and built to be nothing but tourist sites: Mt. Rushmore, Disneyland, the Epcot Center, each functioning more or less as one of its own markers. And there is a whole set of sites—often the spots where historical events took place—that are sites only because a marker sits on them, telling of the fact… Without the marker, these sites would be indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape. […] And until someone thinks to emit, erect, and/or stabilize a marker indicating it, no tourist site comes into being. (*Shorter* 189)

Delany goes on to say that the canon of heralded literary works is essentially “a complex mapping of…literary sites, with suggestion as to what to see now and what to see next” (189). The markers that make writing into literature, in addition to a disavowed queerness, are academic books and articles as well as honors like the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and Nobel Prize, according to Delany (190; 205).
The discourse of canonicity, then, produces a body of writing known as literature. This production is effected through the erecting of markers—or the writing of academic articles, books, and syllabi on the one hand and the bestowing of honors and prizes on the other—that announce the literary beauty of a piece of writing. The discourse of canonicity also produces a body of writing known as “paraliterature,” or a body of writing positioned outside the bounds of literary beauty, according to Delany. “Paraliterature” as a term was coined in two places during the 1980s by theorists of postmodernism. Rosalind Krauss used the term “paraliterary” to describe the writing of philosophers that is read not as criticism, but as literature (Hutcheon 40). Subsequently, Frederic Jameson used the term “paraliterature” to denote a group of texts ranging from television shows to advertisements:

The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole “degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply “quote” as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance. (Postmodernism 53)

Both Krauss and Jameson spoke of paraliterature as a broad genre of various forms. Jameson regarded a delightful interest in these “degraded” forms as a tenet of postmodernism. Many of the African American LGBT writers I consider in this
dissertation participated alongside a number of other U.S. writers in postmodernist appreciation of paraliterature. Their chosen forms demonstrate a belief in the revolutionary possibility that celebrating once-degraded styles had to change discourses of class and high art. Unlike some of their contemporaries, however, the African American LGBT writers I consider here regarded the paraliterary as a possible—though certainly not promised—site for complicated and simultaneous engagement with the categories of beauty, gender, race, and sexuality.

Delany’s recent writing on paraliterary studies reveals that, at least for him, paraliterature frequently connotes queerness. He writes that the “abyssal split between literature and paraliterature exists precisely so that some values can circulate across it and others can be stopped by it. The split between them constitutes literature as much as it constitutes paraliterature. Just as (discursively) homosexuality exists largely to delimit heterosexuality and to lend it a false sense of definition, paraliterature exists to delimit literature and provide it with an equally false sense of itself” (205). Delany finds heterosexual subjectivity to be the result of disavowing homosexuality and, analogously, finds that the condition of literary beauty results from the creation and disavowal of an abject paraliterature. For me, it is telling that Delany aligns homosexuality with paraliterature, for it follows that he regards the discourses of canonicity and literariness to be discourses of heterosexuality that cannot include or even accommodate homosexuality in any meaningful way. Many of the writers considered in this study seem to agree with Delany’s assessments in deed if not in word. As a result, part of this dissertation’s project is to situate and document a recent history of African American LGBT paraliterature, or
writing that required its readers to suspend assumptions of beauty and literariness, as well as expectations of black literary realism.

1980s African American LGBT Publishing

The proliferation of African American LGBT publishing during the 1980s can be understood in relation to a proliferation of U.S. LGBT writing in general. According to Robert McRuer,

Before the 1969 Stonewall riots ushered in the contemporary gay liberation movement, material representations of same-sex desire in American literature and the arts were few and far between. Even in the 1970s, although openly gay and lesbian literature had begun to appear more regularly, such work was still quite rare. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, all that changed. Literally thousands of novelists, poets, and playwrights published or performed works about lesbian and gay people. Writers’ groups and workshops, such as the Violet Quill Club, Other Countries, and Flight of the Mind, helped create and nurture this literary movement; literary magazines and book reviews devoted entirely to gay and lesbian writing propelled the movement forward. Annual Lambda Literary Awards—or “Lammies”—even provided institutional recognition of outstanding achievement in lesbian and gay literature. (1-2)

In terms of black-authored writing, especially, a queer renaissance flourished because LGBT African American writers founded their own publishing companies and writers’
groups and, more rarely, invented their own genres of writing. An unprecedented amount of openly LGBT African American writers found significant attention and at times success in the 1980s with independent African American- and/or LGBT-owned presses. Alyson Books, Firebrand Books, Galiens Press, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and Persephone Press, as well as LGBT and/or African American literary magazines or chapbooks, were some of the venues established during the 1980s that sought out the work of black LGBT writers. For the most part, these presses focused on either women’s or men’s writing, rarely both. Firebrand and Persephone were founded as lesbian feminist presses and Kitchen Table was founded as a feminist press for women writers of color. Alyson mostly published work by gay men and Assotto Saint founded Galiens as a means of distributing his own work. Thus, while the publishing sites of 1980s black LGBT men and women were largely separate, they nevertheless formed a significant block of venues that provided literary access to both black LGBT writers and readers.

Of these presses, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is one of the most important to this dissertation because it developed out of black lesbian organizing. Barbara Smith was one of the women who founded Kitchen Table in 1980. At the urging of Audre Lorde, Smith, along with Rosie Alvarez, Alma Gomez, Hattie Gossett, Leota Lone Dog, Cherrie Moraga, Susan Yung, and others, co-founded the press with intentions to publish the writing of and promote discussion amongst a multi-ethnic and multiracial group of women of color from around the world (Smith, “A Press” 11). In her essay “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press” (1989), Smith explained the drastic change her press helped make in the landscape of available writing by women of
color generally and lesbians of color specifically: “If any one had asked in 1980 whether books by women of color could sell or whether a press that published only by and about women of color could survive, the logical answer would have been ‘no,’ especially if the person who answered the question was part of the commercial publishing establishment” (11). After publishing eight books that sold an average of 5,000 copies after a first printing and five popular pamphlets (12), the possibility of an eager audience for writing by feminists and lesbians of color became known fact. “After seven years our work has only begun,” Smith remarked. “We have been able to come this far because we have not been afraid to defy white male logic, which will always tell us ‘no,’ when our hearts and spirit tell us ‘YES!!’” (13).

One of Kitchen Table’s most important publications was *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). The anthology developed after the success of *Conditions 5*, a 1979 issue of the popular lesbian feminist literary annual *Conditions*. *Conditions 5* was dedicated to the writing of black lesbians and was edited by Lorraine Bethel and Smith. Smith remembered it as “the first widely distributed collection of Black feminist writing in the U.S.” (*The Truth* ix). *Home Girls*, published three years after *Conditions 5*, was a major success; according to Smith it set a record in feminist publishing by selling 3,000 copies in its first three weeks (*Home Girls* 1). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1984) was another important publication from Kitchen Table. Edited by Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, it brought together an important assemblage of feminist writing by women of color, much of which explored homosexuality and lesbianism. Jaime M. Grant explains the significance of Kitchen Table when she says it
“literally transformed the conversation of racism, sexism, and homophobia in the classroom” of the 1990s (1024).

In 1984 Barbara Chistian praised Kitchen Table for its publication of *Home Girls* and praised the success of Walker’s *The Color Purple* along with a number of black lesbian-authored and/or -themed texts like Lorde’s *Zami*, Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cyprus & Indigo*, and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, all published in 1982 and all relatively successful. However, she cautioned against regarding the “trend” of black lesbianism in publishing as a sign of surefire change. Christian said,

> [Black] Lesbian life, characters, language, [and] values are *at present* and *to some extent* becoming respectable in American literature, partly because of the pressure of women-centered communities, partly because publishers are intensely aware of marketing trends. I say *at present* because the history of the publication of Afro-American books, of women’s books, of books about Third World peoples in America illustrates how long periods of silence often follow literary explosions of second-class American citizens unless that group somehow gains the power to determine what appears in print. (3, emphasis Christian’s)

Christian wondered to what extent the proliferation of writing by and about African American lesbians in the 1980s was simply a business arrangement allowed by corporate publishers who were confident they could profit from the “trend” of black lesbianism before eventually and surely reburying it. Christian thus stressed the importance of a press like Kitchen Table, since its exclusive focus on women of color meant that black
lesbians would have an independent, women-of-color-run space to publish even after the “trend” of black lesbianism passed in mainstream publishing culture.\textsuperscript{23}

By 1990, Essex Hemphill was already characterizing the 1980s as a significant decade for black gay men’s writing:

Black gay men can consider the 1980s to have been a critically important decade for our literature. Literary journals, periodicals, and self-published works were sporadically produced and voraciously consumed. The 1980s gave us \textit{Blacklight}, \textit{Habari-Daftari}, \textit{Yemonja} (which later became \textit{Blackheart}), \textit{Black/Out}, BLK, \textit{Moja: Black and Gay}, BGM, the \textit{Pyramid Periodical}, the \textit{Real Read}, and a promising selection of self-published chapbooks and portfolios that, taken as a whole, suggests that an important period of fermentation and development in black gay literature has been occurring since the release of [Adrian] Stanford’s \textit{Black and Queer.”}\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{(Brother xxiv)}

\textit{Black and Queer}, published in 1977 by the Good Gay Poets of Boston, was an anthology of black gay poetry that Hemphill remembered as a gift from the writer and editor Joseph Beam. Hemphill found the book to be an important symbol for the bourgeoning field of openly gay black writers during the 1980s: “For me, evidence of black gay men creating \textit{overt} homoerotic poetry begins with that small, powerful book. What I am suggesting is that black gay men have been publishing \textit{overt} homoerotic verse since 1977” (xxii). The sheer number of items in Hemphill’s long list of black gay publications and presses founded in the 1980s was unprecedented in U.S. publishing. It is significant that
Hemphill cited the anthology *Black and Queer* as a touchstone for those later publications and presses, since the multi-authored anthology—like *Home Girls*—was a major genre of black LGBT writing during the 1980s. While most of this dissertation, with the exception of the last chapter, focuses on long single-authored works of both non-fiction and fiction, the study would be incomplete if it did not give some attention to the importance of anthologies and magazines to black LGBT literary culture of the 1980s. Of Joseph Beam’s 1986 anthology *In the Life*, for example, E. Lynn Harris, in 2004, wrote, “Never before had the world seen the likes of Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint, to name several of the authors whose unabashedly gay, often sexually explicit material shaped the course of black gay, African American, and gay literature up to the present day” (xiii). Like Hemphill, Harris found the 1980s to be a significant moment in black gay writing and publishing: “By the 1980s, black gay writers took matters into their own hands. *In the Life* was only one of several literary milestones from this period. Writers groups like Blackheart and, later, Other Countries were formed to foster and promote black gay male literature. More than a mere literary movement, however, these artistic endeavors assumed greater depth of purpose via the AIDS epidemic that had surfaced in 1981. Much of this sudden outpouring of literary activity was organized in response to—indeed, a function of—AIDS” (xiv). One of the major issues explored in black gay writing from the 1980s is AIDS, an issue around which the discourses of both black sexual pathology and (white) homosexual pathology circled in the 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, the success and proliferation of 1980s black gay writing was in many ways built on the backs of countless black men who, dying due to
complications of AIDS and ignored by the federal government, clamored for recognition and expression.

In the late 1980s, Assotto Saint founded Galiens Press, his own independent publishing company through which he distributed his poetry collections *Stations* (1989) and *Looking for Wings* (1994), as well as his anthologies *The Road Before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets* (1991) and *Here to Dare: 10 Black Gay Poets* (1992), all of which explored the issue of AIDS. Reflecting on the need to establish black gay literary distribution networks, Saint wrote, “Let us save, beg, and borrow money to keep building our autonomous publications and other cultural institutions. Let us make sure that these institutions outlast us and do not become self-serving. Let us live beyond the here and now by nurturing each other and supporting one another’s works” (5). Like Christian, Saint insisted that the black LGBT publishing companies established during the 1980s outlast the supposed trend of black LGBT writing in the major publishing industry. Similarly, Essex Hemphill wrote of his hopes to “see a day when black gay men will bring forth anthologies and literature published and distributed by companies we have created and own” (*Brother xxx*). Many black LGBT writers understood the importance of controlling means of distribution—and access to those means—if, as Saint notes, newly-founded black LGBT publishing houses were to “outlast” and “live beyond” the 1980s and early 1990s.

Ensuring the longevity of newly-founded houses required, according to Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin, consciously engaging—though not necessarily directly addressing—white readers. Saint-Aubin focuses on appeals to white gay men in black
gay men’s writing in particular and finds that they were necessary “given the particular modes of literary production and dissemination and the particular patterns of literary consumption in this culture: Who publishes? What gets published? Who reads? In order for this collection [black gay texts] to constitute a commercial and political success, [they] must engage the white gay male reader even if [they do] not explicitly or consciously attempt to do so” (480). That is, independent, self-founded, identity-based publishing did not alter the rhetorical needs that other black LGBT writers—including Samuel Delany and Alice Walker—encountered by working with major U.S. houses like William Morrow and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, respectively. Thus, throughout this dissertation, I consider issues of audience and audience expectation and find black LGBT writers navigating through a complicated list of spectators: black LGBT readers, white LGBT readers, presumably straight African American readers, and—in specific cases like that of Delany and Walker—mainstream and straight white readers.

Articulating Shamelessness

In the four chapters and conclusion that follow, I interrogate the relationship between realism, publication venue, race, and sexuality in late-twentieth century African American literature, using the writing of LGBT African Americans of the 1980s as important sources and sites of the relationship. Chapter 1, “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s The Color Purple,” positions Walker’s novel as a response to not only the Black Power and Black Arts Movements’ politics of pride, but also a corrective to the conservative values of sexual respectability and silence that have
circulated in African American literature since its inception. Narrator Celie’s written and oral articulations of sexual abuse and same-sex desire break the rules that govern both the politics of pride and respectability by representing experiences usually considered shameful. Walker’s use of “racial realism” for the novel expanded, or queered, the existing portrait of black reality within African American writing. The meeting of black lesbian shamelessness and literary realism resulted in a major critical backlash against the novel, which suggests that black literary realism is a critical site for challenging the idea that black lesbianism is not a viable, or livable, path for black women.

Chapter 2, “Packaging Black LGBT Life-Writing: Audre Lorde’s Zami and Samuel R. Delany’s The Motion of Light in Water,” analyzes two autobiographical texts of the decade. Though life-writing is a genre closely affiliated with realism, the texts of Lorde and Delany actually take a step away from the racial realism employed by Walker in The Color Purple. Lorde and Delany’s texts challenge the expectation that African American life-writing offers a documentary-like entrée into black life. The texts self-reflexively point to the fact that major publishing houses mediate available visions of black reality, mediation which silences black queer expression. But rather than offer their narratives as realist correctives to this silence, Lorde and Delany deify themselves in their texts and thereby narrate their lives as hypothetical and/or unreal. By the end of her narrative, Lorde becomes Afrekete, a trickster figure from West African religious practice; Delany, on the other hand, consistently refers to his own and his association with celebrity and thereby narrates his life as legendary. In representing their lives as
deified, unreal, hypothetical experiences, Lorde and Delany point to the mediated condition of other black life-writing and of black racial realism in general.

Chapter 3, “Queering the Neo-Slave Narrative: Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*,” focuses on two speculative fiction novels that imaginatively unpack the ways in which sexual queerness has defined blackness in U.S. culture and, concurrently, the ways in which sexual normalcy has defined whiteness. As neo-slave narratives, both novels dramatize the initial scene of antebellum racialization in the United States. They point to how racism developed through the stigmatization of black bodies perceived as sexually queer. Both texts reveal that effective anti-racist practice requires reassessing the stigma placed on queer sexuality, given that this stigma underpinned some of the earliest racist discourse in the United States. Delany and Gomez explored this issue in speculative fiction and thereby suggested that literary realism is not the only site for producing knowledge about slavery and racism.

Chapter 4, “Embodying Black Gay Poetry: The Cinematic Corporeality of Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint,” focuses on Hemphill’s and Saint’s performances in the films of Marlon Riggs—*Tongues Untied* and *No Regret*, respectively. Hemphill and Saint’s decision to perform and thereby distribute their poetry and non-fiction in Riggs’s films created a black gay artistic network outside both the major publishing industry and the independent black/LGBT publishing scene. The work of Hemphill and Saint thus suggests that the traditional book is a medium unable to articulate the importance of the body’s materiality, its pleasures, and its pain. However, Hemphill and Saint participated
in the tradition of racial realism by performing in experimental documentaries designed to archive and thereby preserve their HIV-positive bodies. They strategically used this discourse to insist on their bodies’ lingering presence.

*Black Shamelessness* concludes that 1980s black LGBT writers’ various engagements with the dictate of racial realism reveals literary form as a primary site for twentieth-century black writers to negotiate with the sexualized politics of black pride and black authenticity. Furthermore, their engagements with various independent and major publication venues speak to contemporary black writers’ agency to find and address heterogeneous audiences.

**Bibliography**


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1 Individual black LGBT/same-sex desiring writers certainly managed to emerge in literary discourse before 1982, including James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, June Jordan, and Pat Parker. Also, Samuel R. Delany, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker—three of the writers I consider in this dissertation—began their careers in the 1960s and early 1970s. However, not since the simultaneous emergence of Countée Cullen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimké, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Richard Bruce Nugent—as well as performers Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey—during the 1920s had such a large and varied group of same-sex desiring writers shared the stage of black artistic production. See A.B. Christa Schwarz’s *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* for gay and queer readings of the work and lives of Cullen, Hughes, McKay, and Nugent. See Gloria T. Hull’s *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* for lesbian and queer readings of the work and lives of Dunbar-Nelson and Grimké. See Angela Y. Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* for lesbian and queer readings of the work and lives of Smith and Rainey.

2 The acronym “LGBT,” as well as each of the terms to which it refers—“lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “transgender”—are historically-contingent terms that emerged and accumulated meaning during the twentieth century. These terms differ from the medical connotations of a term like “homosexuality,” which emerged out of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century discipline of sexology (see Hugh Stevens’s “Homosexuality and Literature: An Introduction”). My interest in highlighting the work of openly LGBT writers is not a presentist means of celebrating the late twentieth century as a period of unprecedented sexual liberation, but rather a means of understanding the formal qualities, distribution strategies, and reception of writing by those who accepted—and, in some cases, were indirectly labeled—with the, again, historically-contingent terms “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “transgender.”

3 I use the word “queer” as a verb here and define it as the pointing out and challenging of implied and tacit assumptions of (sexual) normativity. When used as a verb, “queer” takes on what Judith Butler calls a “performative force” (*Bodies* 223) that, due to the
term’s troubling history as an anti-gay slur, questions assumptions about sexual normativity and, in particular, assumptions about which sexual identities are most desirable.

While Cleaver and Baraka are two important and powerful figures of the Black Arts Movement, their misogynist and homophobic ideas do not represent all of the Black Arts Movement and certainly not all of the Black Power Movement. For example, Huey Newton—co-founder of the Black Panther Party—addresses a black male audience in 1970 as follows: “Whatever your personal opinions and insecurities about homosexuality and the various liberation movements among homosexuals and women (and I speak of the homosexuals and women as oppressed groups), we should try to unite with them in a revolutionary fashion. I say ‘whatever your insecurities are’ because as we very well know, sometimes our first instinct is to want to hit a homosexual in the mouth because we are afraid that we might be homosexual; and we want to hit the woman or shut her up because we are afraid that she might castrate us, or take the nuts that we might not have to start with” (2). See also Fred Moten’s *In the Break* and José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* for queer readings of the Black Arts Movement and of Baraka’s writing in particular.

5 See Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* for a detailed definition and explanation of her use of the term “womanist.” See Johnson’s “Quare Studies” in the anthology *Black Queer Studies* for a definition and explanation of his use of the term “quare.”

6 This use of the term “queer” comes from David Halperin’s seminal queer theory text *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Halperin writes, “Unlike gay identity, which, though deliberately proclaimed in an act of affirmation, is nonetheless rooted in the positive fact of homosexual object-choice, queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality. As the very word implies, ‘queer’ does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer,’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices” (62, emphasis Halperin’s). Black sexuality’s degraded status in relation to white sexuality’s normative reign thus queers antebellum black sexuality.


8 Baldwin and Hansberry often eluded discussions of their sexual desires and identities. Furthermore, Baldwin explicitly rejected the label “gay” because of its associations with whiteness. See James S. Tinney’s article “Baldwin Comes Out.” See also Dwight A. McBride’s discussion of Baldwin’s television appearances in “Straight Black Studies” from the anthology Black Queer Studies for a discussion of how Baldwin closeted himself in order to play the role of representative race man. See Jewelle Gomez’s essay “Lorraine Hansberry: Uncommon Warrior” in Forty-three Septembers for a discussion of the way (hetero)sexism often forced the writer to keep quiet about her sexual desires and life.

9 “Black queer studies” as a specific field developed at the turn of the twenty-first century with a special edition of Callaloo (23.1: 2000) devoted to “New Essays in Black Queer Studies,” edited by Jennifer DeVere Brody and Dwight A. McBride. These essays developed a method of black queer cultural analysis that elucidated how the social categories of race and sexuality inform one another. The critical anthology Black Queer Studies, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, came five years later in 2005 with a particular interest in theorizing black queer sexuality using the tools and ideas of black vernacular culture, as well as those of earlier black queer writers. The field of black queer studies brings an awareness of race to queer studies and an awareness of queer sexuality to African American studies. As a field it is indebted to the development of black feminism and womanism in the 1970s and 1980s, which according to Roderick Ferguson has “the longest engagement with racialized sexuality” (85), or the concept that race is one discourse of sexuality and, vice versa, that sexuality is one discourse of race.

10 Gérard Genette has defined “paratexts” as “verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations… [which] ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays at least) of a book” (1).

11 E. Patrick Johnson’s discussion of Essex Hemphill in “‘Quare’ Studies” is an example of the way in which black queer studies has responded to Hemphill’s dually material and discursive literary image. As a performance theorist, Johnson pays close attention to the reception of Hemphill’s bodily performances by academics. Johnson responds to Hemphill’s appearance at a 1990 Outwrite conference of gay and lesbian writers, where Hemphill offered his thoughts on the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and, while lamenting the celebration in Mapplethorpe’s photography of what Hemphill understood to be racist fetishism for black men, began to cry (131). Johnson finds Hemphill’s teary performance to be an example of the need to focus on the corporeal experience of race in addition to the discursive. In so doing he critiques John Champagne’s reading of Hemphill’s tears as a “manipulative” (132) attempt to have his audience uncritically agree with what he saw as Hemphill’s “monolithic” (Champagne qtd. in Johnson 131) reading of the photographs. The story of Hemphill’s tears has become a small bit of lore, at this point, in black queer studies, as José Esteban Muñoz responds to it too in
Disidentifications, finding Champagne’s assessment of Hemphill to be a “frantic mission to attack important black queer culture makers” (202). Thus both Muñoz and Johnson come to the defense of Hemphill’s body and bodily actions in the face of Champagne’s attack. I take this critical urge to defend Hemphill’s body as a metaphor for the ways in which black queer studies, via its interaction with Hemphill, asks us to acknowledge and defend a writer’s physical body—and that body’s actions—in the assessment of said writer’s written work rather than disciplining the body into invisibility. In so doing, the writer’s body becomes a part of the writer’s literary oeuvre.

12 See Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahmann’s “The Strangest Freaks of Despotism” for a discussion of black sexuality’s role in the development of white normalcy during the antebellum era. See Siobhan Somerville’s Queering the Color Line and Julian Carter’s The Heart of Whiteness for explorations of black sexuality’s role in the articulation of whiteness and sexual normalcy at the turn of the twentieth century.

13 See, for example, Elizabeth Keckley’s description of losing her father in Behind the Scenes (1868).

14 See Blumoff and Lewis’s “The Reagan Court and Title VII” for an explanation of Reagan’s fight against Title VII.

15 One of the few incidents of black homosexuality actually being considered in mainstream political discourse came at the end of the decade, when Marlon Riggs released his aptly titled documentary Tongues Untied in 1989 and, subsequently, when PBS broadcast it on television in 1990. The documentary, which I discuss in detail in the last chapter of this dissertation, explored the revolutionary potential of black gay men discussing their experiences on screen and, importantly, the revolutionary potential of black gay men loving one another. Its presentation was a landmark moment, for it signaled one of the first—and last—cogent, sex-positive, and black-authored explorations of black homosexuality on American television. When PBS revealed plans to air the documentary, North Carolinian Senator Jesse Helms “lobbied in Congress to end NEA support for Riggs’s work, while Christian fundamentalists campaigned unsuccessfully against the 1990 national public television broadcast” (Williams 745). Presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan even used scenes from the documentary in his television campaign spots in 1992 to demonstrate the supposed moral depravity that existed during his opponent George Bush’s 1988-1992 administration. By the early 1990s, conservative politicians began to see black homosexuality as a cipher of racial and sexual obscenity and shame. While black sexuality in general and (white) homosexuality were demonized by conservative political discourse early in the decade, by its end black homosexuality was at least on the national radar, albeit with much protestation. The actual airing of Tongues Untied on behalf of PBS in 1990 notwithstanding, the furor over its broadcast demonstrates the extreme hostility that black homosexual artistic expression occasioned among those in power during the 1980s and early 1990s.
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first pointed to “the politics of silence” in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” as “a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (Hammonds 143).

While Butler does not specifically address an African American context here, her words recall the African Americanist work of Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*, as well as Toni Morrison’s thoughts on black women’s self-fashioning in *Sula*, wherein Sula and Nel realize that they are “neither white nor male” and so “set about creating something else to be” (52).

The Combahee River Collective Statement advocated that black women seek political change and support causes which confront the simultaneity of racism and (hetero)sexism in the lives of women. *Conditions* 5 was a 1979 issue of the 1970s lesbian-feminist magazine *Conditions* devoted to the writing of black feminists. This issue eventually developed into 1983’s *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. The Black Woman predates these later efforts as a 1970 anthology edited by Toni Cade Bambara that brought together writing by black women, a project which was theretofore unprecedented.

See Braziel and Young’s “Introduction” to *Erasing Public Memory* for a thorough examination of Kant’s racist writing.

See Stacy I. Morgan’s *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* for an exploration of how mid-twentieth century black writers embraced “social realism” (2) as a means of enacting material change to structures of inequality.

According to Linda Hutcheon, a number of late-twentieth century writers regarded as postmodern developed “historiographic metafiction” that were “incredulous” towards realism (4) and that “play[ed] upon the truth and lies of the historical record. Certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history [and literary realism] and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error” (10). All of the texts I consider in this dissertation share this same concern with history and the historical record, but they come to this concern due to the specific damage historiography and black literary realism have done to stories about black queer sexuality rather than due to general anxiety over the nature of “truth.”

Major work was undertaken during the 1980s to imagine how the study of U.S. literature would change as the writing and experiences of African Americans were taken seriously. Not only did the canon war expand the conditions of literary beauty to include black-authored writing, it also amended the way white-authored texts were read. In 1990, Toni Morrison explained, “The contemplation of [the] black presence [in American history] is central to my understanding of our national literature… These speculations
have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematic; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (5). Morrison considered how the values of U.S. literariness were defined against a supposedly aimless amorality. This so-called value was racialized as white while its opposite—amoral “valuelessness”—was racialized as black.

23 Though Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is no longer in operation, RedBone Press—which focuses on black gay and lesbian writing generally—was founded by Lisa C. Moore in the late 1990s after “white feminist publishers told her that there was ‘no market’ for [an] anthology of Black lesbian coming out stories” (Piepzna-Samarashinha). See Reginald Harris’s “Out, No Doubt” in *Black Issues Book Review* (2004) for a history of black LGBT publishing and a survey of contemporary trends in black LGBT publishing.
Chapter 1. Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness:
Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

Just before the 1982-1991 time period with which this dissertation is concerned, Barbara Smith lamented the lack of black lesbian representation in U.S. literary discourse. In her pivotal 1977 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Smith explained that “All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist” (132). At least by 1982, however, U.S. literary studies began to acknowledge and discuss the unprecedented amount of writing by and/or about black lesbians that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Barbara Christian noted that four seminal black lesbian texts—Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cyprus, & Indigo*, and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*—were all published in 1982 (5). She said, “Black lesbians, of course, had written before the 1980s. But seldom, until recently, have they identified themselves as lesbian, or overtly written from a lesbian perspective” (4). Publishing variously through major and independent identity-based presses, black lesbian writers and those who shared their concerns crafted representations of black lesbianism that had never been seen before in U.S. literary discourse. Lesbian- and bisexual-identified writers Ann Allen Shockley, Cheryl Clarke, Alexis De Veaux, Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde, Pat
Parker, and Alice Walker each began and developed their careers between 1970 and 1990.\(^1\) Writers like Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Ntozake Shange who did not openly identify as lesbian, same-sex desiring, or any manifestation thereof also published writing in the 1970s and 1980s that explicitly represented black lesbian characters and/or shared black lesbian writing’s general interest in women’s same-sex relationships.\(^2\) These writers have been referred to collectively as “the community of black women writing” (Spillers qtd. in Gates and McKay 2131) and as a community enabled by the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Gates and McKay 2127).

This group of writers has also been regarded as at odds with major male writers of the Black Arts Movement like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver because they consistently embraced feminist values.\(^3\) The community of black women writing critiqued what E. Patrick Johnson calls “the politics of hegemonic blackness,” an ethic which conceives of the “representation of effeminate homosexuality [within black writing] as disempowering” because both femininity and homosexuality are considered “ineffectual in the fight against oppression” (51).\(^4\) The 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement stated the case plainly:

> Black feminist politics … have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It
was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men. (273)

Composed of black lesbian writers like Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Beverly Smith, the Combahee River Collective consistently critiqued not only the racism of white feminism, but also the politics of black (masculine) pride that required the supine body of a black woman for its articulation as self-determined and invulnerable to white racism. Black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers of the 1970s and 1980s insisted on telling stories about black women who were excluded from black literary representation under the politics of black pride, including most notably lesbians and survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Cheryl A. Wall explains they “looked behind the veil and explored broken families, domestic violence, and sexual abuse” (797). The politics of hegemonic blackness consider these experiences and identities “dismantling” because they have typically been affiliated with sexualized vulnerability and shame. Black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers of the 1970s and 1980s brought attention to the ways in which sexualized shame dictates what is representable in African American literature. Their exploration of what are usually considered shameful issues complicated the calls for absolute black pride that defined the Black Power and Black Arts Movements.

Together, black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers cultivated what I call “black lesbian shamelessness,” an amended version of the calls for black pride that circulated in
the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Black lesbian shamelessness is defined by its celebration of the fact that same-sex relationships sustain and nurture the lives of countless black women, as well as by its acceptance of vulnerability and mutual dependence as fundamental conditions of human relationships. The ethic of black lesbian shamelessness, as represented by a number of black women writers from the 1970s and 1980s, does not position identities like “black,” “woman,” “white,” and “man” against one another in a re-structured hierarchy, but rather conceives of blackness as an experience through which the vulnerable, inter-subjective qualities of gender, racial, and sexual identification are clearly seen. In this chapter, I consider Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* as one particular treatment of black lesbian shamelessness. I begin my analysis of 1980s African American LGBT writing with *The Color Purple* because its 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and National Book Award mark a significant moment in the history of African American LGBT writing. The novel’s popularity and critical acclaim suggested that black female same-sex desire as an object of literary representation could be regarded with seriousness and sensitivity by a widespread audience. However, the swift backlash against the novel’s use of realism for its cultivation of lesbian shamelessness also reveals that genre determines the spirit in which celebrations of African American sexual queerness are received. Walker’s championing of black sexual queerness in a realist form directly violated calls for black authenticity defined through sexual dignity and normativity—calls endorsed by the politics of black pride that continued to reverberate after the 1970s. This chapter therefore considers Walker’s cultivation and presentation of black lesbian shamelessness as well as its reception. I begin by
positioning the characters and content of *The Color Purple* against the conservative value of sexual silence as well as the seemingly more radical politics of black pride. I consider how narrator Celie’s written and oral articulations and affirmations of her sexual experiences lead to a truly radical conception of vulnerable inter-subjective black identification. I then discuss *The Color Purple*’s reception as a realist text. Walker’s queering of black literary realism resulted in a critical backlash against the novel; its realist presentation of queer sexual and racial politics was often regarded as naïve and/or dangerous. This backlash indicates that realism is a critical site for the simultaneous negotiation of black community, queerness, and anti-racist politics. I conclude by briefly motioning to Walker’s black lesbian writer contemporaries who worked alongside her to challenge sexually normative portraits of black reality, as well as conceptions of invulnerable black identity.

**Articulating Sexuality and Opposing Salvation**

*The Color Purple* ruminates on issues of salvation, shame, and silence as they manifest in the lives of early-twentieth-century black women living in the U.S. South. The novel represents the pitfalls of the “salvific wish,” a rhetorical gesture associated with representations of African American women that Candice Jenkins explains is best understood as an aspiration, most often but not solely middle-class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual or domestic pathology through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety. Historically, it has been located in
social institutions such as the black church, as well as the black women’s club movement, which began in large part as a response to moral defamation of black women in the U.S. public sphere. At the end of the nineteenth century, both black women’s church groups and secular women’s clubs were grounded in the popular ideology of racial “uplift,” which consisted primarily of the conviction that a communal focus on “self-help, racial solidarity, and the accumulation of wealth” would improve the situation of blacks in American society. (125)

Jenkins points to a history of black women sacrificing sexual exploration—especially queer sexual exploration—in order to protect black communities from accusations of sexual deviance. As such, sexual propriety has operated as a shield. Evelynn Hammonds explains that black women have consistently “countered negative stereotypes” of black sexuality through “the evolution of a ‘culture of dissemblance’ and a ‘politics of silence’” (142), both of which have required black women to hide, mute, and/or shield any expression of (queer) sexuality. According to L.H. Stallings, this “historically politicized quiet has made it very difficult to fully discuss Black women’s sexual desires” (4). Because white supremacy regards black women’s open expression or exploration of (queer) sexuality as an invitation to violation, black women have frequently felt the need to sublimate both.

