AFRICAN AMERICAN LESBIAN IDENTITY IN PERFORMANCE

by

KRISTYL DAWN TIFT

(Under the Direction of Emily Sahakian)

ABSTRACT

The theatre can be a space of hope where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) persons rehearse and perform identity. While much of the LGBTQ and African Diaspora performance scholarship focuses on white lesbians, white gay men, and black and Latino gay men, black lesbians have not been studied as extensively. This dissertation is the first full-length study of African American lesbian identity in theatre and performance. I explore the works of playwrights and performance artists Shirlene Holmes, Sharon Bridgforth, Donnetta Lavinia Grays, Staceyann Chin, and Lenelle Moïse, artists that situate black lesbian identity at the center of their narratives in complex ways for specific ends—empowerment and survival. To analyze black lesbian identity and homemaking, I rely on critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's *intersectionality*, feminist theorist Chela Sandoval's *differential consciousness*, and performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz's *disidentification* to ground my theory of *utopian mo(u)rning*—a mode of performance evident in contemporary black lesbian feminist performance that combines the performative acts of mourning and hope.

INDEX WORDS: African diaspora, theatre, performance, queer, black lesbian feminism, 20th century, 21st century, butch–femme, intersectionality, disidentification

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KRISTYL DAWN TIFT

B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2004

M.F.A., The New School for