Black lesbian writers of the 1970s and 1980s critiqued the cultural compulsion that required black women’s sacrifice of (queer) sexual articulation. Audre Lorde theorized the uselessness of salvation via silence in 1977’s “The Transformation of
Silence into Language and Action.” Rather than hide or sublimate desires and experiences considered shameful as a means of shielding oneself from judgment or violation, Lorde explained that

It is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive…. And it is never without fear—of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. (Sister 43)

Lorde’s insistence that black women have always “lived through [scrutiny, judgment, and pain] already” is meant to liberate black lesbians in particular from the operating presumption that their silence on issues of same-sex desire can protect themselves and black people in general from (hetero)sexist and/or racist judgment. Her suggestion that, had she been mute, she “would still have suffered” resounds because of the fact that (black) women are violated in patriarchal cultures regardless of their sexual experience, expression, clothing, make-up, or any other defining feature of propriety. Furthermore, African Americans in general have been subject to racism regardless of their demonstration of respectability.

Walker questions the salvation assumed to be inherent in silence and respectability on the first page of The Color Purple, which begins with a line the rest of
the novel goes on to challenge: “You better not never tell nobody but God” (1). The line is purportedly spoken to Celie by her step-father Alphonso, who repeatedly rapes her during her adolescence. While Alphonso intends to keep Celie quiet about his sexual abuse, she proceeds to write letters to God about her experience and thereby turns Alphonso’s threat on its head. As Martha Cutter writes, “the rape becomes not an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie’s search for voice” (166). Rather than mute any articulations of Celie’s sexual experiences, Alphonso inadvertently sparks an on-going enunciation of them. The variety of experiences narrated demonstrates the many ways in which sex informs Celie’s life. Her first letter to God describes Alphonso’s abuse in a disturbing manner: “He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (1-2).
Celie’s descriptive narration of Alphonso’s abuse suggests that sexual articulation can displace imposed silence as a means of coping with abuse. Celie is confused over Alphonso’s violation, which she has no reason to believe she deserved or invited: “I am fourteen years old. I am-I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). Celie emphasizes her long-standing status as a “good girl,” a condition determined by her adherence to the salvific wish and the politics of respectability. Celie has been led to believe that her “good girl” behavior can spare her from the sexual violation of men, as well as spare her entire community from the racist violence of white people. Celie’s experience confronts the value of the salvific
wish by challenging its assumption that “good girl” behavior leads to personal safety and that, vice versa, only “bad girl” behavior leads to violation. Walker ultimately represents the politics of respectability as ineffectual means of confronting violation. Furthermore, she regards the politics of silence dictating the reticence of Celie’s community over the history of racist violence in the United States as misguided. Celie eventually learns that her biological father was lynched by a white mob threatened by his success in business. When Celie’s mother continuously grieved the death of her husband, “[t]he neighbors… shunned her more and more… because her attachment to the past was so pitiful” (181). Pushed to forget the past and hide its grief from her daughters, Celie’s mother married Alphonso, who proceeded to masquerade as the biological father of Celie and Nettie. In both situations, articulations of (hetero)sexist and racist violation were stifled in order to preserve a semblance of familial sanctity. Celie’s letters about her experiences begin to confront these silenced realities of sexuality, sexual violation, and racist violence. But their confrontation, according to Wendy Wall, is initially barely audible given that Celie “can survive these abuses only by recording them in a diary which acts as her second memory. She displaces her voice onto this silent, uncommunicated text” (263).

Upon marrying, Celie’s letters continue to silently narrate sexual feelings and experiences, including her disinterest in her husband Albert as a dominative sexual and domestic partner. Of her wedding night, Celie writes, “I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe. And then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him” (13). Celie’s disinterest in sex with Albert is signaled by her mind wandering to
women, first her sister and then Shug. Tracy L. Bealer says that “Celie’s first heterosexual encounter [with Alphonso] teaches her that sexual touch is a physical expression and reinforcement of the violent masculinist domination that pervades all aspects of her domestic space. […] For Celie, sex with [Albert] is consistent with his model of dominative masculinity, and highlights her internalization of Alphonso’s imperative to be silent and compliant in the face of domination” (29). Upon meeting her lover Shug, Celie is introduced to masturbation, same-sex relationships, and letters from her sister Nettie that Albert hid. Celie begins writing to Nettie rather than to God and Walker thus represents black women’s open expression of sexuality with one another as an alternative to the isolation of writing only to God. Furthermore, Walker represents black women’s sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex.

Celie’s same-sex experiences work to soothe the (sexist) wounds inflicted by Alphonso and Albert.8 Celie’s opening letter in which she describes rape is unmatched by any other in the novel in terms of graphically-rendered sexuality. The only other letter that details any kind of sexual encounter at length or in detail describes Celie’s intimacy with herself and with Shug: “I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. […] It a lot prettier than you thought, ain’t it? [Shug] say from the door” (82). With the aid of Shug, Celie complicates the power dynamics of looking within The Color Purple: no longer an object for Alphonso and
Albert’s sole viewing and sexual use, Celie—with Shug as the director—becomes inquisitive about her body and sexual pleasure:

…Where the button?

Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.

I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash. (82)

Celie’s articulation of sexual pleasure is also the articulation of her very body and presence. That is, Walker positions Celie’s woman-directed masturbation as the means through which her burgeoning self-love is experienced. This vision of selfhood and self-love is very different from the calls to pride heard during the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, during which time black selfhood and self-love was often said to be experienced through men’s use of “prone” women’s bodies.⁹ Shug’s encouragement is also important in this scene because, upon their first meeting, Celie remembers Shug remarking, “You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain’t believed it” (48). Celie is initially so unappealing to Shug because she knows of her only through Albert, who regards his wife as ugly. Walker suggests that male intervention into women’s sexual exploration hinders the communication necessary for women to value themselves and one another. Male intervention turns the scene of Celie’s sexual self-exploration from one of consensual female sexual companionship to one of female sexual deviance, as it ends when Albert and his son intrude on Celie and Shug: “Albert and Harpo coming, [Shug] say. And I
yank up my drawers and yank down my dress. I feel like us been doing something wrong” (82).

Together, Celie and Shug demonstrate a model of sexual vulnerability and mutual dependence that has them working together consensually rather than relating hierarchically—an interaction different from Albert’s masculinist relationship with Celie. When Celie decides to travel to Memphis with Shug, Albert responds to Celie’s departure by degrading her:

You’ll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spunk, he say. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid.

Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food. (212)

Albert chides Celie as different from Shug, who can “talk to anybody.” Albert’s words demonstrate that Celie’s silence has not shielded her from insult and accusation, as he nevertheless degrades her. Another major disparity Albert sees between Shug and Celie is their “looks”—the things Shug has that allow her to “stand up and be notice.” Celie’s lack of looks, in Albert’s eyes, deems her non-existent. Albert tries to use Shug’s alleged beauty to shame Celie and to differentiate them from each other. As such, he regards the women as sexual competitors rather than sexual companions.10

Celie responds to Albert’s degradation with a curse: “I curse you. […] Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. […] Until you do right by me,
everything you even dream about will fail” (213). Celie explains that the origin of her curse and newly-vocalized self-articulation is beyond her individual body, “I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees” (213). This particular speech act of Celie’s affirms her existence and experience to Albert in a way her silent letters could not. According to Judith Butler, “In order to attribute accountability to a subject, an origin of action in that subject is fictively secured. … The question, then, of who is accountable for a given injury precedes and initiates the subject, and the subject itself is formed through being nominated to inhabit that grammatical and juridical site” (45-46, emphasis hers). When Celie curses Albert, Albert initially receives the curse as if Celie alone is the curse’s “origin of action,” or author. This explains his reaction: “He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (213). To Albert, Celie is “nothing at all” because of her blackness, poverty, ugliness, and womanhood, but the curse itself attests to Celie’s presence, allows her to speak her experiences and feelings, “precedes and initiates” her. Celie performs what Butler calls the “making [of] linguistic community with a history of speakers” (52). According to Thomas M. Marvin, Celie responds to Albert “like a conjure woman” (412) and links herself to a host of African diasporic religious practices and practitioners. Indeed, Celie makes Albert aware of this fact when she tells him, “You better stop talking because all I’m telling you ain’t coming just from me” (213). Celie cites and inhabits a history of African diasporic religious practice that intimidates Albert—so much so that he backs down. Celie’s ability to articulate her feelings in speech in addition to writing is
celebrated here. Before hearing her curse, Albert mistakenly believed Celie to be a non-existent, non-speaking non-subject. When Celie asserts a place for herself within African diasporic religious practice that is recognizable to Albert, she affirms her existence to him, as well as their shared inter-subjective experience.

Celie re-imagines the four categories in which Albert places her when she responds to his insults with a final declaration: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (214). Celie shamelessly embraces the terms Albert intended as insults. Following her earlier work to turn Alphonso’s compulsion to silence upside down by writing to God, Celie once again finds a means of articulating her experiences in the face of extreme degradation. Thadious M. Davis finds that Celie’s embrace of Albert’s insults

echo [the words] of Langston Hughes’s folk philosopher, Jesse B. Semple (Simple): ‘I’m still here… I’ve been underfed, underpaid… I’ve been abused, confused, misused… I done had everything from flat feet to flat head… but I am still here… I’m still here.’ Celie’s verbal connection to Hughes’s black everyman and the black oral tradition extends her affirmation of self, so that it becomes racial, as well as personal. (119)

Thus, Walker connects Celie and her cultivation of black shamelessness not only to the history of African diasporic religious practice, but also to the work of Hughes, an earlier black queer writer. In 1943, Hughes began a series of stories about Semple, an African American man who cultivates his own sense of shamelessness by listing in precise detail the many abuses he has suffered: “I have been cut, shot, stabbed, run over, hit by a car
and trampled by a horse. I have been robbed, fooled, deceived, two-timed, double-crossed, dealt seconds, and might near blackmailed—but I am still here” (93). Semple’s narration and Celie’s articulation of the very actions and insults intended to defeat them can be considered a black queer survival strategy. Darieck Scott postulates that countless African Americans have utilized this queer survival strategy from the antebellum era to the present and wonders, “If we are racialized (in part) through domination and abjection and humiliation, is there anything of value to be learned from the experience of being defeated, humiliated, and abjected?” (6). Speaking from an abjected and violated position rather than a defensive and posturing one, Celie models the politics of black shamelessness by embracing and valuing a social experience regarded by most facets of society as worthless. Walker thus posits the embrace of queer vulnerability as a critical lesson about black lesbian identification, as well as black identification in general. Scott explains that

the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power—indeed, what we can think of as black power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call identity, body, race, nation seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. (9)

Regarding the vulnerability of abjection as a source of knowledge and power, Walker upsets hierarchizing tendencies that conceive of resoluteness and its attendant feeling of
pride as uniquely powerful and valuable. Her work re-conceptualizes experience with and acknowledgement of violation and vulnerability as a source of power and strength rather than shame within black communities.

When Albert springs toward her during their argument, a “dust devil flew up on the porch between us, fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, Anything you do to me, already done to you” (214). With her maxim, Celie, with dirt in her mouth, unites herself with Albert, suggesting that they have a shared bodily existence. If he should hit Celie again, Albert will only hit himself. After Albert’s work to differentiate Celie from himself—and to differentiate Celie from Shug—by calling her “pore,” “ugly,” and “a woman,” Celie unites them all by gesturing to their shared historical circumstances of violation and abjection and encourages Albert in particular to value vulnerability. Via Celie, Walker articulates a vision of black shamelessness that depends upon the concept of inter-subjectivity. Houston Baker uses the term “inter-subjectivity” as a means of explaining the blues and, in particular, the experience of a blues performance. He says, Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole. The blues singer’s signatory coda is always atopic, placeless: “If anybody ask you who sang this song / Tell ‘em X done been here and gone.” The “signature” is a space already “X”(ed), a trace of the already “gone”—a fissure rejoined. Nevertheless, the “you” (audience) addressed is always
free to invoke the X(ed) spot in the body’s absence. For the signature comprises a scripted authentication of “your” feelings. Its mark is an invitation to energizing intersubjectivity. Its implied (in)junction reads: here is my body meant for (a phylogenetically conceived) you. (5)

In Baker’s theory of the blues, individuals who witness and experience a given blues performance, sharing emotions and identities, blend together. The blues performance thus suspends clear distinctions between individuals in its requirement of empathy and the exchange of bodily and emotional experiences. The result of a blues performance is “not a filled subject,” but a communal sense of inter-dependence. That is, individual community members depend upon one another for support and for a relational sense of identity. Celie learns this vision of blues inter-subjectivity and inter-dependence from Shug, herself a blues musician. Shug explains to Celie that she cultivated her own sense of religious practice beyond the structure of a church and the notion that God was a white man: “My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed” (203). Shug speaks to the inter-subjectivity of individuals—human and otherwise—for their identities. Her vision of inter-subjective identities speaks to the way in which identities emerge in relation to one another. While this understanding of identity could lead one to rigidify his ego’s boundaries in order to disavow that which is not himself, Shug cultivates an empathetic sense of shared experience that resembles Baker’s theory of inter-subjectivity. Shug’s approach to
identity topples the hierarchy that allows a single white man to be God. Following Shug, Celie gestures to the history and circumstance she shares with Albert rather than continue their oppositional interaction by simply reversing their hierarchical relations. L.H. Stallings explains that “[r]eal resistance to stereotypes [sh]ould entail more than simply reversing the binary logic of stereotypes about Black women’s sexuality; it would mean destroying systems of gender and sexuality that make the stereotypes possible. Such action would aid in the initial construction of radical Black female sexual subjectivities” (2-3). *The Color Purple* reveals that “such action” requires the breakdown of individual egos postured against one another. According to Rachel Lister, “Walker, through her elaboration of Celie’s narrative, rejects the traditionally masculine emphasis on self-containment and strong ego boundaries and presents fragmentation as a form of empowerment” (65).¹⁵ Again, this mode of “empowerment” is quite different from those contained within the politics of pride and the salvific wish, given that it advocates shields and “ego boundaries” be dropped and vulnerability embraced.

In her response to Albert’s insults, Celie shamelessly embraces the term “ugly” and even the idea of her mouth being filled “with dirt.” In the rest of this dissertation, I consider what it means for black lesbian writers specifically (and black LGBT people generally) to embrace ugliness, or the socially shameful. If, as Hortense Spillers notes in her iconic 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” black women are “embedded in bizarre axiological ground” and if “there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath [this ground] to come clean” (257), then is there any way to value being “dirty”? As Celie embraces ugliness, she emerges with what is literally a
“mouth filled with dirt.” The scene suggests the power of a shameless and dirty mouth. Furthermore, regardless of what is communicated, black lesbian expression will be regarded by many as adulterating and shameful. Since “com[ing] clean” is impossible because of racist discourse on blackness and (hetero)sexist discourse on homosexuality and women, Walker advocates that black lesbians cultivate shamelessness regarding their supposed dirtiness, which can be effected through their articulation of sexual desires and experiences, first, to one another and, later, to the black men who attempt to shame them and the white supremacist/heterosexual culture that attempts to destroy them.

Receiving *The Color Purple* and Black Lesbian Shamelessness

Candice Jenkins argues that, in opposition to the values of the salvific wish, *The Color Purple* queers the “historical fantasies of black patriarchy (erected, perhaps, as a defensive response to [what Hortense Spillers calls] fatherlack), of which the black community harbors many” (94). *The Color Purple’s* queerness lies in the fact that it “contains a possibility far more bewildering than the father’s absence: a father [Albert] who is *present*, but nonetheless no longer dominant or even interested in domination” (94). By the end of the novel, Albert and Celie have become friends rather than volatile husband and abused wife. The failed patriarch becomes the symbol of successful, feminist heterosexual masculinity and the shameless black same-sex desiring woman becomes emblematic of successful black female sexual articulation. The caustic reception that *The Color Purple* received from many readers demonstrates the hostility that embracing an ethic like black lesbian shamelessness can engender. Walker’s vision of
black shamelessness, vulnerability, and abjection sparked major concern in a number of critics due to the fact that so-called black sexual depravity is often used as the rationale for white supremacy in the United States. Trudier Harris wrote in her 1984 review that *The Color Purple* simply add[s] freshness to many of the ideas circulating in the popular culture and captured in racist literature that suggested that black people have no morality when it comes to sexuality, that the black family structure is weak if existent at all... The novel gives validity to all the white racist’s notions of pathology in black communities... Black males and females form units without the benefit of marriage, or they easily dissolve marriages in order to form less structured, more promiscuous relationships. (157)

Harris found that the novel’s cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness validated white racist discourse of black sexual impropriety and deviance. *The Color Purple* came to represent the entire discourse of black sexual and domestic pathology in its representations of homosexuality and sexual assault. Harris’s concern over the lack of monogamous marriages represented in the novel betrays an interest in the promotion and circulation of heteronormative propriety and familiality exclusively. Harris’s critique also reveals a primary concern with audience and the number of “spectator readers” that *The Color Purple*’s “unequaled popularity” (155) brought it as a result of its publication through the major press Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, its Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and its National Book Award. These predominately white spectator readers, unlike Albert, might
not understand Celie’s cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness via the resounding modes of African diasporic religious practice.

Other critics also took umbrage with Walker’s cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness in a realist form. Indeed, many critics have suggested that this elaboration is one of *The Color Purple*’s most unrealistic aspects. Albert’s willingness to link himself with Celie by the end of the novel and relinquish his imagined status as an inviolate man was seen as particularly odd to Dinitia Smith, who wrote, “The men in this book change only when their women join together and rebel—and then, the change is so complete as to be unrealistic. It was hard for me to believe that a person as violent, brooding and just plain nasty as [Albert] could ever become that sweet, quiet man smoking and chatting on the porch” (19). Steven C. Weisenburger also found the shamelessly queer sensibility of the novel unrealistic, writing that, “as *The Color Purple* neared its close, the author’s felt needs—to win her reader’s complicity with, and good opinion of her, consciousness-raising work—had overridden the intradiegetic requirements for mimetic verisimilitude” and that “Walker’s ‘womanist’ errand had taken priority over the elements of narrative art” (265). Weisenburger critiqued Walker for stretching the conventions of literary realism in order to accomplish a political goal he regarded as tangential to artistic concerns. Harris’s review made a similar point about Celie’s curse and Albert’s transformation: “I am not opposed to triumph, but I do have objections to the unrealistic presentation of the path, the process that leads to such a triumph, especially when it is used to create a new archetype or to resurrect old myths about black women” (156). At the heart of these critiques is the sense that black lesbian shamelessness is neither a viable
path to triumph nor a realistic sensibility for black women’s lives. The critiques take
issue with Walker’s combination of black lesbian shamelessness and black literary
realism—two tracts which, according to the rhetoric of the salvific wish, the politics of
silence, and the politics of black pride, should not meet.

As noted in the introduction, “black literary realism” is an almost redundant term
given that realism has been an expectation of black-authored writing since the antebellum
era. Gene Andrew Jarrett explains that “racial realism” (1)—an artistic mode he describes
as that which “supposedly portray[s] the black race in accurate or truthful ways” (1)—has
been endorsed and regulated by both (often white) publishers and black writers alike,
including “William Howells in the 1890s, Alain Locke in the 1920s, Richard Wright in
the 1930s and 1940s, and Amiri Baraka in the 1960s and 1970s” (1). This expectation has
been informed by the assumption that black writing is, to use Toni Morrison’s phrase,
“rich ore” (2303), or a source of unmediated, even unsophisticated, information about
blackness. Historically, many black writers have strategically used the expectation of
racial realism in order to represent African Americans in ways that could level damage to
prevailing discourses of racism and white supremacy, discourses which operate by
presuming to know completely what blackness is. Recognizing racial realism as the
privileged arena of black artistic expression, black writers have endorsed sexual
normativity within it in order to combat racist discourse of black sexual depravity.

According to Dwight McBride, “There are many visions and versions of the black
community that get posited in scholarly discourse, popular cultural forms, and in political
discourse. Rarely do any of these visions include lesbians and gay men, except perhaps as
an afterthought” (207). Walker, like other black writers, recognized racial realism as a privileged discourse; unlike many black writers, however, she queered the predominant portrait of black realism—not simply by broadening racial realism to include a representation of black female same-sex desire, which had been done before, but by positioning such desire as its main character’s foundational and central experience of black self-love. The novel’s realist conventions thereby beg the question of what is (sexually) viable for black women in particular and for black identification in general.

*The Color Purple*’s use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) for the vast majority of its narration is one element of its realism upon which readers of the novel have consistently remarked. In an early review, Mel Watkins celebrated the “authenticity of its folk voice” (9) and Trudier Harris, who otherwise disapproved of the novel, wrote that its “folk speech … is absolutely wonderful” (156). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. championed *The Color Purple* for revealing that “one can write an entire novel in dialect” (251), which in turn affirmed that AAVE itself was a “storehouse of [linguistic] figures” (251) rather than an unsophisticated or simplistic sub-language. Thus, *The Color Purple*’s language was celebrated for its authentic realism even when the queer story it narrated was not. AAVE has long been associated with black writers and black literary realism. In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), James Weldon Johnson remembered Paul Laurence Dunbar, the leading black poet of the late 1800s, remarking to him, “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me” (899). Dunbar recognized his white audience’s appetite for AAVE and sated it strategically in order to build an audience with whom he could then share images of
dignified and respectable African Americans—images to counter stereotypes of sexual depravity and backwardness associated with both blackness in general and AAVE specifically. Zora Neale Hurston’s use of AAVE to narrate a significant portion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) further complicated expectations of AAVE by emphasizing its ability to authoritatively narrate a story, rather than marginalizing it to the speech of unsophisticated characters. According to Lisa Cohen Minnick, “Dialectical features associated with African American English figure extensively in the speech of nearly every character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well as in a number of nonspeech segments of the narration, a unique application of, to use Gates’s term, ‘dialect-informed’ free indirect discourse” (122). That is, Hurston’s narrator uses AAVE along with her characters, but the narrator also differentiates herself from Janie, Tea Cake, and others by using mostly Standard English (SE) to omnisciently recount their lives. Still, “[i]n this approximately 60,000-word novel, nearly half of those words are represented as the direct speech [in AAVE] of characters” (Minnick 123). Though the percentage of AAVE in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is substantial, the Standard English (SE) voice of the narrator remains a normalized discourse with which to compare the speech. The novel exalts AAVE and its expressive power, but AAVE remains a literary language secondary to SE, which is represented as omniscient. Walker continued Hurston’s work by narrating almost all of *The Color Purple* in AAVE. When Nettie’s SE narration enters the text, it is always framed by Celie’s AAVE introductions, making AAVE the guiding language of the novel. Writing nearly a century after Dunbar, Walker—like Huston before her—challenged assumptions of AAVE’s artfulness and
sophistication by using it to narrate almost an entire novel. Furthermore, Walker subverted the linguistic and therefore racial expectations of the epistolary genre, long heralded as the form from which long-form Anglophone fiction originates. In effect, Walker revealed that AAVE was not limited to the “two full stops” of “humor and pathos” that James Weldon Johnson once believed it to be (901).

What early reviews and critics since then have overlooked and/or de-valued is the fact that Walker’s use of realism and AAVE also manage to question what a realistic, viable, and livable black life can look like. Similar to Dunbar, Walker was conscious of audience when she chose to compose in AAVE. Describing her mother’s interaction with *The Color Purple*, Walker writes, “She had not read *The Color Purple* before her stroke, beyond the first few pages, though it was deliberately written in a way that would not intimidate her, and other readers like her, with only a grade school education and a lifetime of reading the Bible, newspapers and magazine articles” (*Same* 24). Made to be accessible to readers like her mother rather than white spectator readers, *The Color Purple*’s strategic fulfillment of the stylistic conventions of racial realism nevertheless queers the normative portrait of African Americans traditionally found in black literary realism for both groups, as well as the more radical but nevertheless misogynistic portrait of black self-love endorsed by the politics of black pride. That is, the framing of black lesbian shamelessness as a realist and realistic narrative, along with the narrating of black lesbian shamelessness in AAVE, expands the privileged arena of black literary realism to account for a happy, successful black lesbian. Furthermore, this queering of black literary
realism challenges predominant masculinist assumptions of what makes black life valuable and viable.

*The Color Purple*’s reception also reveals how truly novel Barbara Smith’s 1977 proclamation of black lesbian existence was. A great number of readers harbored normative aspirations for black communities that sought the elimination of black lesbianism by suggesting that, for African Americans, lesbianism (and shamelessness regarding it) was simply impossible. The backlash against *The Color Purple* reveals the normative politics of black literary realism, as well as the normative politics that determine what Judith Butler calls a “livable life”: “When we ask what makes a life livable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life” (*Undoing* 226). Within the African American literary tradition—as well as the reception of the tradition—assumptions about what makes black life valuable determine whether a specific portrait of life is deemed realistic and therefore successfully realist. When those assumptions are normative, then a queer vision of life can only remain hypothetical. Furthermore, when we ask what makes a black literary text realist, we are asking about the socially-normative conventions of the genre. ¹⁸ *The Color Purple*’s work to challenge assumptions of black lesbian unviability also questioned what Cheryl Clarke calls the “boundaries of blackness” and, specifically, how blackness as racial identification should operate. Clarke writes that the “prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement era were imposed upon recent converts to blackness, much like the codes of ‘black respectability’ were impressed upon recent migrants from the South at the turn of the twentieth century. The rhetoric of the black nationalist intelligentsia … sharply
policed the ‘boundaries of blackness’ to its margins” (14) in an attempt at invulnerability. These boundaries were heavily patrolled not only to keep black queer expressions out, but to regard the vulnerability endemic to queer social positions as incompatible with a newly self-determined, inviolate notion of blackness. Reading *The Color Purple* and its reception as negotiations with the politics of black pride reveals genre—and literary realism in particular—as a critical site at which the boundaries of black communities are continuously re-imagined and re-articulated, as well as a site at which the values of pride, shame, and shamelessness are either espoused or challenged.

**Conclusion: The Binds of Literary Realism**

*The Color Purple* suggests that black women’s open and vocal articulation of (same-sex) sexual experiences can cultivate a liberating sense of black lesbian shamelessness. This sensibility opposes the politics of pride that defined the Black Arts Movement, as well as the rhetoric of the salvific wish that has silenced black women’s expressions and explorations of (queer) sexuality since at least the nineteenth century. The novel characterizes black lesbian shamelessness as an approach to racial, gender, and sexual identification that acknowledges the mutually constitutive, inter-subjective conditions of these categories, as well as the history of black violation in the United States.

My reading of *The Color Purple*’s reception finds that black literary realism is a critical site for exploring viable approaches and responses to the legacies and realities of racism and white supremacy in the United States. Thus black literary realism asks the
question, in the words of Judith Butler, of “how a collective deals with its vulnerability to violence” (*Undoing* 231). Butler identifies two familiar possibilities before exploring another:

There is the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself. There is the possibility of becoming violent. But perhaps there is some other way to live in such a way that one is neither fearing death, becoming socially dead from fear of being killed, or becoming violent, and killing others, or subjecting them to live a life of social death predicated upon the fear of literal death. Perhaps this other way to live requires a world in which collective means are found to protect bodily vulnerability without precisely eradicating it. (231)

Walker offers black lesbian shamelessness as this “other way to live” and regards intersubjective vulnerability as a sustainable experience. The fact of individuals’ indebtedness to one another for their identities and existence thus becomes a fundamental ethic of human care. Rather than regard vulnerability and social abjection as invitations to violation that must be foreclosed and disavowed, Walker’s queer realism conceives of social abjection as a source of sustenance that speaks to individuals’ need to preserve one another’s vulnerability. Central to this black queer realism is the black lesbian who shamelessly articulates her sexual experiences, violations, and desires and who, subsequently, links these experiences to broader histories of black violation and desire.

Like Walker, late-twentieth-century black lesbian writers Audre Lorde and Jewelle Gomez—along with black gay male writers Samuel Delany, Essex Hemphill, and
Assotto Saint—confronted the question of whether black literary realism could expand to accommodate thriving black lesbian and queer characters. Read together, they reveal a wide range of responses to the question. Walker’s explicit framing of the queer politics of shamelessness in a realist form challenged predominant visions of black reality and livability and at the same time re-articulated black literary realism’s privileged status in the African American literary tradition. In the chapters that follow, I explore how other black LGBT writers responded to black literary realism’s association with heteronormativity. Delany, Gomez, and Lorde—unlike Walker—seized non-realistic, speculative forms as means of celebrating black queer sexuality. Hemphill and Saint, like Walker, recognized the benefits of working within literary realism’s privileged discourse, but also challenged its championing of the written book as a uniquely valuable source of knowledge. Walker’s *The Color Purple*, along with the work of other late-twentieth-century black LGBT writers, reveals black literary realism as a critical site for the exploration of queer sexual and racial politics, as well as for the articulation of black sexual boundaries and vulnerability. Black LGBT writers’ shamelessness regarding the history and reality of black vulnerability, and their positing of black queerness as a viable means of thriving despite such violation, continues to challenge normative means of dealing with vulnerability, including the politics of silence and the politics of pride.

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*Feminism Meets Queer Theory.* Eds. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor.


117


Shockley’s *Loving Her* (1974) is one of the first novels to feature a black lesbian main character. Clarke’s *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* (1983) was her first poetry collection. De Veaux’s *Spirits in the Street* (1973) is a fictionalized memoir of her life. Additionally, her *Don’t Explain* (1980) is a biography of Billie Holiday written as a prose poem. Gomez published her first two poetry collections, *The Lipstick Papers* (1980) and *Flamingoes and Bears* (1986) during this time. Pat Parker published four poetry collections throughout the 1970s, culminating in *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry* (1978). Audre Lorde published seven volumes of poetry during this time period, beginning with *The First Cities* (1968) and including *Coal* (1976). Alice Walker published her first collection of poetry, *Once* (1968), her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and her first short story collection, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), during this time. Walker has been identified with the term “bisexual” at various points in the 1990s and early 2000s and did not make public proclamations about her same-sex desires until after *The Color Purple*’s publication. Nevertheless, rumors of her sexual orientation swirled around the time of *The Color Purple*’s publication (Jenkins 224). In her preface to *In Search Of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Walker identified as a “womanist,” or a “woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” who “[s]ometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually” (xi). In 1990, Walker referred to herself as “two-spirited,” saying, “I get a thrill out of Bob Marley and Tina Turner” (qtd. in White 443).


3 See Amiri Baraka’s 1968 poems “Black Art” and “A Poem for Black Hearts” for representations of black pride that reveal masculinist sensibilities. See Cleaver’s collection *Soul on Ice* (1968) for examples of his masculinist vision of black pride. For specific critiques of their work, see E. Patrick Johnson’s chapter on Cleaver from *Appropriating Blackness* and Darieck Scott’s chapter on Baraka from *Extravagant Abjection*.

4 See also Wahneema Lubiano’s “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense,” in which she writes that black nationalism’s “most hegemonic appearances and manifestations have been masculinist and homophobic” (232). Furthermore, she says that “Black nationalism is a constantly reinvented and reinventing discourse that generally opposes the Eurocentrism of the U.S. state, but neither historically nor contemporaneously depends upon a consistent or complete opposition to Eurocentrism… [O]ne consistent black feminist critique of black nationalist ideology is that it insufficiently breaks with patriarchal modes of economic, political, cultural (especially familial), and social circulations of power that mimic Euro-American modes” (233).
Shame has been a topic of discussion in queer studies since the late 1980s, a discussion that is in many ways indebted to black women writers’ exploration of shamelessness during the 1970s and 1980s, though this indebtedness most often goes unnoted. Queer theory by Leo Bersani and Douglas Crimp in particular has considered the potential liberatory qualities of shame and ego debasement, especially in opposition to ethics of pride and invulnerability that typically define patriarchy. Bersani’s 1987 essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” for example, considered patriarchy “not [as] primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the value of powerlessness in both men and women. I don’t mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (217). Bersani argued that the shame and debasement one may experience during or after sexual penetration has the potential to “shatter” (218) rigid and egotistic conceptions of the self on which patriarchy depends for its continuous re-articulation. See also Crimp’s “Mario Montez: For Shame.” Before the 1970s and 1980s, shame had rarely—if ever—been regarded as potentially liberatory in critical race discourse. On the contrary, eliminating the shame associated with blackness in white supremacist discourse has been a major project of black writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Langston Hughes. When shame became an issue of representation in black women’s writing of the 1970s and 1980s, it did not necessarily share Bersani’s belief that shame could liberate; rather, it regarded debasement as a fundamental reality of black women’s lives that shamelessness, as a lens and an ethic, could help explore. See Judith Halberstam’s “Shame and White Gay Masculinity” for a critique of the ways in which shame has been embraced by mostly white gay male scholars in queer studies. Halberstam writes that shame is a potentially-powerful lens through which to read white gay male cultural production because “shame can be a powerful tactic in the struggle to make privilege (whiteness, masculinity, wealth) visible” (220).

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first pointed to “the politics of silence” in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage or Race” as “a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (Hammonds 143). In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” Darlene Clark Hine says the “culture of dissemblance” developed as “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (Hine qtd. in Hammonds 143).

Hammonds advocates that black women cultivate a politics of sexual articulation in order to “overturn… the ‘politics of silence’” (152). The politics of sexual articulation, she says, should “build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (152). In this chapter, I share Hammonds’s concern about the means
through which black women’s sexual experiences can be articulated, especially when it comes to literary form.

8 Some critics have found that these wounds of sexism are also represented as wounds of racism. Maroula Joannou writes, “Because the context of slavery is invoked through the particulars of Celie’s situation, her experiences bring to mind collective rather than individual memories and histories” (176). Still others have argued that Walker does not adequately contextualize the sexist acts of Alphonso and Albert in the context of U.S. racism. Elliot Butler-Evans writes that the novel accomplishes the “displacement of broad issues of Afro-American history by a specific feminist ideology” (12). Lauren Berlant argues that the stories of other characters—Sofia and Squeak/Mary Agnes—are more thoroughly contextualized in the context of dual racism and sexism experienced by black women (219). Additionally, my argument that Celie’s sexual exploration with Shug helps to heal the wounds caused by Albert and Alphonso’s violations is in no way meant to suggest that Walker represents female same-sex desire as universally the result of failed relationships with men, as Ishmael Reed wrote in “Steven Spielberg Plays Howard Beach,” his critique of the movie version of The Color Purple.

9 Stokeley Carmichael said in an unofficial 1964 statement that the only position for women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was “prone.”

10 The fact that Albert calls Celie “ugly” in order to stifle her ambitious plan to travel to Memphis recalls a relationship between ugliness and intelligence/ambition explored in the Combahee River Collective Statement, which says, “No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of black women’s lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were ‘smart’ had also been considered ‘ugly,’ i.e., ‘smart-ugly.’ ‘Smart-ugly’ crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our ‘social’ lives” (276). Thus “ugly” is in close association with “smart” and “ambitious” for black women in particular due to the fact that black female intelligence and ambition plays no valuable role in normative “‘social’ lives.”

11 Many critics have made this point about the privileging of orality in The Color Purple, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his chapter on The Color Purple from The Signifying Monkey, Thomas F. Marvin in “‘Preachin’ the Blues,’” and bell hooks in “Reading and Resistance.”

12 I import the terms “inter-subjective” and “inter-subjectivity” from Houston Baker’s Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, wherein he conceives of the blues as both a musical form and a cultural experience that “offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a
nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience. What emerges [through blues performance] is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole… Its [anonymity] is an invitation to energizing intersubjectivity. Its implied (in)junction reads: here is my body meant for (a phylogenetically conceived) you” (5). Baker’s theorizing of subjectivity in a black cultural context emphasizes the importance of vulnerability and willingness to not only relate to other people, but to become part of them, and vice versa.

13 Significantly, Hughes is said to have “discovered” Walker. He had a hand in publishing some of her first stories. See White’s Alice Walker: A Life.

14 See Thomas F. Marvin’s “‘Preachin’ the Blues’” and Marlon Racquel Moore’s “God is (a) Pussy” for extended discussions of Shug’s blues sensibility.

15 Furthermore, Shanyn Fiske explains in “Piecing the Patchwork Self” that this ethic of inter-subjectivity is actually reflected in The Color Purple’s broad form: “The novel’s inclusion of so many individual stories makes it difficult to tell whether these narratives are enclosed within Celie’s account of her life or whether Celie’s story is part of a larger whole. This formal destabilization of a dominant narrative emphasizes that an individual cannot be considered apart from the matrix of his or her relationships” (150-151).

16 Nella Larsen’s novel Passing (1929) is an example of a significantly earlier representation of black female same-sex desire that regards one black woman’s desire for another as threatening and antithetical to black social success.

17 See Barbara Smith’s “Sexual Oppression Unmasked” for an explanation of the fact that, while many readers celebrated The Color Purple’s language, most chose to overlook its lesbian storyline.

18 A number of critics have tried to redeem The Color Purple be reading it not as a realist narrative, but as a romance, fairy tale, and/or folk tale. See Molly Hite, “Romance, Marginality, and Matrilineage,” Diane Gabrielsen Scholl’s “With Ears to Hear and Eyes to See,” and Margaret Walsh’s “The Enchanted World of The Color Purple.” However, even these more sympathetic critics end up implying that black lesbian shamelessness is not a viable means of experiencing life by relegating it to the realm of romance, fairy tale, and folk tale.

19 While Butler does not specifically address an African American context here, her words recall the African Americanist work of Orlando Patterson’s Slavery and Social Death, as well as Toni Morrison’s thoughts on black women’s self-fashioning in Sula, wherein Sula and Nel realize that they are “neither white nor male” and so “set about creating something else to be” (52).
Chapter 2. Packaging Black LGBT Life-Writing: Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name and Samuel R. Delany’s The Motion of Light in Water

The previous chapter argued that the expectation of “racial realism” (Jarrett 1) has frequently required literary representations of African Americans that foreground heterosexual experiences and normative aspirations rather than queer-positive experiences of same-sex desire. The backlash against Alice Walker’s use of realist aesthetics to celebrate queer sexual and racial politics in The Color Purple reveals black literary realism’s critical role in the politics of black sexuality. Its terrain is important for examining both the queer possibilities and the normative boundaries of blackness and black racial identification. This chapter continues Black Shamelessness’s exploration of the relationship between realism, race, and sexuality by examining 1980s black LGBT life-writing. I analyze Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982) and Samuel R. Delany’s The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965 (1988), autobiographical writing that explicitly addresses and challenges publisher and audience expectations of racial authority, authenticity, and truth in black realist texts.¹ Lorde and Delany ask readers to question whether their autobiographical, supposedly realist writing provides accurate reflections of the authors’ lives, as well as of black LGBT subjects generally.² This chapter argues that self-
reflexive moves within both texts questioning the “reality” of realism are used to critique the relationship between black literary realism and heteronormativity, a relationship that requires heteronormativity be regarded as the sole “real” black experience. Thus, rather than reify realism’s privileged role in black writing, Lorde and Delany challenge its presumed ability to portray black subjects and black LGBT subjects in particular.

This chapter also considers how the ethic of black shamelessness elucidated in my analysis of The Color Purple manifests in 1980s black LGBT life-writing. I explore how a shameless investment in vulnerability and ego loss can operate in a genre that represents and often celebrates uncompromising individuality. Lorde’s and Delany’s consistent deferral of their own authority over their identities and bodies demonstrates the ways in which both are formed through inter-subjective relations with others.

My analysis of Lorde’s and Delany’s life-writing requires attending to the paratextual materials that frame Zami and The Motion of Light in Water, given that the framing and marketing strategies of black life-writing have historically been wed to the issues of racial authority and authenticity. I explore how Lorde and Delany, as African Americans writing to celebrate sexual queerness rather than denounce it, were made visually consumable to their audiences on the covers and in the prefatory material of their life-writing. The fact that Lorde published Zami through the independent lesbian press Persephone, and that Delany published The Motion of Light in Water through Arbor Books (part of the major William Morrow Press), allows me to consider whether an independent distribution strategy provided for more innovative and perhaps resistant framing and marketing strategies than did a major press.
I begin by surveying the relationship between blackness, economics, and literature in order to understand the history of African Americans publishing in the United States, as well as the history of packaging black-authored texts. I provide this history in order to contextualize the different publishers and therefore audiences that Delany and Lorde found for their life-writing. I then consider the form Lorde chose for \textit{Zami}—what she called “biomythography”—and its associations with myth and legend rather than realism and reality. Then I consider the unorthodox form of Delany’s text, which he referred to as a “genre crosser … between criticism and memoir” (Rowell 266). I consider why, in both texts, Lorde and Delany use some of the conventions of realist black life-writing—like frontispieces, literacy narratives, and scenes of trauma due to racism—as a means of narrating themselves as “black” and connecting themselves to other versions of literary blackness. I then explore how their simultaneous narration of homosexual pleasure managed to subvert audience appetites for such conventions. Throughout, I attend to the reasons Delany and Lorde narrate themselves as “legendary” rather than “real.” Since agencies of power in the United States regard the pain of racialized heterosexism as unreal in order to avoid addressing its consequences, I explore why Lorde and Delany would leave any room in their life-writing to suggest that what they experienced as black LGBT subjects was unreal. I conclude by considering their aversion to black literary realism and to claims of black authenticity.

Packaging and Publishing while Black and Queer

128
The relationship between race, economics, and mass culture began with the Middle Passage and the era of antebellum slavery, when African people were regarded by white supremacist discourse as products to be bought and sold. This legacy of circulating black bodies for white sale and exchange continued into the late-nineteenth century era of mass cultural production, when a single, increasingly globalized marketplace began to provide access to only the most popular products. According to Jacqueline Goldsby, racism and mass cultural production have historically worked in tandem in the United States through the packaging and circulation of black suffering for white consumption (200-201). The major U.S. publishing industry, according to John K. Young, is one agency of power involved in such packaging, as the “predominantly white publishing industry reflects and often reinforces the racial divide that has always defined U.S. society, representing ‘blackness’ as a one-dimensional cultural experience” (4). This singular cultural experience is frequently white-authored and defined for white consumers as the bodily and psychic trauma of racism. Russ Castronovo explains that “the spectacular nature of racial victimization” (119) has made it an aesthetic of mass culture that consumers anticipate and even crave.

Access to the means of literary distribution—indeed, access to literacy—had been socially banned for enslaved African Americans in the antebellum United States. The slaveholding system regarded knowledge of written language, as well as the act of writing itself, as either irrelevant to black people it believed intellectually incapable of such knowledge or a dangerous method of creating a potentially rebellious enslaved population. As such, the composition, publication, and wide circulation of black-authored
writing—including that of Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass—was inherently transgressive in the antebellum United States. Indeed, publishing and circulating black-authored writing was one method abolitionists used to combat racist assumptions of black intellectual deficiency.6

In order for the very presence of a black-authored book to challenge the cultural logic of U.S. racism, it had to shore up the Western intellectual tradition’s belief in writing as the primary site of knowledge production, notwithstanding efforts to celebrate orality within antebellum African American texts. Thus, while black-authored writing unsettled some Western ideologies, it supported others. Roderick Ferguson has regarded published writing as one means through which marginalized subjects may be normalized in the United States. He says,

[L]iberal ideology has often presented literature as a mechanism by which marginalized groups can bid for the normative positions of state and civil society. Abolitionists used the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and the letters of Ignatius Sancho to show “that the untutored African may possess abilities equal to an European.” Aesthetic practices would grant access to national culture and Western civilization and would bestow the properties of the rational (i.e., ‘white’) citizen-subject onto the irrational other. (Aberrations 25-26)

According to Ferguson, this “bid” for normalization frequently endorsed—albeit indirectly—Western aesthetic and intellectual values, including the supposed values of books and of heteronormativity. As a result, publication became a process through which
Western aesthetic and intellectual forms like writing, as well as social values like heteronormativity, were promoted rather than questioned. Black-authored writing certainly challenged racist ideas of black aesthetic and intellectual incapability, but its publication did not question the fundamental assumption of writing as the primary reflection of one’s aesthetic and/or intellectual aptitude, nor did it interrogate the normative conditions under which black intellectual capability was realized.

According to Ferguson, publication historically worked alongside academic canonization as an anti-queer process invested in normalizing subjects racially and sexually. Normalization required the reproduction of historically Western and white customs as well as the demonstration of heterosexuality and domestic propriety. Ferguson says,

As canonical interpretations format literature to enable morality, they presume literature’s obligation to normalize and universalize heteropatriarchal relations… [U]niversalizing and normalizing heteropatriarchal relations would also necessitate disciplining nonheteronormative formations. Indeed, regulating nonheteronormative elements exposes a nationalist imperative at work within aesthetics. As it responds to canonical pressures, literature engages the racialized genealogy of citizen and state formations. (Aberrations 25-26)

Nineteenth-century African American literature in particular demonstrates how invested black writers were in promoting what Ferguson calls “heteropatriarchal relations” as well as in “regulating nonheteronormative elements.” The masculinist rhetoric Douglass uses
in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) as well as Elizabeth Keckley’s sustained documentation and celebration of her parents’ marriage in *Behind the Scenes* (1868) are examples of this demonstration. Ferguson explains that the demonstration of heterosexual propriety on behalf of racially marginalized populations has historically been one way for such populations to be regarded as suitable for citizenship (“Of Our” 89). That the major U.S. publishing industry is obligated to universalize heteronormativity betrays its investment in nationalist ideas of the sexually proper citizen-subject. As a result, the U.S. publishing industry has frequently been unable to respectfully recognize sexual complexity and/or queerness as real. Furthermore, it has consistently required a monolithic vision of heterosexual blackness in order to make African American subjects recognizable as human and real to white readers.

Indeed, according to John K. Young, the major U.S. publishing industry has “historically inscribed a mythologized version of the ‘black experience’ onto all works marked by race” (4). He says that there are “complex negotiations required to produce African American texts through a predominantly white publishing industry” (5). In *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (2006), Young examines how a number of African American writers had their work edited or amended by major white publishers interested in making their books marketable and believable to a white audience. Knopf Publishing changed the title of Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel from *Nig* to *Passing*, for example, so as to not offend the sensibilities of potential white readers (1). Furthermore, Richard Wright removed
descriptions of Bigger Thomas masturbating with a male friend and of the white Mary Dalton desiring Bigger from *Native Son* (1940) in order to make the novel acceptable as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, with the Book-of-the-Month Club operating as the most significant mid-century network through which major publishers circulated their products to a predominantly white readership (14-15). Earlier, in the nineteenth century, African American writers who preceded Larsen and Wright also wrestled with audience expectations and publishing conventions of blackness. John Ernest explains that, “[i]n all of the situations and contexts in which they worked, [nineteenth-century] African American writers, narrators, and textual subjects faced the challenge of representing a life defined by race, resisting that definition while also cultivating community, negotiating the cultural politics of readership as well as the occasions for publication, and redirecting the trajectory of—and the possibilities and settings for—African American identity” (79).

Thus, according to Young and Ernest, the major U.S. publishing industry has historically required that black-authored writing accommodate white sensibilities of race and blackness, including expectations of heterosexuality and expectations of black physical and psychic suffering. African American writers often had to work with some recognizable literary conventions of blackness in order to challenge others. It follows from this history that incredible negotiations were necessary to produce and circulate African American LGBT texts in the 1980s, especially given that even white-authored texts dealing with same-sex desire have historically encountered censorship. Producing such texts required negotiating with a major publishing industry that had historically
censored LGBT material and had exercised tight control on what African American writers could say about race and sex in print.  

The emergence of so much black LGBT-authored writing in the 1980s contributed to growing awareness over the specific challenges faced by LGBT African Americans. Speaking of another context, Goldsby explains that “the refusal by power in all its forms—the state, its agencies, and its ideal (white) citizen-subjects—to sanction the social woundings that racial subjects experience as ‘real’ is the defining problematic of racial trauma” (180). The emergence of black LGBT writing in the 1980s had the potential to alleviate the pain of being unrecognized by establishing a paper trail that attested to the realities and presences of LGBT African Americans and the hardships associated with black queer experience. Still, the 1980s moment of black LGBT visibility within U.S. literary discourse did not come without suspicion from black LGBT writers. If the agencies of power involved in the production of U.S. mass culture had historically profited from the circulation of (heterosexual) black suffering, what good could the mass circulation of LGBT black suffering do? In 1985 Barbara Christian noted,

[black] Lesbian life, characters, language, [and] values are at present and to some extent becoming respectable in American literature, partly because of the pressure of women-centered communities, partly because publishers are intensely aware of marketing trends. I say at present because the history of the publication of Afro-American books, of women’s books, of books about Third World peoples in America illustrates how long periods of silence often follow literary explosions of second-class American
citizens unless that group somehow gains the power to determine what appears in print. (3, emphasis in original)

Christian wondered to what extent the proliferation of writing by and about African American lesbians in the 1980s was simply a business arrangement allowed by a U.S. publishing industry confident it could profit from the “trend” of black lesbianism before eventually and surely reburying it. Could the very popularity of a few texts—especially of *The Color Purple* which, as noted in the previous chapter, garnered an unprecedented amount of attention, both caustic and laudatory, for a black lesbian text—add to the suffering of black lesbians that the texts purported to represent? Was U.S. literary discourse sincerely invested in a sustained engagement with feminist and queer politics, or was it only briefly allowing both to emerge in representations of African Americans? Would the popularity of a few texts exhume and clarify black lesbianism for a mass audience, or would major U.S. publishers simply point to and profit from a tokenized black lesbianism and the suffering associated with it before directing their gaze to some other form of black pain?

Christian’s concern is similar to Michel Foucault’s provocation about the conditions under which seemingly revolutionary ideas generally surface in discourse. He says, “[W]e should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse…?” (1635). Foucault’s recommendation suggests that literary texts are
primarily objects published and circulated by publishing companies rather than objects composed and written by individual writers. As such, literary texts published by the U.S. publishing industry may serve to buttress longstanding racist and (hetero)sexist traditions of literary discourse rather than “penetrate” them and then change them “from within.” This chapter considers whether publishing through independent channels might be one means of resisting such a circumstance. As noted in the introduction, many black LGBT writers functioned as both publishers and writers in the 1980s and 1990s. Audre Lorde, for example, co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press as a means of distributing work by various women of color and Assotto Saint founded Galiens Press as a means of distributing his own writing. Reflecting on the need to establish black gay literary distribution networks, Saint wrote, “Let us save, beg, and borrow money to keep building our autonomous publications and other cultural institutions. Let us make sure that these institutions outlast us and do not become self-serving. Let us live beyond the here and now by nurturing each other and supporting one another’s works” (5). Similarly, Essex Hemphill wrote of his hopes to “see a day when black gay men will bring forth anthologies and literature published and distributed by companies we have created and own” (Brother xxx). Many black LGBT writers understood the importance of controlling means of distribution—and access to those means—if, as Saint notes, newly-founded black queer publishing houses were to “outlast” and “live beyond” the 1980s and early 1990s.

Ensuring the longevity of these newly-founded houses required, according to Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin, consciously engaging—though not necessarily directly
addressing—white readers. Saint-Aubin writes that appeals to white gay men in 1980s black gay men’s writing were necessary “given the particular modes of literary production and dissemination and the particular patterns of literary consumption in this culture: Who publishes? What gets published? Who reads? In order for this collection [of black gay texts] to constitute a commercial and political success, it must engage the white gay male reader even if it does not explicitly or consciously attempt to do so” (480). That is, independent, self-founded, identity-based publishing did not alter the rhetorical needs that other black LGBT writers—including Delany and Walker—encountered by working with major U.S. houses like William Morrow and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, respectively.

**Distributing through Major and Independent Presses**

Lorde initially published *Zami* with the independent, lesbian Persephone Press and, one year later, with the independent, lesbian-feminist Crossing Press. While Lorde had, in the 1970s, published poetry collections with major presses like W.W. Norton (1976’s *Coal* and 1978’s *The Black Unicorn*), by the 1980s she had developed a commitment to independent black and/or LGBT publishing, in part because W.W. Norton and other major presses like St. Martins refused to publish an earlier version of *Zami* but offered little to no rationale for the rejection (De Veaux 271-275). Lorde published 1980’s *The Cancer Journals* via the lesbian feminist press Spinsters Ink, 1984’s *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* via Crossing Press, and 1988’s *A Burst of Light* via the LGBT press Firebrand Books. By instantiating herself, during the 1980s, in independent
feminist publishing—be it lesbian, black, or both—Lorde avoided the predominantly heterosexual, masculinist audience to which major publishers cater. Indeed, she avoided the huge and at times hostile audience that Walker addressed with Harcourt Brace Jovanovich-published *The Color Purple* and that Delany addressed with Arbor House-published *The Motion of Light in Water*.

Still, publishing *Zami* with an independent lesbian press did not necessarily mean that Lorde could count on her lesbian audience to be committed to racial justice. Werner Sollers has argued that U.S. ethnic writers inevitably confront a “double audience” when dealing with the major publishing industry: the first a knowing, in-group audience and a second of “readers, listeners, or spectators who are not part of the writer’s ethnic group” (249). The same is true for a black writer publishing through LGBT presses that cater to a multiracial but predominantly white audience. As Walker did with *The Color Purple*, Lorde encountered a white “spectator” audience that, while LGBT-aligned, was not necessarily invested in racial justice.

Importantly, though, Lorde directly addresses such “spectator” readers as well as the realities of race and audience in independent lesbian feminist publishing within *Zami*. While reflecting on the failure of black-white lesbian coalitions in 1950s New York City, Lorde shares the following experience with 1950s lesbian feminist publishing culture:

> When I mentioned at the library that I wrote poetry, somebody was bound to mention Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gift from the Sea*, the runaway bestseller that year [1955]. It had no more to do with my work than a scallop to a whale. Spurred on by Muriel [Lorde’s then-lover], I sent some
of my poems to The Ladder, a magazine for lesbians published by the Daughters of Bilitis. Their prompt and unaccompanied return crushed me.

Lorde suggests that independent lesbian publishing of the 1950s was not interested in black lesbian experiences, ideas, and writing. Rather, the Daughters of Bilitis, as one example, followed a marketing strategy that—like the major U.S. publishing industry—did not regard black lesbians as either writers or readers worth engaging. By including this story in Zami, Lorde draws attention to the racist history of lesbian publishing—a history that Persephone and Crossing Press inherited as lesbian and LGBT-aligned publishers. In effect, Lorde remarks on the limits of the very venue through which her readers experience her text, drawing attention to the mediated vision of reality available in published (life) writing. Rather than a reflection of reality, published (life) writing is highly-controlled material. Publishers—major and independent—create a particular image of the real world based on what will sell and/or appeal to an audience that is in general suspicious of black sexual expression.

Like Lorde, Delany had a substantial writing career and a history of working with the major U.S. publishing industry before the proliferation of black LGBT publishing in the 1980s. He published his first novel, The Jewels of Aptor, in 1962 with Ace Books and continued to publish with Ace—a major science fiction publisher—regularly throughout the 1960s. Unlike Lorde, Delany’s career was firmly rooted in the paraliterary culture of science fiction. Therefore, though The Motion of Light in Water was not published through a specifically science fiction press, it can be inferred that Delany’s primary
audience for the text were readers of science fiction already familiar with his name and writing thanks to his prevalence in science fiction culture. Science fiction has historically been marketed to a white, heterosexual, masculinist audience not unlike that of U.S. literature generally. Thus, while science fiction has frequently been regarded as deficient vis-à-vis “literary” writing in academic literary studies (Westfahl 1-2), science fiction publishers have historically had much in common with other major publishers. Reflecting on the scant number of well-known women of color science fiction writers specifically, Elyce Rae Helford suggests that the lack results from limited access to publishing: “[P]ublishers can ‘erace’ [erase] the literary visions of women of color in a white- and male-dominated culture… [T]hey can refuse to publish their writing, judging it inferior to writing by white (women) writers based upon internalized racist standards of ‘universality’ of appeal or deviance from ethnocentric principles of ‘excellence’ in writing” (127). Like Lorde, Delany reflects on how this tendency affected his own career in *The Motion of Light in Water*. He quotes the reaction of a science fiction publishing insider to one of his early manuscripts—*Voyage, Orestes!*—that reveals to his audience science fiction publishing culture’s belief in the “universal” marketing appeal of white, heterosexual characters. The publishing insider remembers Delany’s manuscript and explains why it was not purchased: “We rejected it, of course. It was completely outside the purview of what we were doing back then: your central character was bisexual, your narrator, telling all about him, was black; and there was just nothing in it for the middle American audience we thought back then every piece of fiction we published had to appeal to” (192). Subsequently, the physical manuscript of *Voyage, Orestes!* was lost.
Delany refuses to summarize the now-gone narrative in order to let the loss of this would-be black LGBT science fiction novel hover in his text. Like Lorde, Delany reflects on the limits of his publishing venue—and to some extent his audience—within the very product of that venue as a means of announcing its highly-mediated nature.

Helford explains that the science fiction publishing industry also mediates information about race by publishing “only a small, select group of writers of color, distorting and controlling images of ‘minority’ experiences. Carefully selected tokens allow publishers to decide which views of ethnic America reach audiences and which do not… Nowhere in American publishing is this more true than science fiction” (127).

Helford says that the science fiction publishing industry is actually more invested in the history of U.S. racial exclusion than the part of the industry that focuses on “literary” writing. Her assessment of science fiction publishing culture reflects Christian’s belief that, when publishers finally become aware of something like a “black lesbian market,” they offer only a few, “tokenized” examples to their audience. Christian said, “[D]espite the fact that Walker received the Pulitzer Prize for The Color Purple and Naylor the American Book Award for The Women of Brewster Place, I doubt if Home Girls, a 1983 anthology of black feminist and lesbian writing published by Kitchen Table Press, would have been published by a mainstream publishing company” (3). Christian does not elaborate on what distinguishes Home Girls from The Color Purple and The Women of Brewster Place, but one can surmise that the sheer number of black lesbian voices included in the anthology would make it difficult for major U.S. publishers to market the book as the reflection of a singular and easily-consumed black lesbian experience.
Despite the fact that major U.S. publishers did not believe an audience existed for the complex and at times contradictory portraits of black lesbianism found in *Home Girls*, the anthology, according to Barbara Smith, set a record in feminist publishing by selling 3,000 copies its first three weeks out (*Home* 1). Thus, a large audience did exist for complicated representations of black LGBT experiences, but it was mostly found in academia and, in particular, within growing departments of women’s and feminist studies.\(^1\) *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*—regardless of how complexly, particularly, and uniquely their characters are actually drawn—were stretched as representative by major publishing companies that felt the need to feed their larger, unknowing audiences only a few black LGBT packages, according to Christian.

Thus, the major U.S. publishing industry, the science fiction publishing industry, and the independent LGBT publishing industry share a racist and (hetero)sexist history. In 2000, when asked about the difficulties specific to an African American in the science fiction publishing industry, Delany said, “[T]ransgression inheres, however unarticulated, in every aspect of the black writer’s career in America” (Rowell 250). That is, despite Delany’s position in paraliterary culture, he noted that this culture was neither immune to the national issues of race and sexuality the way some science fiction writers believed it to be, nor did it confront racism and (hetero)sexism in order to deal with the reality of both.\(^1\) Rather, science fiction culture—as a part of U.S. culture—is informed by racism and (hetero)sexism.

Lorde and Delany offered their life-writing to an independent lesbian publishing culture and a major science fiction publishing industry that were not necessarily
committed to racial justice. If white readers of science fiction and independent lesbian publishing were invested in racial justice, they may have been only insofar as a given vision of racial justice mirrored one they had already developed for themselves. Frances Smith Foster’s claim about nineteenth-century African American autobiography is applicable to the 1980s life-writing of Delany and Lorde as well: “While white abolitionists were eager to privilege the authenticity of black writers’ descriptions of slavery, it was only insofar as their descriptions confirmed what white readers had already accepted as true” (82). Thus, various conventions of nineteenth-century African American autobiography—like frontispieces depicting the author, literacy narratives, and scenes of trauma due to racism—may have become comforting because familiar tropes of black writing rather than tools that unsettle and destabilize U.S. racism. Lorde and Delany used many of these literary conventions of blackness, but they also made major efforts to challenge the authenticity and truth of their accounts of themselves.

Paratextually, both Zami and The Motion of Light in Water participate in literary conventions of marketing blackness while also subverting them. Gérard Genette has defined “paratexts” as “verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations… [which] ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays at least) of a book” (1). According to Young, African American writers have always been “marked in advertisements, prefaces, and other paratextual material as black, even when their texts themselves might belie such a strict classification” (4). Young attributes the paratextual marking of blackness in the publication and circulation of books as metonymic of general “cultural anxiety about
racial classification” in the United States (5). I would add that the paratextual marking of blackness also triggers audience expectation for other tropes of literary blackness, like descriptions of physical and psychic suffering. Both Zami and The Motion of Light in Water confront this expectation on their covers and in their prefatory materials.

As forms of life-writing, various versions of Zami and The Motion of Light in Water unsurprisingly contain photos of their subjects. While the cover of Zami’s Persephone first edition is unremarkable—a hazy, pink-tinged portrait of clouds and lightning with the title and the author’s name—the cover of Crossing Press’s first edition includes an image of Lorde on its front cover. The fact that Persephone did not include any images of Lorde on the first edition’s cover is significant. This paratextual strategy did not immediately position Lorde as black; the strategy also suggested that Lorde’s identity was primarily literary or verbal and not physical. The Persephone edition presents Lorde herself—as well as, indirectly, black lesbianism—as a verbal event with no clear material referent. However, given that, in 1982, Lorde was already well-regarded as a black writer by several reading audiences, it is possible that her name alone would carry connotations of literary blackness. Furthermore, it is surprising Persephone chose not to capitalize on her physical image and celebrity in order to market the book.

Crossing Press version’s cover photo suggests otherwise: that Lorde and black lesbianism exist both verbally and bodily. The photograph on the Crossing Press version’s front cover depicts Lorde with a female friend looking into a shop window. Both women have their backs to the camera. This, too, is an unexpected packaging strategy. This cover of Zami denies its audience immediate access to Lorde’s face. Therefore, like the cover of
the Persephone version, the Crossing Press cover refuses to make Lorde the “face” or “poster child” of black lesbianism. Unlike the antebellum frontispiece to *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1774), for example, which depicted Wheatley in profile, indoors, at a desk, writing—and thereby made her exemplary of black intellectual achievement—the Crossing Press version’s cover depicts Lorde as part of a community. She is outside on a sidewalk with a companion looking into a store. On the cover, Lorde—unlike Wheatley—becomes a public woman who is but one part of a community rather than an individual writer who works privately and alone at a desk, documenting the plight and suffering of her people.

Indeed, Lorde states emphatically in *Zami* that boiling a community down to a particular experience or face—as U.S. literary discourse frequently does with black subjects—is inherently flawed. Reflecting on the few black lesbians she knew in the 1950s who were willing to identify themselves as such, Lorde says, “*Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different*” (226, emphasis Lorde’s). Though Lorde desires a community, she does not desire a community that ignores difference. Throughout *Zami*, Lorde emphasizes and celebrates difference within and between various communities. The paratextual strategies employed by both the Persephone and Crossing Press versions of *Zami* avoid boiling black lesbianism down to a particular face. Doing so would have positioned black lesbian experience as easily accessible, consumable, and knowable.
Lorde works throughout *Zami* to suggest otherwise. Both Persephone and Crossing Press did not package the book as an exemplary black lesbian text and thereby avoided tokenizing Lorde as the “face” of black lesbian writing.

The paratexts of Arbor House’s first edition of *The Motion of Light in Water*—unlike those of *Zami*—did indeed position its subject as an exemplary and isolated black scholar. The cover to the Arbor House version includes a painting of a man depicted in profile, indoors, at a desk, writing—a composition incredibly similar to Wheatley’s frontispiece. In both images, the subject looks to the left and appears to be deep in thought. Both appear in a classroom, studio, or study of some kind. Fundamentally, both images portray a black person writing—an idea enticing enough to attract readers because, according to the (il)logic of the major U.S. publishing industry, black people do not usually write. In circulating images of black writers alone, isolated, and separated from a community of black people, the major U.S. publishing industry may justify the relatively low amount of black-authored writing it actually publishes. On the cover to the Arbor House version of *The Motion of Light in Water*, Delany—like Wheatley—becomes the individual black writer who carefully toils alone to write about his community.

That this mode of packaging black-authored writing has been sustained by major publishing houses since the 1700s begs the question of whether or not expectations of black-authored writing have changed since then. Goldsby explains that,

> From the enormously popular antebellum slave narratives to the “race literature” eagerly read by New Negroes…, African American life writing was compelling fare in great part because of its “corporeality”—that is, the
ways in which black authors were expected to offer their bodies as proof of their narratives’ claims to authenticity. […] Cultural studies of anti-slavery politics tell us that the iconography of the black slave in painful distress, so plentiful and persuasive a symbol in abolitionist rhetoric, functioned as a political ideal to mobilize the antebellum masses to humanitarian action. However, once race and the depiction of physical pain became forged as an essential condition for African American writing of the “real,” a literary aesthetic was established that conferred narrative value on the wounded or otherwise defiled black body as the expressive medium of authentic knowledge and experience. (185-186)

According to Goldsby, the racial authority of black-authored life-writing depends on proof of its subject experiencing pain and wounds. In effect, the major U.S. publishing industry continuously re-opens this wound in order to confer racial authority onto its published texts. Importantly, neither Wheatley nor Delany is depicted as physically wounded, but physical pain is implied in both images. Wheatley’s frontispiece includes a frame that reads, “Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston.” Phillis Wheatley’s servitude to John Wheatley would have contained the high possibility of physical and sexual abuse, regardless of her status as a learned writer. The image of Delany on the Arbor House version’s cover so resembles Wheatley’s frontispiece that the physical pain implied in the earlier image is attached to the later one. For readers unconvinced by the visual similarities of the images, the epigraph to The Motion of Light in Water immediately positions the book in a tradition of writing about black physical
suffering. Delany quotes from Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* (1789):

> If, then, the following narrative does not appear sufficiently interesting to engage general attention, let my motive be some excuse for its publication. I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation. If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interests of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified. Let it therefore be remembered that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise. (qtd. in Delany vii)

With the epigraph, Delany invokes a history of black physical suffering alongside individual black aesthetic and intellectual achievement that garnishes his text with racial authority and “realness,” a necessary trait for black-authored writing to reach a mass audience, according to Goldsby. Depicted alone and in presumably strenuous thought, Delany—like Wheatley—gains writerly authority through association with black physical suffering.

However, inside the Arbor House edition of *The Motion of Light in Water*—as well as in all versions—is another image, this one clearly labeled: “Samuel R. Delany 1964.” In the portrait, Delany is shirtless, strumming a guitar, and lying in bed. This third paratext under consideration contrasts greatly with the first two, which align very closely with codified ways of packaging black subjects for mass audiences in U.S. literary discourse. In the photo, Delany looks seductively into the camera with lips
pursed. As in the cover image, Delany is alone, but his position in the bed and his gaze into the camera combine to suggest the possibility of or even the invitation to company. The image draws on Walt Whitman’s nineteenth-century aesthetic of bohemian aimlessness. Delany is depicted as a desiring subject who lazily strums a guitar while waiting for his partner(s) to join him in bed. In the frontispiece to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman gazes directly at the viewer. He slouches with his hand on his hip in a pair of wrinkled pants and a baggy shirt open at the collar. The image signals a break from nineteenth-century images of buttoned-up and well-postured male literary geniuses. Indeed, Whitman’s insouciant openness in the image became emblematic of the queer sexual aimlessness he explored in “Song of Myself” in particular. This aesthetic of (white queer) aimlessness was not embraced by Whitman’s nineteenth-century African American contemporaries, however. Indeed, it would too easily become a manifestation of what James Weldon Johnson once called the “happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking being” (901) who prefers rest to work—a “being” or stereotype that white authors circulated in their racist depictions of African Americans. The bohemian “cool” that Whitman manifested, then, was enabled by white privilege, which allowed him to represent himself in a way African American writers felt they could not. Thus, the series of paratexts in the Arbor House version of *The Motion of Light in Water* combines aesthetics and packaging strategies not typically combined: those associated with both normative-aspiring black writers and queer-positive white writers.

*The Motion of Light in Water*’s series of paratexts reads as a narrative suggesting that public black sexual pleasure is possible regardless of the history (and presence) of
institutionalized black physical suffering in the United States. Thus, the paratexts indirectly confront the politics of silence explored in the previous chapter. *The Motion of Light in Water* goes on to explore this possibility by narrating Delany’s sexual experiences with literally hundreds of partners. While the cover image of the book invokes an antebellum history of black writing about suffering, the 1964 photo inside the book frames Delany altogether differently as a willing and confident sexual subject. The two images of Delany suggest that the history of black physical suffering need not eliminate the possibility and articulation of black sexual pleasure, as Delany—the subject of both images—experiences both. Therefore, while Arbor House initially marketed the book using an approach that sutured black physical suffering to racial authority, the third paratext inside the book troubles black physical suffering’s ability to confer racial authority by invoking its lost corollary of black physical pleasure.

Indeed, while earlier black-authored writing, especially autobiographies, worked to document black physical suffering while simultaneously eliding black sexual pleasure, both Delany and Lorde devoted significant portions of their life-writing to documenting—both in writing and in photographic form—their sexual pleasure. They did so while simultaneously exploring suffering caused by racism. For both writers, blending a concern with racism and a concern with homosexual pleasure required the cultivation of new aesthetic forms.

*Lorde’s Zami* and the Critique of Realist Autobiography

150
As stated, writing has been the major site of knowledge production in the Western intellectual tradition. The autobiography has been the primary form for narrating oneself in Anglophone literary discourse. The genre of autobiography, following John Frow, “actively generate[s] and shape[s] knowledge of the world” (2) in the way it presents people as individual, sexually proper citizen-subjects who are so defined against the chaos associated with communality and queerness. According to Jana Evans Braziel, the “genre autobiography (indeed, the word ‘autobiography,’ coined in the eighteenth century) is a post-Enlightenment literary construction that rests on the notion of the individual as self-knowing, self-determining, unified, coherent, and discrete from other entities” (37). Leigh Gilmore argues that “[a]utobiography’s investment in the representative person allies it to the project of lending substance to the national fantasy of belonging… The nation prompts fantasies of citizens, gendered real, embodied, and whole through their incorporation into the national” (12). Gilmore argues that the autobiographer makes a recognizable claim to citizenship by narrating her/himself as either masculine or feminine and by elucidating the boundaries of her/his “whole” and able body. Braziel finds the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin (Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin [1793]) and Thomas Jefferson (including Notes on the State of Virginia [1781] and “Autobiography” [1821]) to be representative of “American” autobiography in particular and its fashioning of individuals as national citizens who, according to Gilmore, are “gendered [simultaneously] real, embodied, and whole.”
When referring to “American” autobiography, Braziel puts the term “American” in quotation marks to announce critical skepticism toward Franklin and Jefferson’s claims to ownership of this term at the expense of people from other parts of the Americas, especially the Caribbean. Braziel argues that Franklin and Jefferson wrote, in part, to explore and relieve their anxieties over “America”’s emerging status as an independent nation with uncertain borders and boundaries. According to Braziel, they argued for their own status as self-aware “American” citizens—and, in extension, for “America” as a viable nation—by announcing their racial difference from indigenous and African populations in the Americas (43). Franklin and Jefferson regarded indigenous and African populations as variously shiftless, simple, and/or dangerous as a means of establishing themselves as industrious, intellectual, and protective and, therefore, as appropriately masculine.

In her analysis, Braziel suggests that Western scientific racism informed the emergence of Franklin’s and Jefferson’s “American” autobiographies, since they used the rhetoric and approach of scientific racism (and its attendant discourse of black domestic and sexual pathology) in order to analyze and differentiate themselves as white from the indigenous and African populations who also occupied the lands known as “America.” “[R]ather than being merely incidental to the form,” Braziel says, the discourse of scientific racism “actually reveals [“American” autobiography’s] foundational core: the national self inscribed into the autobiographical text is defined in opposition to a racialized ‘other’ through biological or scientific genus and literary genre, both inextricably rooted in genos” (49). Using the shared etymological roots of the words
genus (a scientific term designating particular groups of organisms) and genre as evidence of the concepts’ co-constitution, Braziel argues that the discourse of scientific racism and the discourse of early “American” literary genres together informed a racist public discourse that regarded the bodies of indigenous people and Africans—as well as their artistic productions—as deficient and, frequently, ugly vis-à-vis newly-emerging and newly-racialized groups of white people and white-authored art.

Still, the existence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black-authored slave narratives demonstrate how the “American” autobiography—even with its racist foundations—could be appropriated by those marginalized and demonized in scientific racism to critique racist national policies (Braziel 50). Monica Pearl has argued that, with Zami, Lorde participated in a project similar to that undertaken by writers like Equiano, Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs (297). She points to the conventions of self-naming and literacy narratives—both of which occur in Zami as they do in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), among other slave narratives—as a means of situating Zami firmly in the tradition of by-now canonical African American autobiographies. Rather than cover that territory again, though, I am suggesting that one of Zami’s major differences from slave narratives and from the “American” autobiographies of Franklin and Jefferson lies in Lorde narrating the physical and psychic trauma of racism right alongside her homosexual pleasure. The other lies in Lorde challenging expectations that hers is an authentic account of reality.
Experiences with racism abound in *Zami*, but they are usually closely followed by scenes of sexual exploration. For example, Chapter 10 tells the story of Lorde and her family being denied service at a segregated ice cream counter in 1947 Washington D.C. (68-71). Lorde is frustrated by the overwhelming whiteness of the city, its cuisine, and its policies: “The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach…” (71). Chapter 11 immediately re-situates Lorde back at home in her mother’s kitchen, where she learns about sexual pleasure and masturbation while cooking with a West Indian mortar and pestle (71-80). The scene is erotic and woman-centered, as Lorde uses her mother’s cooking utensils as tools for female sexual pleasure: “The whole rhythm of my movements softened and elongated, until, dreamlike, I stood, one hand tightly curved around the carved mortar, steadying it against the middle of my body; while my other hand, around the pestle, rubbed and pressed the moistening spice into readiness with a sweeping circular movement” (79). This erotic chapter follows the scene depicting Lorde’s experience in Washington D.C., during which she experienced racism so traumatic that she “left childhood.” The homoeroticism of the later scene works to soothe the pain caused by the earlier trip. Lorde presents a black lesbian subject who experiences an important literary convention of blackness—the pain of racism—and who also, very unconventionally, experiences (homo)sexual pleasure. In fact, the succession of the scenes suggests that, for some African Americans, homosexual
pleasure is one way of assuaging the trauma of racism. In any case, the succession of scenes argues that experience with racism need not foreclose public sexual expression.

In her important 1978 essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde explains that, “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (Sister 53). Lorde provides an example of eroticism as a source of power and even healing within Zami by imagining female homoerotic self-exploration and masturbation as a potential balm for the wounds of racism. As such, Lorde challenges politics of respectability and silence that require black women’s silence on the issue of sexual exploration. Lorde writes that it is a “false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong… [T]hat strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power” (53). In Zami, Lorde exemplifies the “politics of articulation” (152) that Evelynn Hammonds explains as a corrective to the politics of silence and respectability that have muted black women’s narratives of sexual exploration. Hammonds writes that the “politics [of articulation] would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (152). In Zami, Lorde positions and represents homoerotic masturbation as a maternally-inherited source of power for women to confront and challenge racist oppression.

Zami’s indirect assessment of the racist foundations of “American” autobiographical discourse, as well as the conventions of literary blackness in black-
authored autobiographies, was apparently different enough from earlier texts to warrant the invention of a new form of life-writing. That is, rather than “penetrate” autobiographical discourse and change it “from within,” Lorde invented biomythography and circulated it through an independent lesbian feminist press that would not share “American” autobiography’s investment in the sexually proper citizen-subject. She also changed independent lesbian feminist publishing culture by introducing into it a black subject who suffers due to racism but who also experiences homosexual pleasure.

Throughout Zami, Lorde narrates herself moving from lover to lover and home to home—from Harlem to Connecticut to México to Grenada—and thereby troubles confident declarations of “home” and nationality that “American” autobiographers like Franklin and Jefferson made to the lands now known as the United States. The daughter of Grenadian immigrants, Lorde grew up feeling her home was someplace other than New York City, where she physically resided. Reflecting on her status as a child and a U.S. citizen, Lorde writes,

> Once home was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth. … This now, here [Harlem], was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home. (13)
Lorde’s mother leads her to believe that national identifications are temporary and fleeting at best. Anticipating a sweet homecoming to Grenada and the island of Carriacou nearby, Lorde and her mother question the claims to national U.S. belonging that citizenship frequently entails. Jewelle Gomez explains that Zami “takes place in the bosom of the Black community which Black lesbians recognize as the place of their beginnings” (119). Avowedly feminine but, nevertheless, unlocatable, “the bosom of the Black community” is a fluid, ever-moving place in Zami.

In Zami’s epilogue, Lorde introduces another characterization of “home”: “Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home. […] There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood” (256). Lorde concludes Zami with these words that, again, hearken back to her mother’s experiences in Carriacou. Chinosole explains that

The fullest vision and deepest wisdom that Audre Lorde shares with us as Black women is what I call matrilineal diaspora: the capacity to survive and aspire, to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations. It names the strength and beauty we pass on as friends and lovers from fore-mothers to mothers and daughters allowing us to survive radical cultural changes and be empowered through differences. (379)

Same-sex desire constitutes one of the major “strength[s]” black women pass on to one another, according to Lorde. She situates Carriacou as the origin of her ancestors and genealogical bloodline as well as of her same-sex desire. That is, Lorde regards same-sex
desire as a genealogical trait linked to a geographical site. While Franklin and Jefferson
worked to delineate the boundaries of the United States, to establish their racial
whiteness, and to narrate themselves as sexually proper citizen-subjects, Lorde worked in
near-entire opposition to those goals. In *Zami*, she re-fashions black lesbianism as an
inheritance from long lines of black same-sex desiring women and as a gift from a black
matriarchal bloodline. Lorde shamelessly embraces what Hortense Spillers has referred to
as “Mother Right” (277), or a system of so-called black matriarchy that typically finds
black communities to be “father-lacking” (277) and therefore to be fundamentally
degraded. Like Spillers, Lorde takes issue with the cultural (il)logic that deems
matriarchy and the woman-centered transfer of experiences, values, and—more rarely—
money as the “negating feature of human community” (Spillers 277). Rather, she regards
this woman-centered transfer of same-sex desire as the tradition that defines Carriacou
and its diaspora as present and valuable.

Lorde explores the importance of “Mother Right” much earlier than in *Zami*’s
epilogue. Her book includes a prologue that explains Lorde’s narrating self as the product
and manifestation of an on-going woman-centered genealogy. Simultaneously, Lorde
also rebuffs traditional “American” autobiography’s notion of the egoistic citizen-subject
who is completely self-contained and self-aware. The prologue says, “*I have felt the age-
old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and
flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’
moving back and forth in either or both directions as needed*” (7). Lorde conceives of the
narrating self, or “I,” of her text—as well as the self in general—as a shifting identity that
is constituted through the self’s interactions with female relatives and ancestors across time. She envisions a long, direct line of women as her capital “I” self rather than conceiving of herself as the triangle tip that connects her mother and father as family. Indeed, the majority of Zami represents Lorde as constantly in flux, moving from home to home. As such, Zami continuously defers any stable home or stable subjectivity for its narrator.

In her analysis of the racist foundations of “American” autobiography, Braziel also explains that “autobiography, as genre, is … predicated on the transparency of language (the capacity of the medium of language to transparently inscribe reality), a positivist conception of language that has been critiqued by poststructuralist and postcolonial theories” (37). Zami, along with a number of texts described as postmodern that were written from the 1960s onward, offered such a critique of language. In 1989, Linda Hutcheon explained that

postmodern theory and practice together suggest that everything always was ‘cultural’ in [a] sense, that is, always mediated by representations. They suggest that notions of truth, reference, and the non-cultural real have not ceased to exist, as Baudrillard claims, but that they are no longer unproblematic issues, assumed to be self-evident and self-justifying. The postmodern, as I have been defining it, is not a degeneration into ‘hyperreality’ but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. (341)
That is, along with countless other texts described as postmodernist, *Zami* questioned one’s ability to use language as a means of referring to a particular, describable, and definable reality outside of language. But unlike many of her postmodernist contemporaries, Lorde was especially interested in how this seemingly abstract theoretical conceit manifested in institutions, such as the major U.S. publishing industry and the U.S. education system, that arbitrated taste and truth about race. She found in postmodernism the potential to challenge the belief that physical suffering and the absence of physical pleasure conferred racial authority and authenticity onto African American texts. Furthermore, since black LGBT experience in particular was never presumed to be real or legible by U.S. literary discourse, then the questioning of “what reality might mean” may not have been unsettling to Lorde; rather, such questioning may have reflected a black queer epistemological approach to the world with which Lorde was intimately familiar.

Lorde’s argument that written texts are usually incompatible with knowledge of black lesbianism is revealed in *Zami* in a story about her elementary school geography class and the maps used therein. As a child, she is interested in finding Carriacou, an island near Grenada that Lorde hears about from her mother, on one of the school-approved maps. However, she says,

*Carriacou…was not listed in the index of the Goode’s School Atlas nor in the Junior Americana World Gazette nor appeared on any map that I could find, so when I hunted for the magic place during geography lessons or in free library time, I never found it, and came to believe my mother’s*
geography was a fantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned, and in reality maybe she was talking about the place other people called Curaçao, a Dutch possession on the other side of the Antilles. (14)

Lorde finds that mass-produced, canonical media—like school-issued geography books—do not represent the world in a manner that aligns with the image of the world she received from her mother. And for a while Lorde believes her mother to have invented the island of Carriacou, to have been delusional. Lorde encounters the expurgation of Carriacou from maps as an adult as well, when she performs a formalized study of atlases as a graduate student in library science. She used each atlas’s recognition of Carriacou as a focus for her project and says that Carriacou “appeared only once, in the Atlas of the Encyclopedia Brittanica, which has always prided itself upon the accurate cartology of its colonies” (14). Thus, even when Lorde can find what she considers her homeland represented in a mass-produced, canonical text, the island is represented as the object of colonial and racist knowledge.

Lorde attributes Carriacou’s expurgation from mass-produced and canonical texts to the island’s homosexual reputation. Carriacou, she says, is known throughout the Caribbean as a place where women love women as friends and sexual partners. Lorde takes the title of her narrative, Zami, from the Grenadian word zami, which Christopher Giroux has identified as a creolization of the French word for friends, les amies (286). The word zami’s existence bespeaks a history of female same-sex desire present in the Caribbean. Lorde describes her female relatives and ancestors from Carriacou as having “friended” or had sex with one another in addition to their husbands:

161
Here [in Carriacou] Aunt Anni lived among the other women who saw their men off on the sailing vessels, then tended the goats and ground-nuts, planted grain and poured rum upon the earth to strengthen the corn’s growing, built their women’s houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their children together. Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning.[…]

Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty. (14)

The elimination of Carriacou from maps, along with its attendant history of black women loving one another sexually and as friends, necessitates for Lorde suspicion toward mass-produced and canonical texts and the vision of the world found therein. Indeed, Lorde depicts mass publication/circulation and canonization as processes that are incompatible with knowledge of black lesbianism.

This passage recalls one from James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), a text which Lorde may have invoked because of its own suggestion that the circulation of black-authored life-writing as authentic was a lie or a joke. The unnamed narrator of the novel—which masqueraded as an autobiography upon its initial publication—has a similar experience with his school-issued geography book. As an adult the character travels across the Atlantic Ocean and marvels at the site of a glacier, which looks different from every “angle of vision” (850). Johnson implies that the truth of the glacier’s appearance changes according to who looks at it: “I watched it
through a pair of glasses, seeking to verify my early conception of an iceberg—in the geographies of my grammar school days the pictures of icebergs always included a stranded polar bear, standing desolately upon one of the snowy crags. I looked for the bear, but if it was there, he refused to put himself on exhibition” (850). The glacier seen does not reflect the supposed truth of glaciers found in the narrator’s geography book—a book that was presented to him as non-fictive, objective information about the world. 

Goldsby explains that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* reflects on how “mass culture levels out difference by establishing equivalences that confuse what counts (or not) as ‘real’ experience” (189). That is, the novel examines how mass-produced objects like school books and maps have the unfortunate power to regard different perspectives of the world as the effects of craziness rather than the result of differing experiences and knowledges of the world.

Johnson’s and Lorde’s shared concern with the supposed truth of geography books demonstrates shared skepticism at the way mass-produced and canonical objects can create certain expectations of race and elide the realities of lived experience. Later in *Zami*, Lorde’s own experiences—like those of her female ancestors in Carriacou—become legendary and therefore of indeterminable reality, as she describes her life as an adult in the 1950s. She tells of her sexual relationship with a woman named Afrekete, a figure whose status in the text is uncertain because Afrekete is the name of an important figure from Yoruba religious practice. Kara Provost has explained that Afrekete is a different, feminized name for “Eshu (also known as Elegba or Elegbara)” (45), a trickster figure made famous in African American literary studies by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his
book *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). Afrekete, according to Ayodele Ogundipe, represents the concepts of gender, language, multiplicity, and contrariness (from Provost 47). Thus, one wonders if Lorde’s documented relationship with a woman named Afrekete was an actual and specific experience or if the story is one that alludes to Lorde’s general relationship with African diasporic religious practice. In the Epilogue to *Zami*, Lorde has readers reflect on the reality of Afrekete when she refers to her as “the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become” (255). By celebrating Afrekete, Lorde advocates duplicity and contrariness in language and writing. While I am not suggesting that Afrekete is not real outside of the text, her presence within *Zami* questions assumptions of the narrative’s truthfulness due to her association with linguistic contrariness. Lorde subverts the expectation of truth brought to self-proclaimed non-fiction texts by actually “becom[ing]” the linguistic trickster Afrekete and, in so doing, challenges traditional approaches to autobiography. Thus, Lorde infuses her biomythography with stories from her lived life as well as stories from an imagined, dreamed life that has yet to come to pass. Lorde’s dwelling in the hypothetical, or in the possibility of “becom[ing]” Afrekete, makes her biomythography describable as a speculative autobiography that explores what could be as much as it explores what was.

Pearl explains that “the representation of black lesbians makes it impossible to rely on more common (or contemporary) forms and styles. Audre Lorde writes a ‘biomythography,’ for that is what form she creates—and needs—for telling the story of a black lesbian—that is, herself” (309). Furthermore, Lorde writes a biomythography in order to imbue her text with a non-realist investment in the possibilities of the future, or
in speculative hypothesis. According to AnaLouise Keating, “Lorde’s revisionist
mythmaking goes beyond that of many feminists, for her representation of the divine as a
Black woman recovers a model of female power Western culture has often ignored” (27).
I am arguing that, by recognizing the divine potential in herself, Lorde characterizes
herself as godly—an ethic of individual divinity very similar to Shug’s in *The Color
Purple*. And yet, one of the major emphases of *Zami* is that “we all” must “become
Afrekete.” That is, Lorde encourages readers to aspire to divine, otherworldly status
rather than listing ways they can be recognizable as real and valuable in racist and
(hetero)sexist discourse.

In *Zami*, Lorde’s pronounced critique of mass-produced and canonical texts at the
level of content accompanies her formal movement away from canonical literary genre
and from major publishing companies. I read both gestures as resistance to canonization
and mass cultural production, resistance motivated by the understanding that the
discourses of canonization and literary genre are most often complicit in the reification of
racialized heterosexism and its attendant belief that physical pain, not physical pleasure,
defines black racial authority. Furthermore, Lorde suggests that writing does not have the
capacity to accurately reflect race, sexuality, or reality. L.H. Stallings explains that, with
*Zami*, Lorde “worked to redefine the trickster tradition in Black culture” (76) by
“posit[ing] that cultural or familial myths allow Black women to participate in
performances of unnam[ing]” (76). This “unnam[ing]” at once refers to the subtitle of *Zami:
A New Spelling of My Name*, as well as Lorde’s stated goal of “becoming” Afrekete.
Black lesbian “unnam[ing],” then, constitutes a continuous challenge to the notion of
coherent racial or sexual identities. “Becoming Afrekete” gestures to an identity which is always being articulated anew and which has yet to be embodied.

**Delany’s Legendary Celebrity in* The Motion of Light in Water***

Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water* is a vertiginous series of vignettes narrating the writer’s childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood—though not in chronological order. Delany shares scenes from his life in an associative order. He brings up a memory when it relates conceptually, not necessarily chronologically, to the last one shared. Most of these memories deal with his simultaneous development as a black man, a gay subject, and a science fiction writer. Jeffrey Tucker explains that *The Motion of Light in Water* represents “the convergence of postmodernism and the African American autobiographical tradition” (154). Unlike postmodernisms that disavow the existence of a subject with a stable identity, the black postmodernism explored by Delany “neither essentializes nor annihilates identity, whether racial, sexual, or otherwise” (155), according to Tucker. Rather, Delany’s black postmodernism acknowledges both the benefits and costs of proclaiming a stable identity in writing. Like Lorde “becoming Afrekete” (255), *The Motion of Light in Water* is Delany coming to language while simultaneously noting its limits.

Delany represents himself within the text as someone searching for words that can narrate his complexity. A version of the following refrain appears continuously throughout the text: “A black man…? A gay man…? A writer…?” (212). What it means to be each of the identities listed independently is question enough for Delany; to be all
three simultaneously is the very project of *The Motion of Light in Water*. The memoir narrates Delany’s development as “a black man,” “a gay man,” and “a writer” as mutually constitutive. For example, Delany explains that he initially began writing stories as a means of documenting his “masturbation fantasies” (16). He says these fantasies were “grandiose, homoerotic, full of kings and warriors, leather armor, slaves, swords, and brocade” (16). As a literacy narrative, this one depicts Delany coming to writing as a means of clarifying and detailing his burgeoning same-sex desire. While antebellum black-authored literacy narratives regard the process of learning to read and write as one which allows its subject to question the racist structures that imprison her/him, Delany’s literacy narrative regards the process of learning to read and write as one primarily directed toward the experience and articulation of homosexual pleasure. Furthermore, the literacy narrative depicts Delany’s same-sex desire as contributing to this interest in science fiction and fantasy—and vice versa. Delany’s fantasies of “leather armor” and “slaves” demonstrates early attempts in writing to understand race as an experience that accumulates meaning through sexuality and sexual signifiers. That is, as Delany learns about sex, he also learns about science fiction and race through writing.

Delany explains that writing his fantasies out pleased him immensely, but only momentarily:

A fantasy I had not written out yet, or had only begun to write, would last me a long time, over several days—even a week or more. If, however, I wrote it down, filling in descriptions of place, atmosphere, thoughts, speech, clothing, accidental gestures, the whole narrative excess we think
of as “realism” making my written account as complete and narrationally rich as I could, my own erotic response was much greater; the orgasm it produced was stronger, more satisfying, hugely pleasurable. But, once this has occurred, the fantasy was used up. It became just words on paper, at one with its own descriptive or aesthetic residue, but with little or no lingering erotic charge. (16)

Here Delany suggests that representing ideas—sexuality in particular—in language contains both costs and benefits. On the one hand Delany experienced a “hugely pleasurable” orgasm; on the other, the thrill of potential he experienced while writing was lost. By accomplishing the “narrative excess” of “realism,” an entire realm of possibility—of what could have been—is extinguished. This statement begins Delany’s on-going acknowledgement that realism as an aesthetic mode constitutes a loss, particularly because it refuses to dwell in the realm of hypothesis—a realm which, as a science fiction reader and writer, as well as a queer subject, Delany values. Reflecting on the desire to write out his sexual fantasies, Delany says,

Thus desire set two graphic poles: At one pole, everything tried to hold off writing, to delay beginning it, to halt it, to interrupt it, to keep the word at bay and restrain it from the paper, to retain it as a secret in the mind for longer, and longer, and longer, so that the pleasure of its inner repetition would endure… At the other pole, all forces drove to realize the word on paper, to let the immediate feedback and intensifying potential of the letter enrich and specify, clarify and analyze… (17)
This story about writing his sexual fantasies reveals Delany’s investment in language and identity: he recognizes the pleasure experienced by having a language (and, specifically, an aesthetic form) with which to narrate his identity, but he also remarks on the potential that is lost when one is compelled to write one’s identity in a particular aesthetic form. *The Motion of Light in Water* suggests that the very process of writing constitutes an identity that is at once fortifying and crumbling. That is, language—because it represents reality—also limits what can be construed as “real.” Furthermore, Delany’s ambivalent feeling toward the act of writing can be taken as a black queer epistemological approach to the written archive of African American reality, including its important interventions into white supremacist narratives of U.S. history, as well as its normative omissions of queer sexual expression.

At critical points in *The Motion of Light in Water*, Delany imagines possibilities and potential for black homosexual community of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s rather than proclaiming its assured existence. Just as Lorde looks for a history of black lesbian antecedents in *Zami*, Delany considers the importance of role models to black gay men in *The Motion of Light in Water*. Delany reflects in particular on “brown, round, irrepresibly effeminate” Herman (218), a man who worked as an organist in Delany’s father’s funeral home when Delany was a boy. Herman was allowed to play the role of a woman amongst the other men who worked for Delany’s father, but not without being labeled “disgusting,” a “faggot,” a “fairy,” “funny,” or “strange” (219-220). Delany remembers, “Herman had a place in our social scheme—but by no means an acceptable
place, and certainly not a place I wanted to fill” (220). Delany’s fear of Herman’s unacceptable social role left him with significant questions after Herman’s death:

I realized I had no notion of what sexual outlets there’d been in his life.

Had he gone to bars? Had he gone to baths? Had he picked up people in the afternoon in Forty-second Street movie houses or in the evenings along the benches beside Central Park West? Once a month, did he spend a night cruising the halls of the YMCA, over on 135th Street, where, on Saturday afternoons, up till years before, I used to go so innocently swimming? Had there been a long-term lover, waiting for him at home, unmet by, unmentioned to, people like my father whom he worked for? For even though I’d pursued none of them myself, I knew these were the possibilities that lay ahead—and was desperately trying to work up the courage to explore them on my own. (221)

Here, Delany laments the lack of community and direct inherited legacy amongst black gay men. His series of questions about Herman’s “sexual outlets” reveals a desire for community and trans-generational communal knowledge that never quite comes into existence for the narrator of The Motion of Light in Water. And yet, The Motion of Light in Water documents for readers Delany’s numerous sexual outlets; in doing so it provides the kind of information about Delany that he once sought about Herman. Just as Lorde, in Zami, searches for signs of same-sex desire in her mother and in her female ancestors and relatives in Carriacou, Delany explores them in Herman. Both writers create the sense of community they lacked via their life-writing texts. In doing so, they become the black
LGBT role models they once sought. However, they also continuously remark on the unknowability of black queer community, both because of heterosexism and because of the diverse group of people to which such a term refers.

The unknowability of black queer community and of the black queer subject is also made clear in both texts due to the fact that, in Zami, Lorde embraces a speculative tone when describing black women’s sexual relationships with one another and, in The Motion of Light in Water, Delany wears shoes too incredibly big to fill. Jeffrey Tucker, along with Thomas Disch, regard The Motion of Light in Water as “legendary” (Tucker 158) because of Delany’s “self-mythologization” (Disch 1) therein. Tucker sees The Motion of Light in Water as the chronicle of a science fiction legend or celebrity. Delany’s many accounts of his close proximity to and casual interaction with major artistic, political, and scientific stars of the twentieth century work to compose a narrator who is himself a legend, celebrity, and star by association. Tucker writes, “Perhaps nothing cultivates the image of Delany as a [science fiction] legend as much as his acquaintances with other cultural legends. Motion portrays a man who was acquainted with musician José Feliciano, spent a morning in his high school’s detention office with Black Power activist-to-be Stokely Carmichael, served W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman a shrimp curry dinner, and once, as a child, sailed a model boat with Albert Einstein” (158). Delany also includes stories about his marriage to poet Marilyn Hacker and his experience as a folk singer performing with Bob Dylan. Delany’s “legendary” status is thus achieved through his position in the star system of twentieth-century cultural icons.
Delany also narrates himself as a sexual legend. In addition to the aforementioned shirtless photograph of Delany in bed that accompanies Motion’s preface, Delany includes several instances of men and women remarking on his apparently irresistible sexual attractiveness. “When you were 17, 18, you were simply a dish,” a white female friend of Hacker’s tells him. “You were smart. And you were nice. We knew you were queer … but what did that mean back then? When we were 17, the three of us used to spend hours talking about how we were going to get you into bed” (104). This story positions Delany as desirable especially to white women, who perhaps feel safe divulging their attraction to him because Delany was “queer” and therefore a version of black masculinity that was somehow more accessible and even safer than other black masculinities. This story demonstrates that Delany is regarded throughout his life as a consumable black male body. His same-sex desire does not absolve him of the racialization that considers black men sexually apt, available, and powerful. The story also positions Delany as sexually exceptional. Delany narrates himself as “legend” or “legendary” and therefore has us re-imagine his aforementioned epigraph from Equiano’s slave narrative: “If, then, the following narrative does not appear sufficiently interesting to engage general attention, let my motive be some excuse for its publication. I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation… Let it therefore be remembered that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise” (qtd. in Delany vii). The humility that Equiano’s words supposedly evince is questioned by Delany. Without reading a word of The Motion of Light in Water, one could surmise that Delany’s chosen epigraph does not necessarily align in terms of content with the fact that,
before his critical memoir even begins, readers are exposed to a shirtless and seductive photo of the writer. Delany’s cultivation of himself as a legend and celebrity thereby questions the sincerity of Equiano’s epigraph. The measured humility evinced in Equiano’s words is revealed to be a strategy required for engaging with a predominantly white readership. Delany implies that the history of African American life-writing has required such insincerity; he mocks audience expectation for black humility by insisting he does “not aspire to praise” while all the while consistently attesting to his very celebrity and sexual appeal.

Like Lorde’s biomythographical Zami, the form of The Motion of Light in Water announces its major difference from the (African) American autobiographical tradition. Delany described The Motion of Light in Water as a “genre crosser … between criticism and memoir” (Rowell 266). Delany’s critical memoir disrupts expectations of both memoir and cultural criticism as genres. By insisting that his sexual, personal, and private lives are intimately related to his public and professional lives as a writer, Delany actually troubles distinctions between private and public that have historically operated to obscure the realities of black LGBT experience. Remarking on the erasure of same-sex desiring African Americans from narratives of black history, Essex Hemphill famously insisted, “It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can’t become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal” (64). Hemphill insists that the often-silenced sexual lives and practices of
important African American figures should be exposed and openly discussed. Delany narrates himself as both a legend and a sexual subject who shares details about his sexual life and thereby becomes “something pure to emulate” for black gay readers. And yet, as stated, Delany’s life in *The Motion of Light in Water* is not reproducible given the extraordinary amount of celebrity and celebrity acquaintances he enjoys.

Delany’s participation in science fiction culture may have actually allowed for the frank sexual narration that occurs in *The Motion of Light in Water*. Georgia Johnston explains that exploring sexuality and imagining alternative sexual formations for living beings has long been a convention of science fiction. However, she notes that it has not been a convention of autobiographical writing. She says that “generically-defined discourse systems” (50) encourage readers to expect and accept sexuality in science fiction as part of a created world, as opposed to sexuality in the genre autobiography, where sexuality, because of the genre, when brought to the fore, becomes an unexpected yet integral part of the text… Delany himself writes that “The sight of genitals when you don’t expect them—in a public place, say—astonishes” (*Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* 22), and his use of sexuality within autobiographical cultural criticism is similar textually to that bodily exposure. (Johnston 50-51)

Delany’s work in *The Motion of Light in Water* to narrate his career as a writer and his experiences as a so-called sexual deviant simultaneously is an attempt to fuse together
intellectual and bodily pursuits that have frequently been deemed inconsequential to one another, especially when it comes to LGBT people.

Delany’s blending of the two genres positions him as an authority on his own life and on the sexual subcultures and science fiction culture which he chronicles. And yet, he frequently troubles his own authority. For example, Delany begins his critical memoir by comparing his personal recollection of his father’s death and his biographers’ account of it. Michael W. Peplow and Robert S. Bravard published Samuel R. Delany: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography, 1962-1979 in 1980 and asked for Delany’s help in composing a biographical essay of the writer. Delany confidently remembers, “My father died of lung cancer in 1958 when I was seventeen” (xii). Delany shares information about his father’s last few months, when he would listen to Krzysztof Penderecki, Zoltán Kodaly, and “programs of eclectic classical music” (ix) on WBAI-FM from bed. Delany remembers his mother and all but one of his father’s five sisters crying on the night of the man’s death. And Delany recalls walking barefoot in Harlem’s Riverside Park while composing an elegy for his father that same night. But his account is at odds with the narrative that Peplow and Bravard construct of his life:

I don’t remember the specific letter in which one of them pointed out gently that, if I was born in 1942, in 1958 I could not possibly have been seventeen. In 1958 I was fifteen up until April 1 and sixteen for the year’s remaining months. (Certainly my father didn’t die when I was fifteen or sixteen…?) WBAI-FM did not begin to broadcast till 1960. There were no Penderecki recordings available in 1958. Various researches followed,
along with more questions… Finally, in an old Harlem newspaper, a small article was unearthed that confirmed it: my father died in the early days of October 1960. [...] I was eighteen. (xii)

The fact that Delany’s memories conflict with the paper trail Peplow and Bravard establish demonstrates that neither Delany, Peplow, nor Bravard are absolute authorities on Delany’s life. Delany admits that he does not know everything there is to know about himself, but he also insists that Peplow and Bravard—formal biographers—do not either:

I am as concerned with truth as anyone—otherwise I would not be going so far to split hairs. In no way do I feel the incorrect sentence [‘My father died of lung cancer in 1958 when I was seventeen.’] is privileged over the correct one [‘My father died of lung cancer in 1960 when I was eighteen.’]. Yet, even with what I know now, a decade after the letter from [Peplow and Bravard], the wrong sentence still feels to me righter than the first one.

Now a biography or a memoir that contained only the first sentence would be incorrect. But one that omitted it, or did not at least suggest its relation to the second on several informal levels, would be incomplete. (xviii)

Delany, like Lorde in Zami, does not regard himself as a completely self-aware and self-knowing individual capable of communicating the truth of his experience in the transparent medium of written language. His statements on the incompleteness of Peplow and Bravard’s biography, though, claim that academic biographers are not completely
aware of their subjects either. Like Lorde, Delany challenges presumptions of truth, reality, and authenticity his readers might bring to his text. As a result, he resists the positioning of his critical memoir as a quintessential black gay story.

**Conclusion: Disruptive Legends**

Suspicion toward the major and independent publishing industries, as well as criticism of (black) “American” autobiographical traditions, in both *Zami* and *The Motion of Light in Water* make the texts similar to many black-authored texts of the 1980s, according to Madhu Dubey. She says that “[d]ramatic transformations of U.S. urban order since the 1970s have rendered the idea of community increasingly abstract and experientially unknowable, feeding into the crises of representation associated with postmodern culture. At the heart of these crises lie doubts about the continuing potency of the modern print tradition” (2). Perhaps unlike other black-authored texts of the 1980s, *Zami* and *The Motion of Light in Water* regard “the modern print tradition” with doubt because of its frequent participation in racialized heterosexism that continues to obscure the lives and experiences of LGBT African Americans. Furthermore, both texts assert that the notion of a black LGBT community has always been “experientially unknowable,” given that both texts have to imagine and create senses of community and inheritance where none had previously existed. Both narratives ponder the importance of black queer role models—like Delany’s father’s business partner, Herman, and Lorde’s many female relatives in Carriacou—and in effect become “role model” texts for black
LGBT readers. That is, both narratives provide examples of how to live in the world as an LGBT African American.

However, *Zami* and *The Motion of Light in Water* also tell stories about “legendary” African American LGBT writers. Just as former slave narrators had to at once be representative examples of the enslaved community while also demonstrating their particular exceptionalism, so too did Lorde and Delany offer testimonies about the realities of black LGBT people while also suggesting that they themselves were legendary or even speculative rather than representative. Within *Zami* and *The Motion of Light in Water*, the “legendary” statuses of their subjects—Lorde as the sexual companion and disciple of the trickster figure Afrekete and Delany as an incredibly attractive and well-connected science fiction celebrity—work to question the presumption of reality, racial authority, and racial representativeness that audiences of U.S. mass culture have been led to bring to black-authored texts, as well as to life-writing in general. Thus, in a moment when black LGBT experiences and lives were being circulated for a wide variety of readerships via the major U.S. publishing industry, the science fiction publishing industry, and independent identity-based presses, Delany and Lorde worked to trouble the consumption of those texts and therefore the consumption of the black LGBT issues they represented. Rather than offer narratives of black suffering due to racism, Delany and Lorde narrated their experiences with racism and with (homo)sexual pleasure simultaneously. In doing so, they used some codified conventions of African American life-writing (like scenes of trauma due to racism and literacy narratives) while introducing an entirely new possibility: that (homo)sexual pleasure and
suffering due to racism could be experienced by the same person and narrated within the same account.

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182


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1 Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980) is another form of life-writing published through an independent press (Spinsters Ink). I focus on *Zami* rather than *The Cancer Journals* because *Zami* narrates Lorde from childhood to adulthood— and therefore surveys a range of lesbian experiences— rather than focus on a particular aspect of Lorde’s life like *The Cancer Journals* does by detailing her experience with and thoughts on breast cancer.

2 A number of critics—Gomez, Keating, and Stallings—have referred to *Zami* as fiction, despite the term “biomythography” appearing on the cover of every edition of the book. Though none of these writers consider the genre of *Zami* explicitly, I surmise that they refer to *Zami* as fiction as a way of gesturing toward the self-mytholization Lorde precipitates in *Zami* and which I consider in this chapter.

3 I use the term “heteronormativity” here to refer to a set of expectations and aspirations that govern sexual desires, gender presentations, and domestic configurations. Heteronormative black literary realism has historically celebrated heterosexual object
choice and maligned homosexual object choice, celebrated gender propriety and lamented transgenderism, and celebrated male-female relationships as central to the idea of “home.”

4 Gérard Genette has defined “paratexts” as “verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations… [which] ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays at least) of a book” (1).

5 My understanding of this development comes from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” wherein they argue that “[a]ll mass culture under [capitalist] monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out… Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce” (95). While my interest in black LGBT subjects and mass cultural production does not take the stance that all mass and popular culture is “trash,” it does take seriously Adorno and Horkheimer’s claim that mass cultural production precipitates sameness and, in the case of representations of African Americans, a singular and continually reproduced vision/product of “the race.”

6 See Henry Louis Gates’s “In Her Own Write,” the Foreword to Pauline Hopkins’s Contending Forces. Gates explains the tremendous work Phillis Wheatley had to have her poems verified as her own.

7 See Young on D.H. Lawrence and Radclyffe Hall. See also Allen Ginsberg’s Howl.

8 Young also explains that African American writers and writers’ collectives prior to Lorde and Saint founded their own presses as a means of circumventing the major U.S. publishing industry and its predominantly white audience. Examples include Sutton Griggs’s Orion Publishing, the Colored Co-Operative Publishing Company that produced Pauline Hopkins’s Contending Forces, Du Bois’s The Crisis as well as Brownies’ Book and Unsung Heroes, Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press, and Haki Madhubuti’s Third World Press (11-12).

9 See Smith, “A Table of Our Own” and Saint, “Why I Write.”


11 See Nan Alamilla Boyd’s chapter on homophile activism from Wide Open Town for a discussion of the Daughters of Bilitis’s exclusionary racial politics.

13 See Slusser (103-106) for an example of a writer who conceives of SF as beyond the concerns of race.

14 Lorde frequently romanticizes Carriacou, Grenada, and the Caribbean in general as a paradisiacal home—a romanticization challenged, especially, by the writing of Jamaica Kincaid, especially her portrait of black homosexuality in Antigua from My Brother (1997).

15 In this way Zami has much in common with Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and other postmodern feminist autobiographies.

16 See José Esteban Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia for an explanation of the ways in which queerness operates most effectively in the realms of hypothesis, the future, and the unarticulated.
Chapter 3. Queering the Neo-Slave Narrative: Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*

In the previous two chapters, I explored Alice Walker’s simultaneous embrace and queering of black literary realism with *The Color Purple*, Audre Lorde’s critique of autobiography’s realist claims in *Zami*, and Samuel Delany’s skepticism over official accounts of historical truth in *The Motion of Light in Water*. Each text negotiated with codified realist modes of representing African Americans in writing and at the same time complicated the authorial impulse and audience expectation for appropriate black literary representation. Positioned alongside one another, the texts show 1980s black LGBT writers responding to the major publishing industry’s requirement that African American writers compose in realist forms and endorse sexual normativity. Because Walker, Lorde, and Delany did not celebrate the culture of sexual normativity, they were also at varying odds with the conventions of black literary realism. In this chapter, I consider two speculative fiction novels: Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984) and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991). Both of these novels indirectly comment on and critique the sexually normative representations of African Americans engendered by black literary realism. To do so, Delany and Gomez look to the antebellum era and tell stories of enslavement. Their speculative fiction suspends assumptions that sexual
propriety can operate as a shield against the abuses and violations of racism rooted in slavery. Thus, this chapter reads *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and *The Gilda Stories* as “neo-slave narratives,” a term coined by Bernard Bell to describe a number of black-authored “narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289) written and published in the late twentieth century. I contextualize the novels in this way to highlight their arguments about the gendered and sexual contours of antebellum racialization. Both novels explore the antebellum articulation of blackness as gender and sexual queerness and the concurrent articulation of whiteness as gender and sexual resoluteness. Along with other neo-slave narratives, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and *The Gilda Stories* explore how gender and sexual queerness were imposed upon enslaved people; unlike other neo-slave narratives, they explicitly position queer gender and sexuality not only as conditions of enslavement, but also as possible means of liberation. As such, the novels ruminate on how to value and re-think what Hortense Spillers has called the “neuter-bound” (77) status of black gender and sexuality that was a condition of slavery without romanticizing or celebrating enslavement itself.

This chapter begins with an explanation of how black gender and sexuality during slavery can be considered queer. I go on to explain what the genre of speculative fiction can contribute to on-going changes in the historiography of slavery. I also review critical scholarship on neo-slave narratives to demonstrate that the genre has frequently been taken up in literary criticism as an endorsement of sexual normativity. I proceed to read particular scenes of *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and *The Gilda Stories* that stage antebellum racialization as a sexualized experience of inter-penetration and inter-
subjectivity, terms I first used in Chapter 1’s analysis of *The Color Purple*. Throughout this analysis, I foreground the novels’ statements on the mutually constitutive and compromised conditions of blackness, whiteness, and sexual queerness.

The Queerness of Enslavement

In a reading of the queer entanglements Linda Brent navigates in Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Hortense Spillers characterizes antebellum black gender and sexuality as “neuter-bound” (77). Spillers focuses on a passage wherein Mrs. Flint enters Brent’s bedroom at night and comes on to her in the voice of her master Dr. Flint, Mrs. Flint’s husband: “[S]he whispered in my ear, as if it were her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer” (qtd. in Spillers 77). Here, Mrs. Flint masquerades as her husband, a man who continuously sexually harasses and preys on Brent. As such, Jacobs represents Brent as subject to the sexual violation of both men and women, according to Spillers, and in doing so demarcates a [black] sexuality that is neuter-bound, inasmuch as it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male/female. Since the gendered female [Mrs. Flint] *exists for* the male, we might suggest that the ungendered female [Brent]—in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another woman or man. (77)
For Spillers, the scene demonstrates the range of sexual assaults to which enslaved black people were vulnerable. Enslaved black people’s subjection to “a gigantic sexualized repertoire” articulated whiteness as a penetrative act and, vice versa, blackness as neutered, or incapable of penetration. One could even say that penetration of the enslaved came to define whiteness.¹ By imposing what can be considered “queer vulnerability” onto enslaved people, white masters defined their own domestic, gender, and sexual resoluteness. That is, black queer vulnerability gestured to white resoluteness and sanctity as its negative or opposite. I refer to the sexual vulnerability under consideration here as “queer” because, as Spillers notes, it had the effect of casting black people as gender indeterminate or “genderless” (3), to use Angela Davis’s term.

Furthermore, the sexual vulnerability of enslaved black people can be regarded as “queer” because it served to shore up connections between whiteness and sexual normativity.² According to Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, the notion of black queer gender and sexuality came to define white humanity and normalcy in the United States:

[T]he brutal enslavement of black people, their legal definition as three-fifths human, and the social, economic, and legislative practices of slavery helped to institute not only whiteness but the very notions of the person, the citizen, the normal, and the heterosexual as well. Despite the importance of late 19th-century medical and legal discourses, which founded theories of sexual perversion and its punitive consequences, racial slavery provided the background—and the testing ground—for the emergence and articulation of those theories. (224)

191
Abdur-Rahman considers antebellum slavery the “testing ground” for legal and medical discourses of sexual perversion that emerged in the late 1800s and that were dependent on race for their articulation. Both Spillers and Abdur-Rahman point out that the antebellum characterization of black gender and sexuality as queer played a major role in delineating what constitutes blackness, whiteness, and sexual normalcy in U.S. culture. Sexual norms were defined through whiteness and in particular white license to violate enslaved black people.

As such, white-defined and white-defining sexual normalcy continuously work to articulate racial distinctions. According to Roderick Ferguson, some African Americans—mostly middle-class and wealthy—have hoped to “inherit modernity [and humanity] by adhering to gender and sexual propriety” (92) rather than regard the race-determining dictates of sexual normalcy with suspicion. Similarly, Evelynn Hammonds notes that a “culture of dissemblance” and a “politics of silence” have developed around black articulations of women’s sexuality since slavery as a means of shielding black people from shameful sexual stereotypes (303).

As explained in the introduction and first chapter of this dissertation, the push for African Americans to embrace heteronormativity in order to stave off racist accusations of black sexual impropriety has consistently manifested in the African American literary tradition as an endorsement of literary realism. Black realist aesthetics, especially those of the Black Arts Movement to which 1980s black LGBT writers respond, have tended to champion black authenticity articulated in part through an individual’s successful demonstration of heteronormative aspirations, including the will to clearly-gendered
identities, heterosexual object choices, and gender-determined familial roles. These aesthetics developed in confrontational response to antebellum discourses of black "neuter-bound," queerly vulnerable gender and sexuality. Delany and Gomez trouble these purportedly realist aesthetics by removing readers from a world wherein black authenticity/reality is determined by heteronormativity and, instead, instantiating them in speculative fiction worlds wherein black subjectivity is actually accomplished through queer means. That is, Delany and Gomez use the tools of speculative fiction as a means of both circumventing and critiquing the sexual and gendered values of black literary realism.\(^5\) Furthermore, both reimagine penetration as an on-going exchange that simultaneously clarifies and unsettles racial distinctions.

My argument builds off of Gene Andrew Jarrett’s claims that “realist” aesthetics have always been pushed as major goals of African American writing by white editors and by African American writers themselves. Jarrett traces the development of black literary realism in the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth: “William Howells in the 1890s, Alain Locke in the 1920s, Richard Wright in the 1930s and 1940s, and Amiri Baraka in the 1960s and 1970s arbitrated public expectations that black authors should write authentic literature demonstrating racial realism, which supposedly portrayed the black race in accurate or truthful ways” (1).\(^6\) As such, various “deans” (Jarrett 1) of African American literature have consistently sought to articulate and determine in writing a particular definition of black identity. Deans of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement sought to erect a version of black literary authenticity that would protect the wounds associated with sexual vulnerability and allow them to heal.
However, according to E. Patrick Johnson, “[w]hen black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included” (3). That is, in an effort to elucidate black identity as strong and invulnerable to white adulteration, purveyors of black literary realism like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver “policed the ‘boundaries of blackness’ to its margins” (Clarke 14). Those consistently marginalized within this conception of black authenticity were women and gays, individuals seen as most vulnerable and even open to white subjection.\(^7\) The prevailing logic of the Movement was put clearly by Hoyt Fuller in 1968: “Black Americans are, for all practical purposes, colonized in their native land, and it can be argued that those who would submit to subjection without struggle deserve to be enslaved” (1856). “Submitting to subjection,” for Fuller and for many Black Arts Movement luminaries, constituted unforgivable racial betrayal.

As neo-slave narratives, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and *The Gilda Stories* question whether one can willingly “submit to subjection” as a slave and, furthermore, whether identity is possible without some version of subjection. Delany and Gomez represent racial identities as both inevitable, pre-determined social categories and willfully-constructed senses of self. As such, their work coheres with Saidiya Hartman’s claim that, when it comes to understanding the experience of the enslaved, “will is indistinguishable from submission” (33). The entanglement of “will” and “submission” gestures to the inter-subjective nature of racialization and the fact that willful proclamations of clearly-delineated identity inevitably point to a racial other’s defining role in one’s own sense of self. In the on-going process of racialization (with antebellum
enslavement being one such process), the self is often indistinguishable from the other just as will may be indistinguishable from submission. The novels of Delany and Gomez explore this complicated process and emphasize the role that sexuality plays within it.

In exploring issues of identity rooted in slavery, Delany and Gomez participated in the late-twentieth-century neo-slave narrative’s emergence. Invested in creating new knowledge about slavery, many African American writers had, by the 1970s and 1980s, invented the neo-slave narrative as a new form for its exploration. According to Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, neo-slave narratives emerged in response to a change in the historiography of U.S. antebellum slavery that began in the 1960s with the Black Power Movement. While the artists of the Black Arts Movement frequently saw themselves as distinct from (enslaved) black people of the past whom they regarded as weak and ineffectual against racism, the writers of 1970s and 1980s neo-slave narratives sought to redeem African Americans of the past through careful understanding of their lived realities (Rushdy, Neo-slave 3). In novels like Gayl Jones’s Corregidora (1975), Octavia Butler’s Kindred (1979), Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose (1986), and Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), enslaved people are re-assessed as brave and resourceful individuals who negotiated identities in what seem impossible circumstances. Williams’s author’s note to Dessa Rose states the goal of many neo-slave narratives explicitly. She calls for readers to re-envision slavery as an experience that “eliminated neither heroism nor love” but, rather, “provided occasions for their expression” (6). Following Williams’s assertion, we see that a major goal of neo-slave narratives is to offer counter-narratives to ever-present
images of black (sexual) suffering and victimhood during slavery. Neo-slave narratives in general pose the question of submission’s entanglement with will.

The shapes of these counter-narratives, however, differ significantly. The neo-slave narrative is a gendered form, according to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, who describes each of the neo-slave narratives mentioned above as an interrogation of “the myth that enslaved women, denied the privilege of a gender identity by the institution of slavery, were in fact genderless” (xv). Beaulieu studies the “acts of resistance that enabled enslaved women to mother in the fullest sense of the term” (xv) and thereby suggests that a major project of women-authored neo-slave narratives is to re-gender black women previously seen as genderless. That is, many neo-slave narratives respond to what Spillers describes as the powerless “neuter-bound” gender of enslaved African Americans by articulating freedom (and power) as gender and sexual propriety. Angelyn Mitchell regards neo-slave narratives as “liberatory narratives” that engage “the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new models of liberation by problematizing the concept of freedom” (4), especially as defined by marriage and sexual propriety. As such, Mitchell challenges Beaulieu’s reading of gender propriety as a condition of liberation, but she does not go so far as to consider how black queer gender and sexuality might actually be means of liberation. The neo-slave narratives of Delany and Gomez require the reassessment of the means of liberation and, in turn, the reassessment of black queer gender and sexuality.

Afrofuturism and the Desire for Race: *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*
Because Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* is a novel about slavery and its aftermath in the distant future on the fictional planet of Rhyonon, its setting may seem at odds with generating new knowledge about U.S. antebellum slavery. However, scholars of Afrofuturism—a critical approach to black science fiction—argue that science fiction is an important site for explorations of slavery and racism and that, vice versa, slavery and racism are important sites for the development of science fiction. According to Isiah Lavender III,

The blunt thesis underlying Afrofuturism is that *all* black cultural production in the New World *is* sf [science fiction]. The forced transplantation of Africans to the Americas for the sole purpose of slave labor capable of producing wealth has been interpreted as the substance of sf for blacks… Status and power were derived from translating the black slave body into a technology—a natural machine necessary for the cultivation of a physical landscape—just as access to new and developing technologies defined authority. (“Ethnoscapes” 187)

According to Lavender, Afrofuturism envisions enslaved black people in the Americas as actual cyborgs whose bodies were colonized as technology by powerful whites. Put this way, the Afrofuturist thesis argues that, for African Americans, the “future” of science fiction began hundreds of years ago. Thus, while the setting of *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* may seem distinct and distant from the reality of U.S. antebellum slavery—as well as contemporary U.S. culture—its themes of slavery and bodily alienation chillingly resemble the realities of U.S. history.
For this reason Lavender regards *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* as a “meta-slavery narrative” (*Race* 55), a sub-genre he considers unique to science fiction. Meta-slavery narratives like *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* emerged in U.S. science fiction at the same time neo-slave narratives like *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* emerged in mainstream U.S. literary discourse, according to Lavender. While slavery has been a science fiction—and, more broadly, speculative fiction—trope since the genre’s inception, not until the late 1970s and 1980s did novels like *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* and *Kindred* have speculative fiction writers making direct reference to U.S. antebellum slavery and its attendant tradition of black-authored slave narratives. The meta-slavery narrative, then, participates in the genres of speculative fiction, science fiction, and the neo-slave narrative. It generally “uses technology or science to distance or defamiliarize the institution and practice of slavery” (*Race* 55), according to Lavender. Such defamiliarization requires that readers suspend any codified narrative of reality and U.S. antebellum slavery they have received in order to engage with the text. Lavender explains, “We break away from the ‘actual’ historical continuum when we read SF, going forward and backward in time, experiencing alternative realities and an unfamiliar humanity, leaving us free to change our history, our society, and ourselves in our examination of its process” (59). Meta-slavery narratives like *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* thus operate with the intent to change readers’ sense of slavery and, in extension, of their own histories and identities.

However, Lavender says, “Meta-slavery [narratives] cannot be understood without a historical understanding of slavery and its literature, because meta-slavery takes
slavery’s conventions, such as violence, human chattel, and identity, as its subjects and goes beyond them by changing our understanding of them” (58). That is, while *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* is set in a place with no apparent connection to U.S. history, the novel conveys an understanding that, while its characters may not be affected by the legacies of slavery and race in the United States, its readers certainly are. A. Timothy Spaulding explains that such a conceit actually defines neo-slave narratives in general: “Rather than drawing on elements of the sentimental novel and nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographies as the original slave narratives did, postmodern slave narratives draw from nonrealistic genres in order to re-form our view of the past” (4). As both a neo-slave narrative and a meta-slavery narrative, then, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* suggests that uncritical notions of reality, as well as the generic forms associated with them, may be insufficient tools for assessing and representing slavery and its attendant racial traumas.

Delany announces his concern with slavery immediately in the first sentence of *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*: “‘Of course,’ they told him in all honesty, ‘you will be a slave’” (3). “They” who speak are spokespeople for Radical Anxiety Termination (RAT), a procedure that turns its patients into “rats,” or slaves with no independent will or thoughts who are used by “men,” their masters, for labor (8). The spokespeople talk to the figure who becomes Rat Korga, the novel’s main character who does indeed become a rat/slave to an unidentified “labor project” (6). The novel’s first sentence recalls a line that frequently appears at the beginning of nineteenth-century slave narratives: “I was born…” Consider this statement from Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the
Scenes; Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House (1868), in which Keckley reflects on the conditions of her birth as a person, an event which was simultaneously her birth as a slave: “My life has been an eventful one. I was born a slave—was the child of slave parents—therefore I came upon the earth free in God-like thought, but fettered in action” (368). Keckley narrates the condition of her birth as the inevitable outcome of generations of racism. She “was born a slave” because she “was the child of slave parents.” The statement’s matter-of-factness, though, presents a difficult duality. Born a person, but also born enslaved, Keckley finds her condition at birth to be fundamentally at odds with itself. Keckley’s statement challenges Fuller’s aforementioned statement that “those who would submit to subjection without struggle deserve to be enslaved” (1856). Keckley points to generations of institutionalized racism from which she inherits an identity “fettered in action” but simultaneously gestures to a counter-discourse of black identity that regards her as “free in God-like thought.” The tone of Keckley’s statement suggests that familiarity with enslavement and violation is an inevitable aspect of African American identity, as is exploration of will and agency. Delany explores this same tension in the statement that begins Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand. The people at the RAT institute deem Korga’s status as an enslaved individual plainly and as a matter of fact. Delany’s careful exposition of this supposedly inevitable situation, however, reveals Korga’s identity to be contingent on a number of social norms willfully articulated by the socially powerful. The RAT spokespeople explain to Korga why he “will be a slave”:
You’re ugly as mud and tall enough to scare children in the street. The prenatal brain damage, small as it is, we still can’t correct. You’ve been in trouble of one sort or another for as long as there are records on you: orphanages, foster homes, youth rehabilitation camps, adult detention units—and you haven’t gotten along in any of them. Sexually…? … In this part of the world your preferences in that area can’t have done you any good. You’re a burden to yourself, to your city, and to your geosector… But we can change all that. (3-4)

The RAT spokespeople see Korga as a prime candidate for lobotomization, first, because of his appearance. On Rhyonon, the very shortest are considered the most beautiful. The RAT spokespeople explain Korga’s supposed ugliness with a plain descriptive tone similar to that used by Immanuel Kant in “Of National Characteristics, so far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime” (1764), the essay in which he coldly described Africans as incapable of creating beauty due to what he saw as African physical ugliness. Indeed, the aesthetic and, subsequently, intellectual incapability Kant projected onto Africans are in similar association for Korga, whose supposed ugliness is considered part and parcel of his “prenatal brain damage.” As a result of his supposed ugliness and intellectual deficiency, Korga has been subject to various institutions—orphanges, jails—since birth. The RAT spokespeople consider him a “burden” to his nation and a liability to himself. The rhetoric used by the RAT spokespeople resembles colonialist rhetoric of Africans as “the white man’s burden.” Significantly, the RAT spokespeople also consider Korga sexually deviant, with
“preferences” that are at best suspicious. Delany reveals that the cultural logic allowing Rhyonon’s system of slavery to operate depends upon an interlocking hierarchy of physical appearances, intellectual aptitudes, and sexual orientations. Importantly, Delany does not conceptualize “race” as a factor in Rhyonon slavery. As such, he “distances and defamiliarizes” readers from the social category most often associated with slavery: race. Rather than invoke the idea of “race” as an already-codified social category, Delany demonstrates that race and racial categories accumulate meaning through the consciously-utilized discourses of physical appearance, mental aptitude, and sexuality. At this point in the novel, he demonstrates race to be primarily articulated and desired by those who, through its articulation, become socially powerful and even supreme.

As do other late-twentieth-century neo-slave narratives, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* configures emancipation as a gendered act that provides its inheritor with a new sense of identity. But rather than have Korga exhibit liberation through the performance of heteronormativity, Delany has Korga emerge as genderless, or neuter-bound. Delany asks readers to acknowledge both the costs and benefits of such a state. On what becomes the last day of his enslavement on Rhyonon, Korga is sent to an underground storage facility to retrieve a machine. While underground, the terrain of his planet is suddenly destroyed: “The temperature rose twenty degrees in ten seconds… [I]n a conflagration that lasted some seventeen hours, all life on the surface of his world—a world whose name in all his forty-one years he’d had less than a dozen opportunities to speak, a world he’d known only from the most impoverished perspective…—was destroyed” (61). Typically, according to Orlando Patterson, emancipation is seen as a gift
of personhood that the master bestows upon his former slave: “The master gives, and in giving he creates” (211). However, no explanation is ever given for the conflagration in *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* and, therefore, no particular master grants the formerly-enslaved his freedom. Delany writes about this significant event using the passive voice. Rhyonon “was destroyed” and what momentarily results is a sense that no lingering effects of enslavement and its attendant discourses of sexual and intellectual inferiority remain. However, Delany quickly points out the dangers of such an understanding.

After the conflagration, Korga is retrieved by a group of researchers from Velm, another planet with no prior knowledge of Rhyonon, Korga, or his people. When the researchers reverse the RAT that lobotomized and muted Korga, he asks them, “What have you given me?... What have you taken away?” (171). These questions are Korga’s first as a newly-speaking subject. Korga’s questions admit that the Velm researchers have given him freedom and socially-recognized personhood, but his questions also point to something they have potentially “taken away.” One wonders what could possibly be taken away by emancipation. How can emancipation in any way be configured as a loss? Insomuch as emancipation attempts to reverse the slave’s natal alienation and “cultural death,” its very grantedness, or giftedness, implies a sustained power imbalance. The former slave’s socially-recognized personhood is contingent upon the consent of former masters who must continuously grant it. Korga’s keen understanding of this situation demonstrates his own agency in the process of racialization, as he demands accountability and answers regarding his new identity. Korga has only ever known
“masters.” Though the researchers on Velm presume they are not implicated in Korga’s former enslavement, Korga addresses them as if they are. He says, “This… this is not my world. […] I had a world. But it is as true to say I never had a world. You have given me… possibility of a world. What world will you give me? […] What world will I have? You know: Whatever you have given me, it does not correct the … radical anxiety termination. It only compensates” (172). Korga recognizes that his status as an individual and as a person is at the mercy of the researchers—scientists whom, like the RAT spokespeople on Rhyonon, are the privileged members of their society. Korga’s question of “what world” will be granted to him recalls Medieval and Renaissance notions of the Americas as the New World and Europe, Africa, and Asia as the Old World. He wonders how he will be positioned vis-à-vis the unfamiliar researchers. As such, he considers what his life will mean post-emancipation. Korga’s words suggest that emancipation, like the Middle Passage, sustained the displacement and alienation of the formerly enslaved. While liberated from slavery, freed people were not liberated from New World discourses of blackness and its attendant stereotypes of physical appearance, mental capacity, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, they were not liberated from the idea that recognizable humanity is sutured to recognizable sexual orientation and gender identity.

The Velm researchers believe themselves to have rescued Korga by transplanting him from Rhyonon to Velm and are therefore confused by Korga’s questions about compensation: “Now what could Rat mean, ‘give me a world’?” (173) one of them asks. Rhyonon is considered “a world apart” (1) from Velm—just as contemporary readers may believe slavery to be a distant, inconsequential memory of U.S. history—and yet
Korga suggests the two planets operate similarly. Indeed, the unknowing researchers continue to refer to Korga as “Rat,” or slave, and thereby sustain his enslavement in name. Korga suggests that his identity—his “world”—is up for grabs on Velm and that it will be determined in part by the researchers as much as by his own will. In turn, Delany theorizes racial articulation as both a prone submission and a “choice.” Robert Reid-Pharr encourages scholars of racial identity to “challenge the sense of inevitability that [appear] far too often in the work of many students of race and ethnicity” and “to take seriously the idea that current generations of Americans are indeed agents and not simply products of history” (7). Similarly, Delany presents a group of objective researchers and observers, presumably “a world apart” from Rhyonon, who believe that they themselves play no role in Korga’s racialized subjectification. Delany’s novel demonstrates that sex and sexual queerness in particular allow for “race” to function as a social category. It turns out that the researchers have determined Korga to be the “perfect erotic object” (174) of Marq Dyeth, a Velm dignitary. The two come to “perfectly” define one another. The researchers and dignitaries on Velm, then, desire the same sexualized racial distinctions that operated on Rhyonon. Delany conceives of identity formation as an erotic process that requires the desire for, or the will to, identity on behalf of a given subject, as well as the willingness of others to grant it. Korga very quickly identifies that such an erotic process on Velm is determined by the socially powerful.

Jeffrey Allen Tucker considers Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand a “queer text, not only because it is a ‘gay love story’ [between Korga and Marq Dyeth], but also because it excels in imagining sexual models and alternatives” (258). That is, the various
sexual configurations that Korga witnesses while on Velm bespeak how much “a world apart” it is from Rhyonon. Despite their tolerance of myriad sexual configurations, the state and the socially-powerful nevertheless determine whether or not a given relationship is legitimate. Marq Dyeth’s arranged relationship with Korga attests to this situation. Tucker also reads Korga’s first moments on Velm as Delany’s statement on the emergence of whiteness in the United States, when the enslaved had “black” identities imposed upon them by newly-formed “whites” (265). Robert Eliot Fox reads Korga’s first moments on Velm as emblematic of the Reconstruction-era United States, when black people were “given the possibility of a world in which they could function as persons, not objects” (118-119) but were simultaneously subject to the predominant white society granting them their status as human. My reading shares elements of both Tucker’s and Fox’s, but I want to stress again Delany’s emphasis of the “grantedness” of Korga’s identity. In one way, Delany suspends the assumptions of identity that the Velm researchers themselves take for granted by presenting before them an individual who is not necessarily recognizable. In another, he has Korga question how the Velm researchers will choose to racialize him—and thereby legitimize him—given that the presence of his “kind” on their planet is unprecedented.12

With Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand, Delany demonstrates that notions of queer sexuality informed U.S. antebellum slavery and the articulation of race, blackness, and whiteness. Furthermore, he contends that individuals continuously and willfully articulate blackness and whiteness due to an eroticized desire for such distinctions. Thus Delany responds to black literary realism by refusing to engage with its politics of racial
authenticity and resoluteness. Instead, he uses paraliterary fantasy as a means of commenting on the sexualized discourses of race and racial authenticity without insisting on the need for inviolate, invulnerable conceptions of the true racial self. Korga lives perpetually in an erotic bind with others through which he receives his identity—a condition which Delany regards as the inevitability of humanity. Rather than continuously posture racial identities against one another, Delany considers acceptance of their erotic entanglement and inter-penetration as its own form of emancipation. Darieck Scott writes that

the abjection in/of blackness [in particular] endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power—indeed, what we can think of as black power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call identity, body, race, nation seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. (9)

Delany reveals a similar investment in the “erasure of ego-protections.” Indeed, he conceives of such erasure as a foundational necessity for effectual anti-racist politics. Delany’s work to represent racial identities as mutually constitutive rather than opposed combatants bespeaks his investment in black shamelessness, a vision of racial consciousness that attends to the inter-subjective nature of identity categories. Delany’s version of black shamelessness ponders the power that could arise from valuing the label of queer imposed on the enslaved. Queer positionalities can make clear the damaging,
hegemonic fiction of normality, especially as it accrues meaning through the racializing discourse of sexuality.

The (Neo-)Slave Narrative and the Vampire Novel: Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*

Unlike Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* is set, in part, during U.S. antebellum slavery. Epic in scope, *The Gilda Stories* traces the life of its main character—the Girl/Gilda—from her adolescence as an enslaved girl in 1850 Louisiana to her extended adulthood as an immortal vampire in 1890 California, 1921 Missouri, 1955 Massachusetts, 1971 New York, and 2020 New Hampshire. As such, the novel can be classified as both neo-slave narrative and vampire novel.

Combining the vampire novel and the slave narrative is not as odd as it may initially seem. The two genres emerged around the same time in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Camilla* (1872), both Irish novels, came one generation after texts like Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* (1867). Both genres chronicled the lives of individuals who experienced a living death, or what Patterson has called a “social death.” Patterson explains, “If the slave no longer belonged to a community, if he had no social existence outside of his master, then what was he? The initial response in almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person” (38). Thus, just as theorists of Afrofuturism regard slavery as the original African American science fiction.
fiction text, given that it transformed “the black slave body” into “a natural machine” (Lavender 187), Gomez combines the (neo-)slave narrative and the vampire novel to suggest that slavery transformed enslaved people into social monsters, vampires, and the living dead.

Gomez’s narrative, though, requires the reassessment of social monstrosity. The novel begins with the Girl—who is later named Gilda and who is not yet a vampire—fleeing the plantation on which she is enslaved. After successfully fleeing, she becomes part of a community of vampires who eventually transition her into a vampire. As such, vampirism is one element of the Girl/Gilda’s sustained liberation. Gomez’s reassessment of vampirism—and social monstrosity in general—sharply deviates from representations of vampires in other vampire literature, wherein her/his illicit bodily/sexual desires and shape-shifting abilities are designed to inspire fear in others and thereby define the vampire’s monstrousness. However, rather than cultivate fear of vampires amongst her readers, Gomez positions vampirism and monstrosity as means of liberation and white-determined humanity as a troubling force. In *The Gilda Stories*, white human beings—not vampires—are known for draining the world of its life. The Girl’s mother teaches her that white people are “just barely human. Maybe not even. They suck up the world, don’t taste it” (11). Gomez sutures white-determined humanity to the greedy consumption of food and, obliquely, to the greedy consumption of African Americans at the mercy of white sexual appetites. While the goal of antebellum slave narratives was to make a case for the once-enslaved black narrator’s humanity, Gomez’s neo-slave narrative questions the desire to be recognized as such given that white humanity is practiced through greedy
consumption and penetration. A. Timothy Spaulding considers this aspect of *The Gilda Stories* to be one of its most important: “The most significant revision in *The Gilda Stories* is the shift in status of the vampire as ‘other’ in the text… Gomez forces us to reconceptualize the threat of violence and the source of evil in the text” (105). Gomez positions white-determined humanity as a terrifying force in *The Gilda Stories* and in doing so questions the utility of aspiring to gender and sexual normalcy, a social compulsion which emerged in the United States as a means of defining whiteness as superior to blackness.

Despite her damning critique of white-determined humanity, Gomez does not position the Girl/Gilda as entirely distinct from white people. Instead, she characterizes racialization as an inter-penetrative and inter-subjective experience. One scene in particular dramatizes this argument. Early in the novel, the Girl/Gilda flees her plantation, intending to live free. While hiding, the Girl/Gilda is found by her overseer, who intends to rape her. Gomez presents the scene as follows: “He started to enter her, but before his hand finished pulling her open, while it still tingled with the softness of her insides, she entered him with her heart which was now a wood-handled knife” (11). This scene can very logically be read as representing self-defense. Lynda Hall argues that, while the “female body is often represented in culture as a territory to be vanquished and forced into surrender, … the Girl reverses the physical and symbolic transaction” (417) by stabbing the overseer. Reading the Girl as someone who “reverses” this penetration is a powerful idea, but the realities of slavery and the highly vulnerable status of black sexuality therein suggest that the Girl has already been violated and, as such, no reversal
is possible. Indeed, within the short description of the scene itself, the overseer has already felt the “softness of [the Girl/Gilda’s] insides.” However, the Girl/Gilda does successfully manage to change her interaction with the overseer to one of inter-penetration wherein both parties affect one another. The Girl/Gilda penetrates the man who, as an overseer, has already harmed her. As such, Gomez represents the antebellum process of racialization in this moment by granting the Girl/Gilda a penetrative will that usually delineates whiteness. In doing so, Gomez characterizes racialization similar to the way Robert Reid-Pharr does when he writes that “the Black American is produced at precisely that moment at which the attempt to dehumanize the African is met by the equally bold attempt to resist that dehumanization” (3). The Girl/Gilda does not simply accept, without agency, the racial identity imposed upon her. She imbues it with new meaning by allowing it a penetrative force. But, importantly, the Girl/Gilda remains vulnerable. Her act does not suddenly reverse the realities of history; rather, she remains a frightened and fleeing fugitive slave. In entering the overseer, the Girl/Gilda reveals that the process of racialization results in compromised, not resolute, bodies. Reid-Pharr explains that, in general,

(Racial) combatants are absolutely certain that they are distinct from their rivals. Nonetheless, their behaviors, their needs, their wants, their grimy obsessions are remarkably similar to those of the so-called enemy. On either side the dominant gesture is one of negation. “I am not that vile thing which I hate.” But strangely this gesture always reestablishes the intimacy of the rivals’ relationship. Moreover, this habitual and ritualized
articulation of distinction alerts the outsider to the fact that it is not so much history that structures rivalry as a simple discursive structure whose only purpose is to encourage the constant repetition of a pathetic “no.” (4-5)

Reid-Pharr explains that, while racialization seems to be enacted through a proclamation of repulsion, rather than a statement of desire, for one’s “racial combatant,” in reality racialization links “combatants” in a terrifyingly intimate bond. Gomez represents rape and murder as emblematic of this terrifying intimacy. While the overseer’s racialized acts of penetration once determined the Girl/Gilda’s “social death,” her act and its demonstration of her penetrative potential define his actual death.

As a result, the Girl/Gilda and the overseer are represented as dependent upon one another for their lives—and deaths. Gomez characterizes the process of racialization as one which results in inter-subjectivity rather than clearly-delineated identities. I borrow the term “inter-subjectivity” from Houston Baker, who in his study of the blues characterizes the music as “an invitation to energizing intersubjectivity. Its implied (in)junction reads: here is my body meant for (a phylogenetically conceived) you” (5). In Baker’s theory of the blues, a blues performance suspends clear distinctions between individuals in its requirement of empathy and the exchange of bodily and emotional experiences. Gomez represents racialization as a process similar to the blues. The Girl/Gilda enters the overseer with both her knife and “her heart” and thereby engages with him emphatically. They share a life-force in this life-defining moment. Gomez positions the Girl/Gilda as an integral part of the overseer and, vice versa, the overseer as
integral to the Girl/Gilda, given that his body momentarily harbors her heart. She stabs him and, in doing so, does not necessarily delineate her resolute personhood, but rather completes the necessary exchange of inter-penetration and inter-subjectivity that the overseer’s earlier abuses postponed.

Gomez’s scene attempts to rectify the dynamics of spectatorship and penetration that have defined representations of enslaved black people. Saidiya Hartman has identified moments similar to the rape scene in *The Gilda Stories* as “scenes of subjection,” tools used in the writing of slavery that she considers especially troubling because,

> Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering… At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. (3-4)

Hartman contends that, rather than impress upon readers the gravity of enslavement, these scenes of black queer vulnerability often serve as means of “self-reflection” (4) and as mirrors in which readers gaze to realize and rejoice in their own supposed bodily resoluteness. I contend that Gomez’s scene works to articulate the “precariousness of empathy” when it comes to slavery—an articulation that is perhaps only feasible because the speculative fiction genre in which Gomez writes does not immediately signal realism.
and its attendant discourse of black (sexual) suffering. The Girl/Gilda demonstrates that empathy requires the spectator’s own compromised resoluteness to work effectively. Thus, she enters the overseer with her heart as “a wood-handled knife.”

Importantly, Gomez establishes the wood-handled knife as an inheritance from the Girl’s mother. In the following scene, the overseer approaches the Girl, who is half-asleep and hiding:

In the dream it remained what it was: danger. A white man wearing the clothes of an overseer. In the dream the Girl clutched tightly at her mother’s large black hand, praying the sound of the steps would stop, that she would wake up curled around her mother’s body on the straw and cornhusk mattress next to the big, old stove, grown cold with night. In sleep she clutched the hand of her mother, which turned into the warm, wooden handle of the knife she had stolen when she ran away the day before. It pulsed beneath her heart, beneath the rough shift that hung loosely from her thin, young frame. The knife, crushed into the cotton folds near her breast, was invisible to the red-faced man who stood laughing over her, pulling her by one leg from beneath the pile of hay. (9-10)

The Girl/Gilda dreams of holding her mother’s hand and feeling safe. In turn, her mother’s hand helps guide and even becomes the wood-handled knife with which the Girl/Gilda reveals the inter-subjective quality of racial distinctions. This knife can be read as what L.H. Stallings calls an “allegorical strap-on” (62), the obliquely-mentioned...
phallus that female characters in novels like William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) and slave narratives like *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860) assume when they use cross-dressing as a means to escape enslavement. The titular character of *Clotel*, for example, passes as a white man named Mr. Johnson in order to escape from slavery.\(^\text{15}\) Stallings reads “Mr. Johnson” as a euphemism for a penis and thereby suggests that the name is “a verbal appendage that can be removed and used again at Clotel’s whim” (66). Thus, the trope of the “allegorical strap-on” represents antebellum black theorizing of black queer gender and sexuality, according to Stallings. Brown in particular “exhibits a deep appreciation for the way that Clotel can shift her identity, a fluidity that stems from being a Black female, nonwoman subject” (Stallings 66). In *The Gilda Stories*, Gomez revisits the trope that Brown, Ellen Craft, and William Craft established by literalizing the allegorical strap-on as a physical knife the Girl/Gilda uses to enter her attacker. Gomez re-invigorates the trope by regarding the allegorical strap-on as a maternal legacy—a strategy of survival which countless black women used to, first, liberate themselves and, second, signify on and penetrate the very social systems of gender, race, and sexuality that enslaved them in the first place.

The very notion of a female phallus, or a maternally-inherited phallus, recalls late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century medical discourse that defined blackness as deviant in part by “locating racial difference through the sexual characteristics of the female body” (26), according to Siobhan Somerville, who explains that scientific racism likened a black female subject’s clitoris to a phallus. Gomez uses *The Gilda Stories* to
create a scenario in which this supposedly shameful deviance can be shamelessly re-imagined as a powerful means of liberation. In representing a gender-bending means of survival and liberation, and by positioning the Girl/Gilda’s “allegorical strap-on” as a maternal inheritance, Gomez questions the utility of gender-determined and gender-determining means of survival. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu finds that, in Corregidora, Beloved, and Dessa Rose, “[g]ender-blurring becomes … one of the most effective, and poignant, ways to demonstrate the inhumanity of slavery” (77). Oppositely, Gomez ponders the value of what Spillers calls the “neuter-bound” (78) status of black sexuality during slavery by attesting to the vulnerability inherent in any racialized identity. Furthermore, she conceives of black women as capable of penetration and thereby imagines a situation in which her black female character is neither “neutered” nor gendered normal. The Girl/Gilda’s freedom is established through an act which is neither gender-determined nor gender-determining; as such she emerges with an identity somewhat similar to that which Toni Morrison has conceptualized for enslaved black women: “not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound isolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (“What” 63). Importantly, however, the Girl/Gilda’s invented self does not depend upon the disavowals of maleness, whiteness, and ladyhood; rather it emerges from a space in which the inter-subjective imbrication of these identities is made plain.16

In addition to recalling Brown’s Clotel, Gomez’s scene also blends two scenes from the iconic slave narratives Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Jacobs wrote about having to endure sexual abuse and,
later, having to use her own sexuality as a means of obtaining her freedom in *Incidents* while Douglass wrote about physical, hand-to-hand confrontation with his overseer, Mr. Covey, as the means of his liberation. The Girl does both in the same scene. Reid-Pharr claims that “the Black American has utilized sex and sexuality as a means by which to ensure the survival of black individuals and communities to a *much* greater extent than he has utilized violent confrontation” (4), but Gomez theorizes how what we might call sexual survival mechanisms and violent confrontation were at times indistinguishable, especially for enslaved black women. The supposedly quiet, sexual survival mechanisms of Jacobs are usually gendered feminine in literary criticism while the violent confrontation of Douglass is gendered masculine. In combining the two gendered means of survival and liberation, and by providing the Girl with what one might call a maternal phallus, Gomez questions the utility of gender-determined and gender-determining means of survival. Accessing freedom, for both Jacobs and Douglass, necessitated the successful performance of, respectively, a feminine and masculine gender identity. That is, following the narrative logic of early black literary realism, personhood is established through the successful performance of either masculine or feminine gender. But the Girl accomplishes her freedom through an act which is dually gendered masculine and feminine; as such she emerges within *The Gilda Stories* as both man and woman. Gomez thus questions the narrative logic of antebellum black literary realism by positing the possibility of a human gendered as both masculine and feminine. Judith Butler asks, “[I]s there a gender that preexists its regulation, or is it the case that, in being subject to regulation, the gendered subject emerges, produced in and through that particular form of
subjection? Is subjection not the process by which regulations produce gender?” (41).

Following the regulations of black literary realism, the Girl’s gender and therefore personhood is produced as both masculine and feminine.17

Importantly, while Gomez positions gender indeterminacy as the means of the Girl/Gilda’s liberation, she also considers the difficulty of experiencing queer gender and sexuality. According to the narrative, there is no place in the world for the Girl/Gilda to go after she has “entered” the overseer in a moment of inter-subjectivity other than Woodard’s, a brothel run by two female vampires in an interracial sexual relationship—Gilda (the original, who later names the Girl after herself) and Bird. Gilda the original, an ancient, presumably white vampire, finds the Girl hiding in her cellar. Gilda the original’s dual masculine and feminine gender is immediately noted by the Girl, as she “wore men’s breeches and a heavy jacket” (13). The Girl is as curious about Gilda the original’s gender performance as she is the fact that Gilda the original can communicate with her telepathically. That is, the social monstrosity of vampires in The Gilda Stories hinges not only on the fact that they drink blood, can communicate without speaking, have superhuman strength, and live for ages, but also on their queer gender and sexual conditions. K.D. Patterson explains that, “Through her creation of Gilda [and the Girl], Gomez acknowledges how those whom the dominant society has marginalized are often labeled monstrous in the iconography of popular discourse” (36). Gomez considers “monstrousness” the social condition of vampires as well as the social condition of black people positioned as queer vis-à-vis white gender and sexual normalcy. Rather than regard social monstrousness as a condition to disavow, Gomez elucidates its liberatory
potential. The Girl/Gilda later clarifies the situation when describing to a friend that she, as a black woman, must dress as a man in order to travel long distances alone: “[E]ven in a small town just east of here… four times I met others just like me. I mean women dressed like boys. Just going around from place to place trying to live free” (66). “Trying to live free” for nineteenth-century black women like the Girl/Gilda requires experimentation with various gender performances, according to Gomez. In celebrating this resourcefulness rather than lamenting its necessity, Gomez—following Sherley Anne Williams—re-imagines slavery and its legacies in the nineteenth century as providing occasions for the expressions of radical black subjectivity and liberation rather than eliminating black heroism and love due to the queerness of enslaved black gender and sexuality.

The vampire novel’s convention of immortality allows Gomez to construct an individual—the Girl/Gilda—who lives through slavery, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, the Civil Rights era, the late twentieth century, and the twenty-first century. Thus, Gomez elucidates slavery’s lingering presence after Emancipation. As such, she participates along with other neo-slave narrative authors in “emphasiz[ing] the ways the past history of slavery intrudes upon the present with disturbing and dangerous consequences” (Spaulding 7). The Girl/Gilda tells a friend in 1921 Missouri, “The past does not lie down and decay like a dead animal… It waits for you to find it again and again” (126). Indeed, slavery re-occurs in The Gilda Stories by 2050. After vampires have publicly made their presence on earth known to humanity, they are systematically hunted. The Girl/Gilda compares this experience to her time as a fugitive slave:
Thoughts of the Hunters, armed with drugs and other weapons to ensnare her and her family, caused Gilda to shiver with the memory of her escape from the plantation. In unsuspecting moments she felt the bounty hunter’s hand on her childishly thin ankle as he dragged her from beneath the hay. Those who came now were more silent, more expert, but essentially the same. Their approach filled her with a familiar terror. […] This horror was slavery come again. (234-5)

Gomez re-stages what was once the hunt for a fleeing enslaved black girl into the hunt for another kind of social monster. As such, she points to how social conceptions of monstrosity—a condition defined through racializing discourses of queer gender and sexuality—continuously operate.

What queers the Girl/Gilda and her vampire family in 2050 is their conception of family as inter-subjective and inter-penetrative. By the end of the novel, the Girl/Gilda has decided to leave the United States with her family to escape the harassment and hunt of newly-made bounty hunters. This family includes, according to Miriam Jones, “two Black lesbians, a straight Black man, two gay white men, and a Native American lesbian” (165). Anthony—a gay male vampire whom Jones describes as white but who nevertheless has African ancestry—explains to the Girl/Gilda what vampires mean when they refer to “family”: “[T]o choose someone for your family is a great responsibility. It must be done not simply out of your own need or desire but rather because of a mutual need. We must search ourselves and the other to know if it is really essential. To do otherwise is a grave error, the result of which can only be tragedy” (69). The Girl/Gilda’s
vampire family is defined by their inter-penetrative “mutual need” of one another. The family is defined not by gender-determining obligations or race-determining bloodlines but through pronounced choice. Spillers explains the traditional use of the term “family”: “‘Family,’ as we practice and understand it ‘in the West’ [involves] the vertical transfer of bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of ‘cold cash,’ from fathers to sons and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of his choice” (270). That is, “family” implies a racialized bloodline through which “entitlements” are passed from one man to another, as well as a “supposedly free exchange of affectional ties” between a man and his chosen wife.\(^\text{18}\) When a particular grouping does not resemble this discourse—a discourse which serves to concretize the racialized consumption/”entitlement” of fathers and sons—it becomes threatening. As such, the Girl/Gilda’s practice of family has the potential to disrupt the policies of gender resoluteness that define the practice of family “in the West,” as Spillers puts it. Furthermore, the Girl/Gilda’s family exists with racial distinctions that are not hierarchical but, rather, cooperative. This conception of family dramatizes the sexualized inter-penetration and inter-subjectivity of racialization so completely as to warrant extinction from U.S. culture of the future, as represented by Gomez.

The end of Gomez’s novel can be read as in conversation with Harriet Jacobs’s final passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.\(^\text{19}\) Jacobs makes the connections between traditional conceptions of family, marriage, and bondage clear at the end of her narrative when she explains the means through which she and her children live free lives:
Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! … The dream of my life [though] is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than for my own. But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side. It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children. (315)

Significantly, it is not a male-female relationship or marriage that sustains Brent’s freedom. The first sentence quoted above opposes freedom and marriage, according to Angelyn Mitchell, and thereby “draws attention to the fact that nineteenth-century marriages were inequitable property relationships, much like slavery” (40). Instead, it is Brent’s relationship with Mrs. Bruce that sustains her freedom. Brent describes Bruce as “Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred” (315). However, this interracial, same-sex friendship is far from equal, as Jacobs continues to “serve” Bruce, the woman who helped secure funds for her freedom, and is “bound to her side.” This familial bind is the means through which Jacobs is liberated from one kind of enslavement, but it initiates her into another form of bondage. At the end of The Gilda Stories, Gomez rather romantically imagines a multi-racial, indeterminately-gendered family of social monsters—Anthony, his white partner Sorel, 222
Gilda’s one-time partners Effie and Julius, and the Native American Bird—who leave the United States together in search of a new home at Machu Picchu free from hunters and enslavement. Gilda says to Ermis, one of her family members, “You are not bound to me. Don’t feel obligated to take this journey if that’s not what you want” (246). Here, Gomez suggests that family can be yet another experience of enslavement if it is not practiced carefully. As Lynda Hall explains, “Gomez’s emphasis on ‘family’—on the individual’s ability to choose and ‘create’ the ‘family’—not only bypasses heterosexuality and often negates the male presence as a necessary and powerful ‘head’ of the family, but also takes agency in the ‘act’ itself—naming and claiming identity as a family without procreation [being] a necessary component” (401). The queer family is positioned as solace from slavery at the end of The Gilda Stories, not as its unfortunate effect. As such Gomez points to the chains still worn when humanity is accomplished through the successful performance of white-determined and white-determining gender and sexual roles. This queered version of black literary realism encourages the cultivation and expression of that which heretofore has seemed unreal and/or impossible.

**Conclusion: Contesting the Aesthetics of Black Literary Realism**

Delany and Gomez paint the process of racialization as a sexual schema that seemingly results in white gender and sexual resoluteness and black gender and sexual vulnerability. But rather than continuously posture racial identities against one another, Delany and Gomez advocate accepting the reality of their inter-penetration. As such, they represent gender, sexual, and racial resoluteness as a fantasy on which the damaging
systems of racism and enslavement depend. This resoluteness, while at times adopted by African Americans themselves, has most often been espoused by whites.

Both Delany and Gomez also conceive of ego-erasure as a foundational necessity for effectual anti-racist politics. However, given that black people in the United States have experienced queer vulnerability for centuries—and therefore in many cases already live this experience—the onus of action falls to white people who have obscured the reality of their own queer vulnerability. It is not surprising that straight white men are left out of the Girl/Gilda’s family at the end of The Gilda Stories given that the straight white male figure represents the height of racial and sexual invulnerability and resoluteness in U.S. culture. Gomez in particular suggests that such a figure—though not necessarily the actual body with whom he is associated—cannot play a role in liberation; indeed, his mythic existence is the fiction through which sexualized racial hierarchies function.20

Finally, Delany’s Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand and Gomez’s The Gilda Stories both question operating aesthetics of black literary realism that connote authenticity through the presentation of an appropriately-gendered black subject. Consequently, they both regard the will to authenticity within African American literature as one that binds purportedly free African Americans to the strictures of gender roles and appropriate sexual expressions. As such, they question black literary definitions of freedom that aim to control gender and sexual expression amongst African Americans, as well as those definitions of freedom that regard willfulness and subjection as oppositional, value-laden experiences of race. Read together, Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand and The Gilda Stories register gender and sexuality as the primary means
of experiencing slavery and the primary means of experiencing freedom. Enslavement controls gender and sexuality; freedom releases it from the bind of heteronormativity. Importantly, neither novel claims the label “realism” for itself. Instead, they position speculative fiction as the means through which radical black subjectivities can be hypothesized, explored, and expressed.

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Somerville, Siobhan. Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality


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1 I very consciously refer to “enslaved black people” as subject to sexual assault as opposed to “enslaved black women” in particular because of recent scholarship by Kathryn Bond Stockton and Darieck Scott that explores representations of enslaved black men as rape survivors in Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame and Extravagant Abjection,
respectively. These studies challenge an earlier critical approach to rape during slavery—an approach exemplified by Angela Davis when she writes in 1981’s *Women, Race, and Class* that enslaved “women suffered in different ways [from enslaved men], for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous treatment that could only be inflicted on women” (4). While it is true that only women could be terrorized through pregnancy, the work of Stockton and Scott points to the realities of sexual assault perpetrated against men.

2 This use of the term “queer” comes from David Halperin’s seminal queer theory text *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Halperin writes, “Unlike gay identity, which, though deliberately proclaimed in an act of affirmation, is nonetheless rooted in the positive fact of homosexual object-choice, queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality. As the very word implies, ‘queer’ does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. “Queer,” then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices” (62, emphasis Halperin’s). Black sexuality’s degraded status in relation to white sexuality’s normative reign thus queers antebellum black sexuality.

3 Siobhan Somerville argues that race also made sexual perversion and normalcy legible at the turn of the twentieth century, especially as it was represented in U.S. film, in *Queering the Color Line*. Julian Carter makes a similar point about whiteness and normalcy in his analysis of sex and marriage manuals from the early twentieth century in *The Heart of Whiteness*. And Valerie Rohy demonstrates how, in the late 1800s, “[t]heories of queer backwardness conceived what we now call homophobia in the image of racist discourses, particularly those concerned with Africans and African Americans” (ix) in *Anachronism and Its Others*.

4 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first defined “the politics of silence” in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” as “a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (Hammonds 143). In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” Darlene Clark Hine says the “culture of dissemblance” developed as “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (Hine qtd. in Hammonds 143). Recently, Candice Jenkins has used the work of Higginbotham, Hine, and Hammonds to argue that black women writers at the turn of the century represented black domestic and sexual propriety and normalcy as a means of
attaining political equality. She says that black women writers continuously respond to and frequently adhere to the rhetoric of the “salvific wish” (14), a conservative ethic which holds that African American citizenship and humanity is best demonstrated when black women police their (queer) sexual desires for the betterment of “the black community” as a whole.

I use the term “speculative fiction” in this article to refer to the genres of science fiction and fantasy specifically. Speculative fiction has for the most part been regarded as “paraliterary” writing (Delany, Shorter 204). While I am interested in black queer speculative fiction here, there is a sense in which all paraliterary writing is queer vis-à-vis literary writing, according to Delany. He says that, “Just as (discursively) homosexuality exists largely to delimit heterosexuality and to lend it a false sense of definition, paraliterature exists to delimit literature and provide it with an equally false sense of itself” (Shorter 205). Paraliterature, according to Delany, is the (sexualized) constitutive outsider to literature. Certain forms of writing—be it black-authored, speculative fiction, or both—are discursively positioned against others—white-authored, “realist,” or both—in order to define the latter group’s supposed beauty and superiority. Delany’s analogy between paraliterature and homosexuality is important given its suggestion that literary discourse both establishes and reflects divisions and identities found in U.S. culture generally.

There are exceptions to this trend. The late twentieth century, for example, saw a proliferation in the publication of black-authored speculative fiction. Delany’s 1960s relationship with the major science fiction publisher Ace Books can be considered the beginning of this surge. Delany published nine novels through Ace between 1962 and 1970. He published eight more science fiction novels through the major publisher Bantam—which specialized in mass market fiction—between 1968 and 1985, including 1984’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. Delany, along with Steven Barnes, Octavia E. Butler, John M. Faucette, Jewelle Gomez, and Charles R. Saunders, created a strong precedent for black-authored speculative fiction in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s that later writers like Tananarive Due, Andrea Hairston, and Nalo Hopkinson continue to use and expand upon. Delany and his cadre inherited a notable precedent for African American speculative fiction themselves from early-twentieth century writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and George S. Shuyler (see Sheree R. Thomas’s anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*).

For example, in a now infamous essay on black gay writer James Baldwin from *Soul on Ice* (1968), Cleaver attacked Baldwin and all black male homosexuals when he characterized them as “outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half white offspring of their dreams” (102). The image of black male homosexuals “already
touching their toes for the white man” positions black male homosexuality as willing, perverted subjection to white domination.

8 My intention here is not to critique the important work of Butler, Jones, Morrison, or Williams. Certainly, their re-imagining of enslaved people as invested in familial relationships—however traditional—has played an important role in the reassessment of enslaved people’s lives and legacies. Alternative and queer readings of each novel, however, can point out queer-positive theorizing of black gender and sexuality therein. For example, Guy Mark Foster’s “Re-Mapping Interracial Desire in Octavia Butler’s Kindred” argues that acknowledging the “mutual dependence of discourses of race and desire” (146) would allow critics to recognize Dana, the protagonist of Kindred, as queer. And Darieck Scott’s reading of Beloved in Extravagant Abjection suggests that Morrison’s aim is to “reopen… wounds, to begin a healing that can only be understood as an ongoing process—a healing that is that process rather than the end of process” (130). That is, according to Scott, Morrison insists that black queer vulnerability be remarked upon and explored rather than ignored or rigidified. My readings of Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand and The Gilda Stories serve to highlight Delany’s and Gomez’s much more pointed work to articulate a simultaneously queer-positive and liberatory black subjectivity. As such, I am interested in examining alternative and queer responses to the era of slavery.

9 Sheree R. Thomas makes a somewhat similar point when explaining the significance of science fiction to African Americans. She says that the speculative nature of science fiction has much in common with black vernacular storytelling traditions and spiritual practices: “Th[e] desire to alter one’s path, to understand how things have come to pass, is one of the most basic human impulses, and over the centuries it has inspired and informed much of our creative art forms, including our literature. Speculative fiction writers share this in common with diviners… Their work shares an affinity with these ancient traditions of divination in their desire to gaze into the future in order to anticipate developments,… to caution or offer counsel and direction, to identify and expose injustice, to heal, to protect” (1).

20 Mary Kay Bray makes a similar point in her reading of Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand. She says, “To understand the social and artifactual givens created in an SF world, readers must conceive the changes from the present world which would be necessary for the fictional one to exist and, in so doing, become more aware of what exists or lacks in the present” (153). Bray goes on to argue that, by having language operate differently in the novel than it does in our known world’s Standard English (gendered pronouns do not explain their referent’s gender identity but rather the referent’s sexual object choice), Delany questions what Standard English “lacks” when it comes to articulating sexual desires and identities.
Korga’s questions recall a passage from Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water* in which he recounts hearing the word “dyslexia,” a condition he experienced throughout his life, for the first time:

> Because, at the time [as a child], I had no word—dyslexia—for all this, the difficulty, embarrassment, and pain connected with writing could somehow be set aside, not spoken of… […] So much of what I had learned, what I had done, what I had searched out could be seen as silent, brutal compensation for this heretofore unnamed condition. What would have been the differences in me…if I’d grown up thinking of myself as having a learning disability from the beginning? Would I have become a writer? Would I have become a science fiction writer?

> What might the word have given me?

> What might it have taken away? (*Motion* 217)

Here, Delany contemplates the value of language for narrating one’s experience—particularly one’s experience with difficulty or trauma. Jeffrey A. Tucker reads this passage of *The Motion of Light in Water* as Delany’s argument about identity in general: “a discourse to be problematized, exploded, refracted, as well as a commonality that makes politics possible and life bearable and pleasurable” (*Sense* 155).

Other than those mentioned by Lavender, Tucker, and Fox, most readings of *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* do not consider Delany’s allusions to African American identity or to slavery in the United States. Rather, they focus on Delany’s postmodern investigation of words and their meanings—an investigation very similar to that of racialized people and their meanings—and they focus on the array of sexual configurations and identifications found in the novel. See Mary Kay Bray’s “To See What Condition Our Condition is In” and Martha A. Bartter’s “The (SF) Reader and the Quantum Paradigm” for explorations of Delany’s postmodern investigations into language. See Earl Jackson, Jr.’s “Imagining It Otherwise” and Russell Blackford’s “Debased and Lascivious?” for explorations into how Delany’s play with language systems coincides with his critique of heteronormativity.

For a sustained investigation into the ways in which *The Gilda Stories* deviates from earlier vampire literature, see Miriam Jones’s “*The Gilda Stories*: Revealing the Monsters at the Margins.”

See John Ernest’s *Chaotic Justice* and Frances Smith Foster’s *Written by Herself* for examinations of antebellum slave narratives and their often complicated appeals to white-recognized humanity.

Clotel does not successfully escape from slavery. She kills herself by jumping into a river rather than be captured. As such, one could say that Brown entertains the idea that transgenderedness can lead to liberation, but he ultimately suggests otherwise.
Shannon Winnubst argues that the vampires’ sharing of blood in *The Gilda Stories* further attests to the inter-subjective imbrications of identity categories often posited as distinct. She sees their inter-subjective imbrication represented in the fluidity of blood: “To be a body-in-control, it must be tightly sealed—rigidly separated, distinctly individual, and straightly impermeable. A metaphysics of solid is integral to its survival as a participant in the universal… And yet it is fluids that it contains—soft, gooey, sticky fluids circulate through this body’s veins and cavities. And so, as yet another disavowed dependency, it is the control and containing of these fluids … that this tightly-sealed body must contain” (6). Winnubst also links the fear of mixed fluids explored in *The Gilda Stories* to fear of HIV and AIDS, as well as the tendency to associate the AIDS crisis with gay and/or black people: “[V]ampires haunt this body, this white phallic symbolic that saturates our cultural scenes. We see it in our continuing fear of infected blood” (15). While Gomez only obliquely gestures to the realities of AIDS in her novel, Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint—whom I consider in Chapter 4—directly address AIDS and argue that one way to combat the AIDS crisis is through more sex, affection, care, and love amongst black (gay) men rather than a rigidifying of the body’s imagined “solidity.”

As such, the Girl becomes one of many heroic figures imagined in the vein of Joanna Russ’s Joanna from the lesbian feminist science fiction novel *The Female Man* (1975), a science fiction classic that questions gender-bound definitions of humanity.

Gomez’s conception of choice in the idea of family distinguishes her novel from Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, in which Dana feels bound to Rufus because he (believes himself to be) her master and his ancestor. Ashraf Rushdy, in his reading of *Kindred*, deems it a novel about the fact that “family is something we inherit, affirm, or even escape, but it is not something whose history we can remake according to our desires. A family is a family, after all, by virtue of its blood ties and its legal records” (“Families” 142). Rushdy conceives of choice and desire as inherently separate from family, particularly when working within a legal context. Unconcerned with legal definitions of family, Gomez’s novel reveals how sexual desires and racial families are mutually constitutive forces, with desire operating as a primary force in the on-going enunciation of familial ties.

In *The Freedom to Remember*, Mitchell considers all women-authored neo-slave narratives as in conversation with *Incidents* because “[t]he same feminist concerns and issues, themes and issues … encapsulate the polemics for Black women that have been constant from the time of chattel slavery to the present day” (16).

I arrive at this conclusion with some hesitation, as does *The Gilda Stories* itself, in a way. Though I am unaware of specific changes in the text suggested by Firebrand Books to Gomez, it is possible—given the history of white publishers’ influence on black-authored texts, as surveyed in John K. Young’s *Black Writers, White Publishers*—that
the novel’s romantic ending, which effectively exonerates contemporary white LGBT readers from taking responsibility for the legacies of slavery, was forced—if not directly than by virtue of the venue in which Gomez published. The vision of multiracial queer solidarity presented at the end of The Gilda Stories is certainly challenged by Lorde’s commentary on the racism of lesbian publishing explained in Chapter 2, as well as the non-fiction of Essex Hemphill that addresses racism in white gay communities discussed in the introduction and mentioned in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4. Embodying Black Gay Poetry: The Cinematic Corporeality of Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint

This dissertation has examined several genres used by black LGBT writers of the 1980s, including Alice Walker’s epistolary novel *The Color Purple*, the life-writing of Audre Lorde (*Zami*, a “biomythography”) and Samuel Delany (*The Motion of Light in Water*, a “genre crosser … between criticism and memoir”), Delany’s science fiction novel *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, and Jewelle Gomez’s vampire novel *The Gilda Stories*. Each text responds to the compulsion of what Gene Andrew Jarrett calls “racial realism” within the African American literary tradition. Walker used the conventions of realism to critique the politics of black pride and to offer the politics of black shamelessness as a corrective to it. Rather than use realist conventions to queer portraits of black literary reality, Lorde and Delany created autobiographical texts foregrounding their subjects’ unreal, legendary qualities over their racial representativeness. They, too, cultivated a sense of black shamelessness in their texts by narrating the details of their same-sex experiences without apology. Lorde in particular celebrated female same-sex desire as a maternal inheritance and thereby shamelessly embraced the usually politically-conservative narrative of queer black matriarchy. Similarly, Gomez celebrated transgender liberation strategies as a maternal inheritance. Along with Delany, Gomez wrote speculative fiction to suspend the literary expectations of black realism, race, and sexuality. Their work with fantasy and science fiction provides
a space for challenging assumptions about realism’s privileged ability to represent race and sexuality rather than a space for reifying it. Their work also provides means of valuing sexual queerness despite the fact that queer vulnerability and “genderlessness” were conditions imposed upon enslaved people during the antebellum era.

This dissertation has simultaneously attended to 1980s black LGBT writers’ publication venues, finding that publication venue along with genre determine the extent to which African American writers can queer the boundaries of black literature and blackness in general. Walker’s engagement with the major publishing industry occasioned a large, receptive audience for The Color Purple but also a significant audience suspicious of her use of black literary realism for a queer project. Delany’s engagement with major science fiction presses also afforded his work a large audience but, especially in the case of The Motion of Light in Water, these presses packaged his book using the familiar hallmarks of racial realism, including images of the isolated and uniquely-capable black writer who works alone to document the tragedies of his race. Lorde’s relationships with independent black and LGBT presses allowed for greater experimentation in terms of the packaging of Zami, paratextual experimentation which resonated with the work Lorde does within Zami itself to trouble the text’s status as representative of black lesbian experience generally. Similarly, Gomez’s relationship with independent LGBT presses meant her vampire novel was primarily marketed as a black lesbian text rather than a fantasy text. This strategy confronted expectations of racial realism that white LGBT readers might bring to any given black-authored text.
This last chapter of my dissertation considers the performances of Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint in the films of Marlon Riggs. Both writers appear as interview subjects and performance poets in Riggs’s movies about the experiences of black gay men in the United States. Hemphill’s appearance in Tongues Untied (1988) and Saint’s appearance in “Non, je ne regrette rien” = No Regret (1991) allowed two writers who had previously self-published their material with limited circulation to distribute their ideas to Riggs’s broader audience. Furthermore, Hemphill’s and Saint’s engagement with performance allowed them to indirectly critique the written, often normative archive of African American experience and reality. Analyzing Hemphill’s and Saint’s cinematic performances allows Black Shamelessness to move away from books—the traditional products of literary distribution—in order to examine what film and independent film-based distribution offered to Hemphill and Saint, two black gay poets looking for ways to archive their bodies and provide outspoken and shameless insight into the experiences of black gay men living with AIDS. This chapter continues Black Shamelessness’s meditation on the issues of vulnerability, safety, protection, and shielding as they manifest in discourses of black sexuality. By focusing on the realities of HIV and AIDS, I elucidate a way of valuing shamelessness and vulnerability while, simultaneously, valuing bodily preservation and health.

I begin by explaining moments of black gay visibility within mainstream U.S. political discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s that were occasioned by the AIDS crisis. I find that U.S. political discourse regarded black gay men as a particularly burdensome population draining the country of its resources. I then argue that the work of
Hemphill and Saint offers a different narrative about support, caretaker networks, and family for black men living with AIDS. Hemphill and Saint repeatedly represent other black gay men and/or people with AIDS, not the national government, as their primary support network. Simultaneously, I consider how their appearances in Riggs’s films affected Hemphill’s and Saint’s receptions as writers. Thus, I continue this dissertation’s investigation into the “packaging” of black LGBT subjects in literary discourse. I find that Hemphill’s and Saint’s appearances impressed upon their audiences an urgent concern with materiality and the body—a concern that poststructuralist approaches to literature especially popular during the 1980s often foreclosed. The chapter reads Hemphill’s and Saint’s insistence on documenting and explaining their materiality through performance as a critical engagement with the discourse of racial realism. Like Walker, they strategically used realism to queer the predominant vision of black reality. Unlike Walker and similar to Lorde, Delany, and Gomez, they challenged the presumption that black reality can be definitively accessed through an archive of books and writing. Hemphill and Saint both emphasize the body and performance as critical sites of knowledge about the realities of race and sexuality.

The AIDS Crisis and the Idea of a Black Gay Burden

For the majority of the 1980s, black LGBT experiences were not directly addressed in U.S. political discourse, as noted in this dissertation’s introduction. Between 1989 and 1992, however, the experiences of black LGBT people, especially black gay
men, had registered on the national political radar to some extent due to growing awareness of and questions about the AIDS crisis. Writing in 1993, Kobena Mercer said

[W]e have been involved in a process of ‘making ourselves visible’ and ‘finding a voice.’ Through activism and political organization, from large-scale international conferences to small-scale consciousness-raising groups, black lesbians and gay men have come out of the margins into the center of political visibility. One need only point to the AIDS crisis—or more specifically the crisis of indifference and neglect in the official public health policies of countries such as Britain and the United States—to recognize that our lives are at the center of contemporary politics. (238)

Mercer attributed the movement of black LGBT people from the invisibility of the margins to the hyper-visible “center of contemporary politics” to black-led activism and political organization around the AIDS crisis. First recognized as such in 1981, AIDS in the United States was primarily associated with men who have sex with men. In fact, early on the disease was known as “GRID,” or “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.” Throughout the 1980s, African American men were disproportionately affected by AIDS in the United States, according to Philip Brian Harper, who explains that “195,718 people in the United States were diagnosed as having [AIDS]” between June 1981 and October 1991; “[o]f that number, 44,330—or roughly 23 percent—occurred in males of African descent, although black males account[ed] for less than 6 percent of the total U.S. population” at the time (3). Thus, the AIDS crisis in the United States disproportionately impacted black men and, as black gay writing of the 1980s frequently attests, black gay
men. Harper charges the U.S. government as partly responsible for this disproportionate impact, given that during the 1980s it was unwilling to fund studies that would seriously explore the causes and prevention of HIV and AIDS. Harper also explains that, when the AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns that did exist managed to “trickle down” to black communities, they were frequently unclear and only obliquely discussed the realities of sexual practice (3-5). As a result of the conspicuous lack of governmental resources and time devoted to the prevention of and education about AIDS in black communities, stories about the government deviously planting AIDS in black communities developed, according to Patricia A. Turner.²

In addition to ignoring the disproportionate impact of AIDS on black (gay) communities, government officials repeatedly attacked art that explored the realities of AIDS in black gay communities. For example, in 1992 presidential candidate Pat Buchanan illegally used clips from Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* in television spots supporting his candidacy. Riggs’s documentary, produced in part with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), explores the vernacular traditions of black gay men, the complexities of living as a black gay man with AIDS, and—perhaps most famously—the revolutionary potential of black men loving black men. Ironically, Buchanan cited *Tongues Untied* as an example of the supposed moral depravity that was funded by the administration of his Republican primary opponent, George H.W. Bush, who was certainly no ally to black gay men. *Tongues Untied* was also protested by North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, who lobbied for Congress to end NEA support of Riggs’s work. Various Christian fundamentalist groups also objected to a 1990 national television
broadcast of *Tongues Untied* on PBS. Buchanan, Helms, and the Christian fundamentalist groups complained that Riggs, a black gay artist, was draining the country of economic resources that would best be spent on “moral,” non-black, non-gay causes. Their protests suggested that black gay men received an unfair and unwarranted amount of funding and support from the government. In reality, black gay communities and the growing crisis of AIDS within them were largely underfunded by the government throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The extreme lack of funding devoted to research and prevention campaigns about AIDS and HIV meant that high-risk groups like black gay men by and large did not receive much-needed governmental resources.

The protests of Buchanan, Helms, and Christian fundamentalist groups also claimed the trauma of AIDS as their own. They argued that, by funding a black gay project, the NEA was imposing a vision of moral depravity onto the nation. The protests suggested that the trauma associated with AIDS is primarily experienced by taxpayers required to fund projects on its expression, cure, and prevention rather than those actually living with it. Speaking in a different context, Jacqueline Goldsby has explained black racial trauma in the United States as an on-going result of white refusal to acknowledge the histories and realities of inequality, enslavement, violence, bias, and insult affecting African Americans. She writes, “the refusal by power in all its forms—the state, its agencies, and its ideal (white) citizen-subjects—to sanction the social woundings that racial subjects experience as ‘real’ is the defining problematic of racial trauma” (180). The continuous refusal on behalf of agencies of power to acknowledge racism—notwithstanding the NEA—traumatizes those subjects whose wounds of racism are
deemed non-existent. The AIDS crisis occasioned yet another experience of this racial trauma.

Nevertheless, an unprecedented number of black gay male writers in the United States published and performed work explicitly or indirectly addressing AIDS in black gay communities during the 1980s and early 1990s. The late-twentieth-century writing of Stevin Corbin, Delany, Melvin Dixon, Hemphill, Randall Keenan, and Saint frequently demonstrates that racism and homophobia contribute to the trauma associated with AIDS.3 African American gay men wrote about their experiences and perspectives in part to cultivate discussion amongst black gay communities about AIDS. Hemphill and Saint specifically contested the political narrative that suggested black gay men with AIDS were a national economic burden. They framed the trauma of AIDS as their own by demonstrating that black gay communities and other people with AIDS, as opposed to conservative political figures and policy-makers, helped alleviate and exorcise the burdens endemic to being a black gay man with AIDS in the United States.

The rhetoric that regarded black gay men with AIDS as a national burden mimicked the rhetoric discussed in the introduction that regarded all black sexuality as burdensome. Conservative concern that black gay men with AIDS strained the nation economically built off the imagined image of a “welfare queen” who also drained the country of its resources. In his 1977 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan warned voters of an imagined African American woman who “has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got
Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over $150,000” (“Welfare” 51). The Reagan administration created an atmosphere in which all black sexuality was considered deviant and vampiric—be it the homosexuality of filmmaker Riggs or the heterosexuality of the imagined welfare queen. Cathy Cohen has explained that the image of the “welfare queen” is proof of “the numerous ways that sexuality and sexual deviance from a prescribed norm have been used to demonize and to oppress various segments of the population, even some classified under the label ‘heterosexual’” (42). Cohen points to the unstated, illusory, and vague norm of white domesticity and heterosexuality against which narratives of black sexuality emerged in 1980s and 1990s political rhetoric and against which black sexuality by and large was positioned as queer.

Conscious of the fact that conservative rhetoric demonized black sexuality in general, and black homosexuality specifically, Riggs reflected on the controversy surrounding Tongues Untied in 1991. He wrote, “The vice squad of American culture was once again on the attack. After being rebuffed in their attempts to ban the homoerotic images of Robert Mapplethorpe and then the Todd Haynes film Poison, and after suffering embarrassing defeat in the ‘anti-obscenity’ court case against the black rap group 2 Live Crew, America’s self-appointed media watchdogs regrouped and found another, seemingly perfect target: my experimental documentary” (“Tongues re-tied?” 1). Helms and others had attacked African American and gay artists in the past.4 Throughout the 1980s, black- or LGBT-authored public expressions of sexuality were highly persecuted and worried over by politicians and policy-makers. Tongues Untied in

245
particular may have been the “perfect target” for conservative politicians because, to quote Riggs, “[a]mong these would-be guardians of American culture, sexuality as such remains taboo. Black heterosexuality is shrouded by even deeper layers of silence and aversion. And black homosexuality, the triple taboo, equates in their minds with an unspeakable obscenity” (5). By the early 1990s, conservative politicians began to position black homosexuality as a cipher of racial and sexual obscenity and shame. Black sexuality in general and (white) homosexuality were demonized as queer; the furor over Tongues Untied’s national broadcast, like the earlier backlash against The Color Purple, demonstrates the extreme hostility that black homosexual artistic expression occasioned during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Given the hostility with which the majority of black gay-authored art was received throughout the 1980s, it is not surprising that Hemphill and Saint relied on themselves and other black gay men rather than the major publishing industry to circulate their work. This reality demonstrates that black gay artists of late twentieth century were frequently self-reliant rather than assisted by major corporations or the government. Hemphill and Saint helped to cultivate an artistic community needed to sustain and preserve their work, including the performances of their HIV-positive bodies. The rest of this chapter considers their choice to use cinematic venues for their work as an important statement about the limits of the literary marketplace. Independent film provided Hemphill and Saint the means to reach a widespread black gay audience and to simultaneously preserve and document their bodily materiality in a way the traditional products of literary distribution could not. Their work brings this dissertation back to the
possibilities of racial realism explored in Chapter 1’s analysis of *The Color Purple*. Hemphill and Saint did not avoid racial realism as Delany, Gomez, and Lorde did; however, they did complicate Walker’s version of racial realism by engaging with a form that enunciated their bodily materiality. Hemphill and Saint seized the benefits of racial realism and racial documentary in order to draw attention to the crisis of AIDS in black gay communities.

**Essex Hemphill and Black Gay Performance Poetry**

Before appearing in Riggs’s films in 1989 and 1991, respectively, both Hemphill and Saint had early 1980s careers as performance poets. The emergence of performance poetry was partially informed by the 1960s and 1970s poetry of Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and other Black Arts Movement poets, as well as Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). Black performance poetry as a particular genre built in part off of Baraka’s 1969 call for “‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns” (1943) in his poem “Black Art.” Baraka and others advocated material change to structures of inequality in the United States, often using imagery of weapons and violence as metonym for the forces needed to reform the economy, establish community assistance programs, and even alter the self-presentation of African Americans.

Hemphill’s work adds a concern with queer sexual practice to the Black Arts Movement’s interest in materiality and material change. He celebrates homosexual practice in particular as an important means of black men caring for one another.
Beginning in the mid-1980s, Hemphill self-published the chapbooks *Earth Life* (1985) and *Conditions* (1986) and also contributed work to Joseph Beam’s *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986) and to his own *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991). Hemphill was also the co-founder of Cinque, “a performance poetry group that combined cutting-edge political verse, vivid imagery about Black gay life, and tightly woven harmonies” (Beemyn 4). Hemphill’s self-published volumes and his work with Cinque introduced him to Riggs (Beemyn 5) and resulted in his appearance in *Tongues Untied*. Hemphill’s work as a poet, performer, and narrator went on to appear in Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989), a short documentary on black gay men and transgender women of Washington D.C. called *Out of the Shadows* (1990), and Riggs’s *Black Is… Black Ain’t* (1992). Hemphill came to major prominence with the publication of his first and only volume by a major press, Plume/Penguin’s *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (1992), which won the American Library Association’s Gay and Lesbian Book Award in Literature (Beemyn 8). Riggs’s films in particular document Hemphill’s performance pieces as searing and sensual meditations on black gay experiences.

When read outside of a performance context, Hemphill’s work nevertheless emphasizes the importance of the body in the material world. In particular, Hemphill represents black men’s physical love and care for one another as one potential balm to the wounds of racism. “For My Own Protection” (1985), for example, imagines a network of black men caring for one another in the face of governmental disdain. Hemphill cultivates a vision of black gay self-reliance as a corrective to national carelessness regarding the plight of black gay men with AIDS, writing:
I want to start
an organization
to save my life.
If whales, snails,
dogs, cats,
Chrysler, and Nixon
can be saved,
the lives of Black men
are priceless
and can be saved.
We should be able
to save each other. (1-12)

Hemphill attests to the significant amount of resources devoted to causes he deems
insignificant. However, the need for an organization to save black men suggests there are
no resources devoted to this “priceless” group. Hemphill makes clear in the last lines of
the poem that an element of the love he advocates black men share is sexual:

If a human chain
can be formed
around missile sites,
then surely Black men
can form human chains
around Anacostia, Harlem,
Hemphill imagines a “human chain” of black men touching each other as protection against racism, including the heterosexism that undergirds racism. Hemphill suggests that such physical and sexual affection could prohibit hatred from entering various black communities around the world—“Harlem, / South Africa”—and from entering other sites of significant political and cultural power—“Wall Street, / Hollywood.” And finally, perhaps most importantly, Hemphill views black male love for black men as prevention against hatred subsuming “each other.” This vision of queer sexuality offering “protection” and safety counters the logic of the politics of black pride and the rhetoric of the salvific wish detailed in the introduction and Chapter 1 of this dissertation. According to Hemphill, the open expression of love and sexual affection amongst black men can actually shield black communities from harm, including the harm of self-hatred. The book cover to Ceremonies represents just such a “human chain.” There, Hemphill is photographed not alone, as are most other writers who publish a book of collected writing, but with a black male companion embracing him from behind with his arm over Hemphill’s shoulder. Because Hemphill repeatedly demonstrates black gay men as each other’s primary support system, his work also challenges the conservative political narratives that argued the government was subsidizing a shiftless group of sexual monsters in supporting Riggs’s film.

Hemphill’s commitment to the idea of black same-sex male love’s political and personal utility challenges ideals of black masculinity that prohibit affection, sexual or
otherwise, between black men. Thus Hemphill’s work critiques what E. Patrick Johnson calls “the politics of hegemonic blackness” (51) and explains as follows,

The representation of effeminate homosexuality as disempowering is at the heart of the politics of hegemonic blackness. For to be ineffectual is the most damaging thing one can be in the fight against oppression. Insofar as ineffectiveness is problematically sutured to femininity and homosexuality…, it follows that the subjects accorded these attributes would be marginalized and excluded from the boundaries of blackness.

(51)

That is, the politics of hegemonic blackness often deride femininity and homosexuality for their perceived vulnerability and, therefore, perceived inability to effect social and/or political change regarding racism. As a result, femininity and homosexuality are regarded as inauthentically black. Hemphill’s poetry suggests the opposite, finding that black men “sav[ing] each other” includes the possibility of caring for and satisfying each other sexually, which in turn can be a powerful foundational act of anti-racist politics. For Hemphill, the reality that same-sex relationships sustain and nurture the lives of many black men is one that must be openly addressed. As he says in a now-iconic paragraph from his essay “Loyalty,” “It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can’t become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal” (64). Hemphill emphasizes the importance of honest acknowledgement
of black male homosexuality and the power it has in sustaining countless black men’s lives. Furthermore, he critiques an archive of African American history that has ignored the “ass-splitting truth” of its luminaries, or information about their (queer) sexual practices and performances. Hemphill conceives of those untold experiences as important sources of knowledge about black sexual experience. His emphasis on the body’s practices may be read as an emphasis on bodily performance— in particular bodily performance as a site of knowledge comparable to the written word. Re-conceptualizing bodily performance as a source of information is especially important when considering the histories of people marginalized as queer, given that access to literacy and publication have often been reserved for normative populations. As Diana Taylor notes, “If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity” (xvii). Hemphill calls for information that would reify the exclusions of African American realism and the archives of African American experience. Furthermore, Hemphill suggests that, in order for the archives of black realism to receive this queer information, they must assume an open vulnerability rather than resolve their bodily boundaries—a resolve advocated by the politics of hegemonic blackness and the politics of pride associated with the Black Arts Movement.

While Hemphill amends the politics of pride in his poetry, he nevertheless uses the authenticating conventions of Black Arts Movement poetry by imploring readers to sustain community through violence if necessary. His poem “When My Brother Fell” (1991) remarks on the 1988 AIDS-related death of Joseph Beam, the writer and editor
responsible for the black gay anthologies *In the Life* (1989) and *Brother to Brother* (1991). The poem begins,

> When my brother fell
> I picked up his weapons
> and never once questioned
> whether I could carry
> the weight and grief,
> the responsibility he shouldered.
> I never questioned
> whether I could aim
> or be as precise as he.
> He had fallen,
> and the passing ceremonies
> marking his death
> did not stop the war. (31)

Hemphill presents a portrait of black gay men “shouldering” one another’s responsibilities unflinchingly. He responds to a sense of black gay artists’ shared struggle and strain by immediately “pick[ing] up [Beam’s] weapons.” The poem goes on to critique the impulse behind the NAMES Project Aids Memorial Quilt, which was first displayed on the National Mall in 1987. Hemphill regards the quilt’s presentation on the National Mall as a way of letting the government off the hook when it comes to AIDS. The quilt’s status as memorial suggested that the AIDS crisis was over; its presentation
on the National Mall suggested the government was actually supportive of communities most at risk for AIDS. Hemphill writes,

When I stand
on the front lines now,
cussing the lack of truth,
the absence of willful change
and strategic coalitions,
I realize sewing quilts
will not bring you back
nor save us.

[...]
It’s too soon
to make monuments
for all we are losing,
for the lack of truth
as to why we are dying,
who wants us dead,
what purpose does it serve? (32-33)

Hemphill refers to stories about AIDS being planted in black communities (“who wants us dead?”). If not planted, then certainly AIDS was allowed to grow, he suggests. His declaration that “It’s too soon / to make monuments” echoes the optimism of “For My
Own Protection.” Hemphill asks that black gay men with AIDS regard themselves as alive and worthy of saving rather than as lost causes. He concludes the poem saying,

When my brother fell
I picked up his weapons….
A needle and thread
were not among
his things
I found. (34-42)

Hemphill’s concern with “weapons” links his poetry to that of Baraka and Giovanni, who in various poems write of the needs for direct protest and violence, not the passivity associated with silent poetry and art, to end racism in the United States. In “For Saundra” (1968), Giovanni ponders,

maybe I shouldn’t write
at all
but clean my gun
and check my kerosene supply
perhaps these are not poetic
times
at all (2097)

Like Baraka, Giovanni questions the utility of art as a means of challenging material inequalities. By exploring the need for material change in writing, however, both Baraka and Giovanni implicitly affirm the power of art as a space of intraracial dialogue and
political exploration. However, they also explicitly call for writing that demonstrates a serious commitment to the need for a shift in material circumstances.\(^\text{10}\) By continuing the Black Arts Movement’s exploration of violence as material force in poetry, Hemphill appropriates the rhetoric of black authenticity associated with the movement. However, he also queers this rhetoric by associating it with gay men. He thus “disidentifies” with the realism and authenticity espoused in Black Arts Movement poetry. José Esteban Muñoz writes of the process of “disidentification” as a strategy of identification especially useful to queer people of color who may feel hailed by some aspects of a political philosophy like black pride but may feel slighted, erased, or attacked by others: “Disidentification offers a [black pride], for that queer and lesbian reader, [that] would not be sanitized: instead, [its] homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while [its] anticolonial [and anti-racist] discourse engaged as a still valuable yet mediated identification” (9). Hemphill’s disidentification with the politics of black pride and authenticity represents a different version of resistance to racialized heterosexism than what is seen in the speculative fiction of Samuel Delany and Jewelle Gomez, wherein the politics of realism and authenticity are assessed as entirely unhelpful to anti-racist practice.

Hemphill’s concern with bodily homosexual acts, like the Black Arts Movement’s concern with materiality, does not align with the major approach to African American literary studies of the 1980s, as described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

Ultimately, black literature is a verbal art like other verbal arts.

“Blackness” is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not
have an “essence” as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity. Even the slave narratives offer the text as a world, as a system of signs. The black writer is the point of consciousness of his language. If he does embody a “Black Aesthetic,” then it can be measured not by “content,” but by a complex structure of meanings. The correspondence of content between a writer and his world is less significant to literary criticism than is a correspondence of organization and structure… (162, emphasis mine)

Here Gates, in 1979’s “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext,” offers an approach to African American literature that defined 1980s African Americanist literary criticism, notwithstanding some important rejections (Christian 280; Joyce 290). Gates finds a verbal, written text to be its own “world” with its own unique “system of signs.” Within that world, “Blackness” operates not as a “material object” with an existence beyond this verbal world; rather “Blackness” operates as “metaphor” contained within the written, verbal text. For Gates, it follows that the relationship between “a writer and his world” is not as important to literary criticism as is the relationship between signs within the writer’s self-created discursive world. Gates explains the reason for his approach as follows:

The tendency toward a thematic criticism [Gates’s term for the majority of African American literary criticism pre-1979] implies a marked inferiority complex: Afraid that our literature cannot sustain sophisticated verbal analysis, we view it from the surface merely and treat it as if it were a
Chinese lantern with an elaborately wrought surface, parchment-thin but full of hot air. Black critics have enjoyed such freedom in their ‘discipline’ that we find ourselves with no discipline at all. (162)

Gates finds African American literary criticism pre-1979 to be superficial, an unfortunate legacy of white critics’ understanding of black literature, beginning with eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives, as “mere” historical documentation and/or sociology. In contrast, he defines his approach as rigorous and penetrating in its post-structuralist focus on the ways in which signs define one another within a given text.

Gates’s desire for a shift in the critical approach to black literature in 1979 is understandable given the racist history of understanding African American literary productions as unsophisticated historical documentation. Still, the language he uses in his recommendation is telling of a concern with academic propriety as defined by heterosexist, white literary studies: “Black critics have enjoyed such freedom in their ‘discipline’ that we find ourselves with no discipline at all.” Gates offers this statement in the midst of American universities’ founding of African American studies departments (Johnson and Henderson 1)—obviously a time when African American literary studies needed to demonstrate its disciplinarity. But, as Roderick Ferguson notes, black disciplinarity often entails heterosexist gender and sexual regulation. He explains that African American studies is “one domain of sexuality and indeed a discourse of sexuality itself” (“Of Our” 88). Finding the foundation of black education in the United States in “normal schools” (91), Ferguson suggests that the black middle class, a product of such schools, hoped to “inherit modernity by adhering to gender and sexual propriety” (92). If
an individual could govern her/himself morally—if s/he could adhere to gender and sexual propriety—it followed s/he could govern or participate in the workings of the state, with gender and sexual propriety seen as a precondition for such governing capability (Ferguson 94). Indeed, racial agency itself derives from this ability to be proper in terms of sex and gender (Ferguson 95), hence the reason that the politics of hegemonic blackness necessitate the disavowal and elimination of homosexuality and femininity from representations of black communities. The authority of the communities—and, in extension, of the disciplinarity of African American studies—depends upon such disavowal. That is, the aberrant, queer black body must be disciplined and regulated—to the point, for some bodies, of complete erasure—if African American studies, African American literary criticism specifically, is to be productive and respected.

Hemphill makes an important intervention into 1980s African American literary criticism. His representations of black male bodies embracing refer to a world beyond the verbal, written text, for Hemphill’s work is concerned with the “ass-splitting truth” of bodies and their actions in the material world. My claim about Hemphill’s concern with the material is further supported when considering his sustained engagement with performance and film. As a result, Hemphill’s legacy is both discursive and material. Examining Hemphill’s work requires a black queer reading practice that responds not only to a writer’s verbal “world” but also to his body as it moves through the material world.11 Hemphill’s work requires consideration of his body and his words simultaneously and in effect revises Gates’s frequently-adopted prescription for verbal-
only analysis of black literature that dominated late twentieth century African Americanist criticism. Hemphill’s presence in *Tongues Untied* specifically offers a vision of African American literature that challenges the process by which it has been canonized—namely, a process that frequently ignores or tries to reform how a writer uses her/his body, especially when that body is put to homosexual use. Hemphill’s legacy requires that attention be paid to both his body and his words and in effect requires analysis of a writer’s bodily (and therefore sexual) processes. Such an emphasis on the material is a way of safeguarding against the ways in which African American literary studies has often expurgated same-sex desire from the critical discussions of many same-sex desiring writers.

My analysis of Hemphill’s cinematic performances regards film as an aesthetic form, an epistemological form, and a means of distribution for performance, yet another aesthetic and epistemological form. Film has been an important resource for African American writers since the early 1900s. According to Wheeler Dixon and Gwendolyn Foster, “Zora Neale Hurston … studied anthropology and subsequently made a series of experimental documentary films on the lives of African-Americans. Her films [like her written ethnographic work] break the rules of observational documentary as she interacts with her subjects as a coparticipant” (15). Hurston’s approach informs Riggs’s films, as he frequently appears in them as a “coparticipant” with his subjects. Hemphill, too, draws on Hurston’s legacy by seizing film as a tool to expand the work (and audience) of his writing. Furthermore, there is a history of black queer male writers engaging with film, according to David Gerstner, who argues that “the cinematic” has been a crucial means of
production and aesthetic sensibility for writers like Richard Bruce Nugent and James Baldwin. Gerstner defines a black queer cinematic sensibility as defined by the black queer artist’s “investigation of the look: to look, to be looked at, to be looked down on, to look back at, and to look outward” (15-16). According to Gerstner, artists Nugent, Baldwin and also Riggs “turn[ed] to the cinematic to mark the queer black look in relation to the ideological possibilities that inform the contours of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and death” (16). Black queer writers have used and written about film in order to draw attention to issues of spectatorship and audience that repeatedly manifest in the discourse of racialized heteronormativity and the discourse of racial realism.12

The issues of bodily materiality and spectatorship are explored on the cover of Tongues Untied’s 2008 Frameline DVD release. There, a shirtless Hemphill appears with a shirtless Riggs. Hemphill embraces Riggs from behind and hangs his right arm over Riggs’s right shoulder. Hemphill clenches his fists and the two men give stern looks to the camera. The cover of the film resembles the cover to Hemphill’s 1992 Plume edition of Ceremonies, on which he appears in a tank-top, his muscled arm highlighted, with another man, in shadow, embracing him from behind. Both covers in turn resemble the portrait of a shirtless Samuel Delany that frames his The Motion of Light in Water, discussed in Chapter 2. In each image, the subject or subjects look directly at the camera without smiling or frowning. They present black gay subjects who are both aware and proud of their bodies and who are seemingly in control of their presentation.13 Hemphill confronts his audience with his materiality, made plain by his body depicted in a loving, potentially sexual, embrace with another black man. Furthermore, the covers to
Ceremonies and Tongues Untied—like the cover of Zami discussed in Chapter 2—represent Hemphill as part of a community of black gay men rather than an individual black gay artist toiling alone to document the realities of his community. Attention to his body can thus be understood as directed by Hemphill himself, as he frequently presents images of his body to his audience. He manipulates the convention of marketing black texts as authentic through the presentation of a writer’s black body by framing his own body with that of another black man. The homoerotic sensuality of the images thus challenges notions of black authenticity that depend upon the heterosexist exclusion of homosexuality. Furthermore, the sensuality of the images challenge long-standing packaging strategies of African American realism that represent black bodies in isolation and/or pain, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Hemphill’s role in Tongues Untied begins in its first few minutes, with a shot of him conversing with other black men on a basketball court. A long close-up about midway through is his first major appearance in the film, during which he sits silently, biting his lip and looking distressed. Issues of spectatorship immediately come to the fore, as Hemphill sometimes looks into the camera and other times off to the side as voice-overs from presumably straight black men ask him where his “loyalty” lies: “Priorities, that’s what I want to know. Come the final throw-down, what is he first? Black or gay?” A voice-over from Riggs answers: “You know the answer, the absurdity of that question. How can you sit in silence? How do you choose one eye over the other? This half of the brain over that? Or, in words this brother might understand, which does he value most, his left nut or his right? Tell him.” Hemphill sits silently for minutes on
end. Tension builds as his forlorn image is accompanied by footage of more presumably straight black men, including Eddie Murphy, decrying the desires and existence of gay men. Finally, Hemphill speaks: “I know the anger inside me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be angry than to be hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning, easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting we are worth wanting each other.” Thus Hemphill speaks from, and his body powerfully emotes, the perspective of a black gay man who, under pressure from the politics of hegemonic blackness, says nothing about the anti-racist sustenance black men have brought him sexually and personally. The majority of Hemphill’s appearance in this scene is silent, hence the importance of recording his body as he emotionally responds to the vitriol he hears. When he does speak, Hemphill gestures to the confrontational politics of hegemonic blackness as a form of “anger” somehow easier to express than his pain at being “hurt.” Hemphill acknowledges the tension between the politics of pride/invulnerability and the politics of shamelessness/vulnerability. He recognizes anger as “easier” than “yearning” but nevertheless encourages his audience to consider the difficult work of “tak[ing] on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting we are worth wanting each other.” Hemphill again imagines black same-sex, intraracial love as a method of anti-racist practice rooted in self-love rather than direct confrontation. Black men opening themselves to one another, Hemphill implies, can work as a means of coping with and even toppling white supremacy.
The significance of Riggs’s use of Hemphill in this scene can be understood with help from E. Patrick Johnson’s thoughts on blackness, oppression, and materiality. He explains that “blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing” (8). Johnson’s performance studies approach to blackness clearly diverges from Gates’s aforementioned discursively-based understanding of blackness as socially-constructed metaphor. In Tongues Untied, viewers see evidence of what Johnson calls a “material way of knowing” the world racially in Hemphill’s distraught silence. He appears worn down as his eyelids droop lower and lower over his eyes. Such emoting represents an experience of blackness that Hemphill’s words go on to clarify; yet and still this lived physical experience occasions the later discursive expression—a lived experience which Hemphill’s imposed and difficult silence represents for viewers.

Later, another scene from Tongues Untied represents Hemphill and another black man gazing at each other in a club to demonstrate their attraction to one another. This image cuts to Hemphill addressing viewers with a poem about his desire: “Times are lean, baby. The beans burnt to the bottom of the pot. Let’s make fierce love on the overstuffed, hand-me-down sofa. We can burn it up too.” Later still, after a scene of two black men making love, Hemphill offers more lines: “Now we think as we fuck. This nut might kill us.” In both instances, his words place emphasis on his body, its pleasures, and methods to preserve it. The manifestation of Hemphill’s body on screen—and the
simultaneous introduction of his poetry to many viewers—affects the way these new audience members of Hemphill’s work understand his status as writer and his work’s status as literature. As stated, his texts are never solely discursive; they are spoken from a materialized body—a body that feels pain, pleasure, and desire—on screen.

According to Johnson, “the black body has historically been the site of violence and trauma” (40). Clearly, the covers of Tongues Untied and Ceremonies, for examples, reveal a different bodily experience of black men supporting and embracing one another. In fact, bell hooks’s thoughts on the appearances of Hemphill, Baldwin, and Nugent in Looking for Langston apply as well to the significance of Hemphill embracing men on the covers of Tongues Untied and Ceremonies and within Tongues Untied itself:

“Audiences are startled by the dramatic unveiling of black gay identity, the direct bold-faced portrait of black male artists, the outspoken homosexuality of James Baldwin, Bruce Nugent, and others, not because their preferences were not known but because they are not represented isolated and alone” (195). Thus the body can signify violence or pleasure. But, as Johnson writes, “whatever [the] body signifies, the viewer cannot escape its material presence” (44) nor the reality that Hemphill no longer has a bodily presence, having died from AIDS-related complications in 1995 (Beemyn 10).

As stated, emphasizing Hemphill’s body and his sexual interaction with men is a way of ensuring his homosexuality remains a part of his critical reputation. This is not to say, though, that such recognition will be queer-positive. After all, the black body often “functions ideologically in ways [a performer] may not wish” (Johnson 42) given the large number of stereotypes and racist associations of the black body in U.S. culture. But
pointed emphasis on the body, its pain, and its pleasures can call attention to the body’s general vulnerability, as well as the potential power of such vulnerability. Judith Butler explains that

\[
\text{the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where ‘doing’ and ‘being done to’ become equivocal… The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own. (21)}
\]

Butler finds the indebtedness of one body to another for its meaning and its preservation to be a foundational ethic for human interaction and care. Hemphill’s exploration of his own vulnerability—as well as the powerful self-love that can result from black men caring for one another sexually—results in an ethic of black shamelessness that can be seen as a version of critical/queer black realism. Hemphill flips the coin by demonstrating that the vulnerability of black bodies leaves them at risk of pain and violation, yes, but that same vulnerability is also a necessity for pleasure and a means for black men to realize self-love.

**Assotto Saint’s Refusal to Regret**

266
Assotto Saint published poetry, essays, and plays during the 1980s and early 1990s in the independently-produced anthology *Tongues Untied* (1987) and his own collections *Stations* (1989) and *Wishing for Wings* (1994). Invested in creating black gay publishing and distribution networks, Saint founded Galiens Press in the late 1980s, the black gay writers’ collective Other Countries, and the Metamorphosis Theater in New York. According to Jana Evans Braziel, Saint “is remembered not only for his own literary and performance art, but also for valiantly mentoring the efforts of other black gay writers” (*Artists* 85) of the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, according to Douglas Steward, Saint’s “work with Other Countries … and as editor of [three black gay] anthologies dispersed his own agency among scores of writers” (508).¹⁵ Saint’s work thus extended beyond his own writing and performances to enable and embolden a community of black gay men writing. Saint’s most accessible text today is *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*, a collection of his writings published by Richard Kasak’s erotica press Masquerade in 1996, two years after Saint’s AIDS-related death.

While Hemphill represents black men as his primary source of care and support in his poetry, Saint represents other people with AIDS as well as Haitian religious practices as his main sources of sustenance. In the poem “Shuffle Along” from *Wishing for Wings*, Saint writes about two people with AIDS who share a hospital room. He describes them as “hooked up / to the same pole / [of] i.v. garlands / of cytovene & pentamidine” (4), referring to two drugs prescribed to people with AIDS: cytovene, used to prevent blindness in those with malfunctioning immune systems, and pentamidine, used to treat pneumonia. The “i.v. garlands” connecting the two people with AIDS suggests that, in
addition to the drugs, their physical closeness contributes to their health. Saint refers to their shared pole of IVs as

a survival ritual
that strings us
thread-thin yet tight
as life-partners
trapped in this marathon
of disintegration (6-11)

Saint’s poems are not as optimistic as Hemphill’s; he writes of the inevitability of fast “disintegration.” However, he also represents the proximity of a person in a similar circumstance as a necessary form of support.

Also different from Hemphill’s poetry is Saint’s tendency to represent the support of an individual lover—rather than that of an entire black gay community—as fundamental to the survival of a person living with AIDS. For example, in the poem “On the Pulse of Night,” also from *Wishing for Wings*, Saint writes of a man with AIDS who awakens in the middle of the night after what he calls “a nightmare of silence” (2). The man fears he is alone in his house and his bed—indeed, alone in a country that repeatedly displays uncaring attitudes toward black gay men living with AIDS. The speaker panics as he searches for his lover: “fearing hushed calls gone unheard / my heart breaks in the wake of spirits that quake the ground” (4-5). Finally, the man locates his partner and describes the rush of life his presence provides: “there’s no sound as my hand slides / across these bed sheets to hold your wrist / feel your pulse race through me” (7-9). Saint
represents the sustenance an individual partner can provide those living with AIDS as a sharing of blood. The lover’s “pulse race[s] through” the speaker and presumably allows the speaker to rest easily. AIDS damages the body by eliminating what are known as T-cells, a group of white blood cells that empower the immune system. Saint represents the speaker’s support by a lover as a blood transfusion in which his HIV-positive blood is eased and calmed, allowing him to sleep.

Saint’s exploration of blood as shared life-force recalls Jewelle Gomez’s use of vampirism as a symbol for the process of inter-subjectivity that I explored in the last chapter. Here, though, references to AIDS root the transfusion in a different context. While Gomez’s exploration of inter-subjectivity—along with that of Walker explored in Chapter 1—conceives of the process as one that defines individuals in social relation to one another, Saint’s exploration conceives of inter-subjectivity as an ethic that can direct care for the biological needs of an individual’s body. Saint finds a precedent for this ethic of care in Haitian voodoo/Vodou practice. The “pulse” that enters the speaker in Saint’s poem may be comparable to a loa/lwa, a particular spirit that Vodou practitioners may invite to inhabit or “ride” their bodies. The fact that various lwa may enter numerous bodies regardless of sex speaks to Vodou belief in transmigration of the soul. One body’s capacity to host different lwa—and for various bodies to host the same lwa at different times—requires a communal effort to care for and serve various lwa, as well as communal experience of a shared subjectivity. Because lwa may inhabit various bodies, it is also necessary for members of a given community to care for one another’s bodies and health in order to make them safe harbors for various lwa.
Saint’s concern with materiality, like Hemphill’s, also echoes Black Arts Movement poetics. In his essay “Why I Write,” Saint refers to his poems and plays as “weapons and blessings that I use to liberate myself, to validate our realities as gay black men, and to elucidate the human struggle” (8). Like Hemphill, Saint can be understood as offering a queer/critical realism that disidentifies with the politics of black authenticity, finding them useful means of engaging his audience, but also critiquing their frequent investment in heteronormativity. Perhaps Saint’s most enduring interaction with the politics of black pride and authenticity is found in Marlon Riggs’s documentary on black gay men living with AIDS, No Regret. Saint participates in creating an archive of testimonies alongside other black gay men living with AIDS: Michael Lee, Joseph Long, Reggie Williams, and Donald Woods. Woods’s performance poetry frequently links the subjects’ individual interviews. The fact that writers Saint and Woods—as well as Hemphill—participated in Riggs’s projects reveals an awareness of documentary film’s powerful ability to archive performances and knowledges that might otherwise be lost and unknown. Diana Taylor writes that “[e]mbodied performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semiliterate, and digital societies. Not everyone comes to ‘culture’ or modernity through writing. I believe it is imperative to keep reexamining the relationships between embodied performance and the production of knowledge” (xviii-xix). What Taylor calls “embodied performance” was a means for Saint and Hemphill to communicate knowledge about black gay men and AIDS—as well as a means to preserve their bodies—with an urgency and certainty that writing apparently could not grant.
*No Regret* immediately ruminates on the issues of spectatorship that David Gerstner identifies as a black queer tradition when it comes to engaging in film. The interview subjects all answer questions from an unseen and unheard interviewer throughout the film. The first series of interviews, including Saint’s introduction, presents only his eyes, as if viewers were gazing at him through the horizontal pickets of a fence. Throughout the documentary, Saint intermittently looks directly into the camera, alerting viewers to his consciousness of the medium through which his voice is being heard and his body surveyed. Gerstner writes of Riggs’s films in relation to conservative politicians’ passionate hatred for that which they explored: “To be sure, the conservatives’ celebration of a homosexual’s death was quickly and loudly pilfered by queers who, by *looking directly back at* those who celebrated [the AIDS-related deaths of gay men], rewrote the terms for ‘responsible’ death” (177). Riggs’s focus on Saint’s eyes, and Saint’s decision to stare down the camera, compel viewers to assess their own responsibility to fight the AIDS crisis. “The look” that Gerstner identifies as fundamental to black gay investment in the cinematic becomes a call to action in *No Regret*.

In the film, Saint shares his experience learning he was HIV positive, saying, “I had expected it. I had taken care of and buried most of my friends by then. And there was nothing they were doing that I was not doing back in the 70s, early 80s. So I had somewhat expected it. And when the counselor told me, I remember I just smiled and I thought to myself, ‘Bitch, did you think you would escape?’” Saint’s confrontational yet playful reference to himself as “Bitch” can be thought of as an embrace of shamelessness. Saint frequently refers to himself as “Bitch” in his writing as a means of shamelessly
embracing vulnerability. He explains part of his pen-name—his birth-given name is Yves F. Lubin—as follows: “Saint is derived from Toussaint L’Ouverture, one of my heroes. By using the non de guerre of Saint, I also wanted to add a sacrilegious twist to my life by grandly sanctifying the loud low-life bitch that I am” (9). Saint invokes L’Ouverture, considered the father of Haitian independence due to his leadership during the Haitian revolution, who in many ways represents proud masculinity. Saint disidentifies with L’Ouverture’s image by celebrating the independent masculinity he represents but also celebrating what seems the opposite, a “low-life bitch.” His use of “bitch” in his interview with Riggs performs a similar point. Saint reflects on what he at some point considered his body’s invulnerability and assured health by challenging himself: “Bitch, did you think you would escape?” At this point in the film, Saint’s gaze stops its wavering and focuses intently on the camera. His eyes widen and his question of self-reflection becomes a question posed to the entire viewing audience. Saint’s performance gestures to the vulnerability inherent to human experience; Saint challenges those viewers who consider themselves safe and resolute by gesturing to a shared human vulnerability. In the film and in his writing, Saint advocates condom use as a loving act conscious of human bodily vulnerability. For Saint, condom use becomes a means of preserving and sustaining one’s vulnerability rather than a means of rigidifying bodily boundaries.

Later in No Regret, shots of Saint shift to close-ups of his hands and, eventually, to his entire body from the waist up. As he begins to talk about his mother’s reaction to his diagnosis, shots of family photographs frame his image, photographs which bespeak a
history and set of relationships for which No Regret cannot account. Of his mother, Saint says, “My mother has had a rough time because there is an element of shame. I’m from Haiti. And although AIDS is an epidemic in Haiti, we’re not supposed to talk about it in the kind of social class we come from… But I’m, like I said, open. It’s not something that I’m going to be made to feel ashamed of.” Saint explains that silence is the predominant method of dealing with the supposedly shameful epidemic of AIDS in Haiti. He frames the issue similar to the way Evelynn Hammonds frames black female sexuality in general in the United States. Hammonds says that black women have consistently “countered negative stereotypes” of black sexuality through “the evolution of … a ‘politics of silence’” (142). These politics of silence have required that black women hide, mute, and shield any expression of (queer) sexuality, resulting in what L.H. Stallings calls a “historically politicized quiet [that] has made it very difficult to fully discuss Black women’s sexual desires” (4). Hammonds offers the “politics of articulation” as a corrective to the politics of silence, which “would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (152). Saint’s mother, lovingly invoked in many scenes in No Regret, apparently embraced the politics of silence along with her entire respectable social class. Importantly, Saint’s mother does not appear in the film and does not speak; therefore the film does not exactly offer a feminist politics of articulation. Saint’s testimony about his experience, however, does begin to question why women like his mother cannot openly address the AIDS crisis, especially when it directly affects their family members. He identifies moral framings of sexuality as the primary reason for his mother’s silence. Thus Saint works in the film to reframe the issue of AIDS
from a moral to a medical problem. His tone becomes firm when he says, “It’s a virus, it is a medical problem. People are not made to feel shame when they have cancer, when they have a heart attack, *et cetera, et cetera*. No. I’m not gonna be ashamed. This is a virus. Let’s deal with it from that fact.” Saint suggests that a politics of articulation requires movement away from the shame imposed on sexuality by the discourse of morality and a movement toward a shameless recognition and embrace of human vulnerability, with vulnerability positioned as a necessary condition for individuals to care for and love one another.

Saint’s firm rejection of shame resonates with the ethic of shamelessness explored by other writers in this dissertation. Unlike other writers, Saint’s ethic of shamelessness is positioned as a specific response to the discourse surrounding AIDS. According to Saint, the shame associated with AIDS is not necessarily new, as it grows from the shame associated with homosexuality and sexuality in general. In one of his final scenes in *No Regret*, Saint remarks, “It’s something that society wants you to think is dirty. It’s something that you ought to be ashamed of. It’s something you got through sex. And sex is a dirty word in our so-called Puritanical society… It’s a virus and we have to constantly remind ourselves: it is not sexuality that is the problem.” Again, Saint re-frames AIDS as a medical rather than a moral issue. His ultimate statement of shamelessness happens when Saint urges the audience, including viewers with AIDS,

> Go and have as much sex as possible. Go and have relationships. I do believe in one-night stands. I do believe in extended one-night stands. My lover and I always had an open relationship. But be safe. Use a condom.
And there’s so many facets to sex, to sexuality. It is not just fucking, fucking, and sucking. There’s a whole element of jerking off, of talking dirty, of wrestling. Discover new facets. Explore. And you’d be surprised at what you find. So I say go ahead. Worship each other’s bodies. Love them.

Saint’s refusal to regret the sex he has had, as well as his refusal to condemn sex generally, demonstrates a fierce rejection of the politics of silence and shame surrounding sexuality and black sexuality in particular. Saint even directs his viewers’ attention to new ways of conceiving of sexual practice. Importantly, Saint advocates the use of condoms as a means to “worship each other’s bodies” and “love them.” Saint’s ethic of shamelessness celebrates the vulnerability inherent to intimacy and sexual practice while simultaneously insisting that health consciousness and the preservation of vulnerability are important elements of love. Saint’s shameless embrace of sexuality here recalls his poem “I Want to Celebrate,” from the anthology Tongues Untied, which begins:

i want to celebrate vicious-officious cocks
that kind with a hook or mushroom head
cast spells
made me lose consciousness when most alive
forced to acquiesce to grace under pressure
holiness in being truly low

[…]
i want to celebrate cushiony groins
hot balls that were a mouthful

tough titties with clip marks

hairy fists armed with magic twists

& this well-greased ass

that took pleasure in its added dimensions (21)

Saint’s consistent refusal to abandon sex despite living with AIDS offers a counter-narrative to conservative ideas about AIDS as punishment for sexual behavior. According to Jana Evans Braziel, “I Want to Celebrate,” through its lack of racial or national markers, “asks the reader to suspend expectations about penetrator and penetrated, leaving the roles of active and passive—often stereotypically loaded with false notions of gender, sexuality, even race—open or unmarked so that the reader may imagine the reversibility or interchangeability of sexual or erotic roles” (93). The poem’s speaker refers to various disembodied erogenous zones and in so doing creates a composite body through a collage of “cocks,” “groins,” “balls,” “titties,” “fists,” and “ass.” This composite erotic body gestures to a community’s shared sexual experiences; at the heart of the poem is a belief in the need to preserve and even “worship” this erotic body in spite of the fact that its pleasures are under attack from conservative visions of sexual morality.

Saint’s communal collage in “I Want to Celebrate” mirrors his participation in No Regret, where, as stated, several HIV-positive black gay men convene to share their heterogeneous yet linked stories. According to Kobena Mercer, this composition technique—shared by Saint and Riggs—is a means of “recogniz[ing] the pitfalls of racial
representation” (243), namely its exclusionary practices. Remarking on *Tongues Untied*’s relationship to the politics of racial representation and realism, Mercer writes,

One of the adjectives most frequently invoked in response to *Tongues Untied*, especially among black gay men, is “real”: we value the film for its “realness.” A cursory historical overview of black independent cinema would reveal the prevalence of a certain realist aesthetic, which must be understood as one of the privileged modes through which black filmmakers have sought to contest those versions of reality inscribed in the racist discourses of the dominant film culture. As a counterdiscourse, the imperative of such a realist aesthetic in black film, whether documentary or drama, is to “tell it like it is.” What is at issue in the oppositional or critical role of black independent film is the ability to articulate a counterdiscourse based on an alternative version of reality inscribed in the voices and viewpoints of black social actors. […] Its [*Tongues Untied*’s] realness consists not simply of the accuracy or veracity of its depiction of the experiences of African American gay men, … but through [its] dialogic mode of address which brings the spectator into a direct relationship with the stories and experiences that find their voices. (243-245)

That is, Riggs, Saint, and Hemphill recognize realism as the “privileged” discourse through which African Americans may tell counter-narratives of blackness in U.S. film culture, and for that matter U.S. literary culture. Therefore, all three cultural producers
seize black realism, but not without subverting its assumptions with not only a black “counterdiscourse,” but a black queer counterdiscourse that remarks on the heterosexist ways in which a given black text comes to be defined as “realist.” The “dialogic mode of address” in which Riggs, Saint, and Hemphill—along with viewers of their performances—participate asks that the archive of black reality expand to include their gay and HIV-positive “stories and experiences.” Like the composite erotic body of “I Want to Celebrate” that exercises and is made through various sexual acts, the performances of Riggs, Hemphill, and Saint in *Tongues Untied* and *No Regret* ask for the boundaries of the composite black body supposedly represented in black realism to be redrawn. By insisting on direct and dialogic address, Saint, Hemphill, and Riggs also implicate viewers—be they black, gay, and/or otherwise—in the constitution of this vision of black reality. Their work acknowledges that audience expectations have authority in constructing “the body” and “the race” right along with the subjects said audience is watching.

**Conclusion: Re-Narrating AIDS and the Body**

Saint advocates the body’s preservation at the same time that he advocates for shameless sexual exploration. Like Hemphill’s poetry, Saint’s continuously draws attention to the body and its practices and thereby remarks on the importance of materiality. Both writers compose poetry that remarks on the very limits of writing and the discursive when it comes to articulating and experiencing (racialized) sexuality. Both writers took their concern with materiality a step further by appearing in Riggs’s
documentary films, which have preserved not only their words but their bodies in spite of the fact that all three men died in the 1990s due to AIDS-related complications.

Furthermore, both Hemphill and Saint wrote poetry to contest the political narrative that positioned black gay men with AIDS as the nation’s economic burden. They represented other black gay men and/or other people with AIDS, not the government, as their primary support systems. Furthermore, they consistently spoke of the trauma of AIDS as their own and thereby contested political narratives that suggested the nation was traumatized by the neediness of black gay men with AIDS.

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282


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1 This is especially true of *Tongues Untied* given its 1990 national broadcast on PBS.

2 See Chapter 5 of Turner’s *I Heard It through the Grapevine* for analysis of what she calls “rumors” (137) that the U.S. government planted HIV and AIDS in black communities during the 1980s and 1990s.

I read Riggs’s invocation of Mapplethorpe here as a moment of strategic coalition building rather than sincere endorsement of his work, which often includes damaging racial politics (see Hemphill, “Does Your Mama Know about Me?” in Ceremonies and Julien and Mercer, “True Confessions”). Haynes’s Poison (1991) was, like Tongues Untied, produced in part by funding from the NEA. The film’s exploration of homosexuality and sado-masochism was protested by the American Family Association.

2 Live Crew’s sexually explicit lyrics may again be invoked by Riggs in a moment of strategic coalition building rather than sincere endorsement. Rather than critique the misogyny of their lyrics without denying their rights to free expression (as others have, see Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny”), Riggs seems to refer to them here as a cipher for the ways in which all black sexual expression is condemned as illicit.

The term “performance poetry” was coined in 1982 by Hedwig Gorski, a poet who used the term to distinguish her oral performances of poetry from the music-based performance art of Laurie Anderson, among others (Wheeler 127). Performance poetry is a historically-contingent movement closely associated with anti-racist, feminist, and queer politics of the late twentieth-century, but it is important to note its indebtedness to longstanding African American traditions of oral storytelling and poetic recitation (Wheeler 5).

Furthermore, the poetry of Pedro Pietri, Miguel Piñero, and other Nuyorican Arts Movement poets informed the emergence of performance poetry in the 1980s (Aptowicz 20). Piñero’s re-opening of the Nuyorican Poets Café—originally opened in 1973 New York City by members of the Nuyorican art movement—in 1988 popularized the slam poetry movement, especially amongst poets of color (Aptowicz 22). During the 1980s, performance poetry became most popular in New York City, San Francisco, and Austin, Texas as spaces of anti-racist and feminist artistic expression (Wheeler). Performance poetry was sometimes considered synonymous with “slam poetry.” According to Marc Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak, “Slam poetry … is a word circus, a school, a town meeting, a playground, a sports arena, a temple, a burlesque show, a revelation, a mass guffaw, holy ground, and possibly all of these mixed together. Slam poetry is performance poetry, the marriage of a text to the artful presentation of poetic words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back and let the performer know whether he or she is communicating effectively” (5). Performance and slam poetry grew in popularity and audience just as hip-hop did throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Aptowicz 19). See Chapter 1 of James Edward Smethurst’s The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s for an exploration of the connections between white Beat poetry and the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, the Nuyorican Arts Movement, and others.

See Cheryl Clarke’s “After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement for an analysis of how women poets associated with the Black Arts Movement like Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Ntozake Shange challenged the masculinist
politics of male figures of the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s and 1970s in similar fashion to Hemphill’s challenge in the 1980s.

8 This poem first appeared in Earth Life and was later re-published in Ceremonies. The text I engage with here is from Ceremonies.

9 “When My Brother Fell” first appeared in Brother to Brother and was later re-published in Ceremonies. The text I engage with here is from Ceremonies.

10 Baraka and Giovanni’s concern with material change is itself informed by earlier black writers who composed as a means of fighting against material inequality. See, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois’s “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), wherein he writes that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be” (782). That is, all art seeks political and material change. Du Bois’s sentiment echoes that of Pauline Hopkins, who in the preface to her novel Contending Forces (1900) says she writes to “raise the stigma of degradation from my race” (13). These early-twentieth-century statements on the purpose of black art informed Baraka and Giovanni’s desire for poems that do more than reflect on material inequality, but rather seek to rectify it. Hemphill’s work carries on this same tradition.

11 Johnson’s discussion of Hemphill in “‘Quare’ Studies” is an example of the way in which black queer studies has responded to Hemphill’s dually material and discursive literary image. As a performance theorist, Johnson pays close attention to the ways Hemphill’s bodily performances are received by academics. Johnson responds to Hemphill’s appearance at a 1990 Outwrite conference of gay and lesbian writers, where Hemphill offered his thoughts on the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and, while lamenting the celebration in Mapplethorpe’s photography of what Hemphill understood to be racist fetishism for black men, began to cry (131). Johnson finds Hemphill’s teary performance to be an example of the need to focus on the corporeal experience of race in addition to the discursive. In so doing he critiques John Champagne’s reading of Hemphill’s tears as a “manipulative” (132) attempt to have his audience uncritically agree with what he saw as Hemphill’s “monolithic” (Champagne qtd. in Johnson 131) reading of the photographs. The story of Hemphill’s tears has become a small bit of lore, at this point, in black queer studies, as Muñoz responds to it too in Disidentifications, finding Champagne’s assessment of Hemphill to be a “frantic mission to attack important black queer culture makers” (202). Thus both Muñoz and Johnson come to the defense of Hemphill’s body and bodily actions in the face of Champagne’s attack. I take this critical urge to defend Hemphill’s body as a metaphor for the ways black queer studies, via its interaction with Hemphill, asks us to acknowledge and defend a writer’s physical body—and that body’s actions—in the assessment of said writer’s written work rather than disciplining the body into invisibility. In so doing, the writer’s body becomes a part of the writer’s literary oeuvre.

12 Furthermore, according to Roger Hallas, HIV/AIDS activists consistently turned to film in order to “reframe” the bodies of people with HIV and AIDS. He speaks of a number of HIV/AIDS activist films as significant due to the fact that they “reframed not
only the bodies of witnesses seen and heard on the screen but also the relationship of such represented bodies to the diverse viewing bodies in front of the screen” (3). This act of reframing is very much tied to the idea of “the look” identified by Gerstner, as well as the issues of direct address and direct gaze that I explore throughout the rest of this chapter.

13 These images in many ways counter the messages of Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1980s and 1990s portraits that often feature black male subjects disrobed but headless. See Hemphill’s “Does Your Mama Know about Me?” from Ceremonies for a critique of Mapplethorpe’s racial politics. See also Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer’s “True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality” for additional exploration of these politics.

14 Darieck Scott finds that the vulnerability always assumed in discussions of blackness or black sexuality “endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power—indeed, what we can think of as black power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call identity, body, race, nation seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary” (9, emphases his). Scott understands freedom as the experience of mutual and “utter… penetration” and thereby positions queer vulnerability as a foundation of liberation rather than a hindrance to it.

15 Steward refers specifically to The Road Before Us (1991), Here to Dare (1992), and Milking Black Bull (1995). He says that any account of Saint’s “work” must also “consider his editorship” (508), which was an important aspect of his literary project. While I do not consider Saint’s work as an editor here, I do consider his investment in a network of black gay cultural producers—a network that connects Saint to Hemphill, Riggs, and others—and thereby provide another means of seeing Saint’s “dispersed … agency” (508).

16 For an extended reading of Saint as a queer gwo nèg/big man of the Haitian diaspora, see Jana Evans Braziel’s “‘Honey, Honey, Miss Thing’: Assotto Saint’s Drag Queen Blues—Queening the Homeland, Queer-Fisting the Dyaspora” from Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora.

17 See Roberto Strongman’s “Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities” in Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism.

18 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first pointed to “the politics of silence” in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” as “a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (Hammonds 143).
Conclusion. Articulating and Circulating Shamelessness

In *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary chronicling the 1980s New York City ball culture of black and Latino LGBT communities, several interview subjects reflect on “realness,” a style of performance popular within the culture. Community elder Dorian Corey explains that the goal of the style is to at least partially interrogate why social realities are structured as they are:

In real life, you can’t get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life. That is just the pure thing. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere—and those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom, you can be anything you want. You’re not really an executive, but you’re looking like an executive, and therefore you’re showing the straight world that, “I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity I could be one, because I can look like one.”

In the film, one performer after another uses realness as a means of critiquing predominant visions of black reality and authenticity, as well as predominant visions of white supremacy. They strategically duplicate the social norms of sexuality for various
reasons, including a desire to reveal the ways in which social categories like “man,” “woman,” “black,” and “white” are utterly compromised, dependent upon one another for their existence and dependent upon performers willing to continuously re-articulate them. Read alongside this dissertation’s interest in 1980s black LGBT writers’ negotiations with literary realism, the style of realness in ball culture further suggests that black queer aesthetic forms, be they realist or speculative, invariably comment upon the exclusionary heteronormative politics that define the concept of black authenticity. The powerful executive—a celebrated figure within his racial community—is a role numerous bodies can fill, but one that very few—and only the very straight—are given the opportunity to perform. Furthermore, the realness of ball culture; the queer realism of Alice Walker, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint; and the anti-realist embrace of speculative fiction and hypothesis found in the writing of Audre Lorde, Samuel Delany, and Jewelle Gomez suggest that black LGBT writers and performers can be categorized in part by their relationship to realism and their responses to the politics of black authenticity. While some reproduce the conventions of realism to either parody, queer, or broaden the concept of black reality, others find realism too sutured to the politics of sexual normativity to be used for a queer-positive project. Black LGBT cultural producers of the 1980s continuously pointed to the relationship between sexuality and black authenticity in order to testify to their own existence, as well as to interrogate the privilege associated with words like “real” and “authentic.” Both terms can be appropriated to enforce an ideological tyranny that operates by tacitly implying the normativity—and therefore the rightness—of heterosexuality and gender propriety for African Americans.
Black Shamelessness has argued that a black-authored text’s relationship to realism, as well as its publication venue, determines its ability to queer the established boundaries of literary blackness. I have charted 1980s black LGBT writers’ variously-styled negotiations with black literary realism alongside their critiques of black literary realism’s normative politics, as well as black LGBT writers’ attendant and simultaneous negotiations with major publishing venues. Due to the publishing, packaging, and reception histories of African American literature, all black-authored texts are assessed by their formal relationship to realism. Mainstream audiences and major publishers have assumed that black-authored texts authentically represent black reality. Conscious of this assumption, many African American writers have sought to create a respectable image of black reality within their texts, a trend which has most often occasioned an endorsement of sexual normativity and a critique—or in some cases a lament—of sexual queerness. In the 1960s during the Black Arts Movement, the expectation of realism and the endorsement of sexual normativity became sutured to the politics of black pride, which advocated for self-determined identities amongst African Americans designed to reject white supremacist constructions of blackness, constructions which often defined the supposed depravity of blackness through an association with sexual queerness. At the same time, black writers of the 1960s often eschewed the major publishing industry in order to participate in black independent publishing. In the 1980s, when the first group of African American writers openly identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender emerged, the politics of pride and their relationship to black literary realism were consistently reassessed. Finding the politics of pride to be, again, sutured to the politics of
sexual normativity, black LGBT writers of the 1980s articulated black shamelessness as an alternative ethic of black self-love that advocates the recognition and embrace of vulnerability as a source of power within black racial identification. While black LGBT writers of the 1980s did not share the Black Arts Movement’s endorsement of sexual normativity, many did share its investment in independent publishing.

The reassessment of black literary realism and its relationship to black pride that I have attended to throughout this dissertation also occurred in other black-authored writing of the late twentieth century, especially in black womanist writing like that of Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, and Sherley Anne Williams, among others. These writers began to explore issues that the politics of black pride deemed shameful and therefore silenced, including homosexuality and intraracial domestic and sexual violence. They also engaged in different ways with the expectation of realism. When their explorations of supposedly shameful issues occurred in realist texts—as in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (like Walker’s The Color Purple)—these texts were met with either suspicion or outright hostility. Perhaps as a result, many black womanist writers consistently embraced genres that did not align squarely with black literary realism. They infused their texts with speculative and spiritual concerns that troubled the expectation of realism and its association with black pride. Butler’s consistent work in speculative and science fiction constitutes one such troubling. Also significant are the investigations of spiritual practices, conjure, and ghosts in novels like Jones’s The Healing (1998), Morrison’s Beloved (1987), Naylor’s Mama Day (1988), and Walker’s The Temple of My Familiar (1989) and By the Light of My Father’s Smile

290
(1998) that challenge readers’ senses of “the real,” especially insomuch as that sense is informed by Western assumptions of scientific objectivism. Especially interesting is Walker’s movement away from conventional literary realism by the end of the 1980s, a shift that can perhaps be read as the result of the backlash against *The Color Purple’s* realist form.

Since 1991, when the scope of this dissertation ends, black LGBT writing has continued to be defined by its relationship to literary realism as well as its publication venue. Sapphire’s novel *Push* (1996), with its embrace of literary realism and of African American Vernacular English in particular, garnered criticisms that resembled those leveled against *The Color Purple* to a T. Published by Knopf, the novel’s wide distribution compelled concerned readers to deem it and its queer politics unrealistic. E. Lynn Harris’s *Invisible Life*, self-published in 1991 before being picked up by Anchor for mass distribution in 1994, also embraced black literary realism to tell the story of a black gay man as a means of expanding the form’s boundaries. The success of—and backlash against—both books reveals that mass-distributed black literary realism continues to be critical terrain for black LGBT writers and for the articulation of black communal boundaries.

In terms of performance and documentary, performance poets Sharon Bridgforth and Staceyann Chin continue to emphasize the importance of the body and the spoken word as black queer epistemologies and, in that sense, continue the work of Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint. Bridgforth’s investment in theater, and Chin’s investment in
performance venues like Broadway and television, also continue to expand the means of
distribution for black LGBT poetry.²

And finally the embrace of avowedly non-realist, speculative forms seen in the
work of Samuel Delany, Jewelle Gomez, and Audre Lorde continues in the on-going
career of Delany, who throughout the 1990s and 2000s has published science fiction and
non-fiction that adamantly questions our ability to know reality through writing and,
furthermore, continues to question the racial and sexual structures endemic to U.S. life.
Additionally, Jamaican Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson continues to challenge
expectations of black authenticity, as well as the general expectation of black literary
realism, by writing science fiction and fantasy imbued with concerns for same-sex desire
and African diasporic cultural practices. Hopkinson’s career demonstrates that
speculative fiction continues to be fertile ground on which to explore issues of black
authenticity, sexuality, and reality.³

The independent black LGBT presses founded in the 1980s, including Kitchen
Table and Galiens, did not outlast the proliferation of black LGBT writing between 1982
and 1991. However, others have emerged, including RedBone Press, founded by Lisa C.
Moore in the late 1990s after “white feminist publishers told her that there was ‘no
market’ for [an] anthology of Black lesbian coming out stories” (Piepzna-Samarashinha).
RedBone published just such a collection, does your mama know? (1997), and has
subsequently published numerous books by black gay and lesbian writers. Thus, black
LGBT writers continue to negotiate with black literary realism and with publication and
circulation venue in their articulations of black queer experience.
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1 See Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens for an explanation of the term “womanist.”

2 Written versions of Bridgforth’s work, including the bull jean stories (1998) and love conjure/blues (2004) have been published by RedBone press, though Bridgforth’s work is most fully realized in performance. Chin’s The Other Side of Paradise, A Memoir (2009) is her sole independently-authored published work. Her writing, like that of Hemphill and Saint, is most accessible through anthologies, newspapers, and journals and fully realized through performance.

3 See Hopkinson’s post-apocalyptic novel Brown Girl in the Ring (1998) as well as Midnight Robber (2000), which can be read as a blending of Audre Lorde, Assotto Saint, and Alice Walker’s investment in African diasporic religious practice with Samuel Delany and Jewelle Gomez’s investment in livable futures for black queer subjects.
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294


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Conclusion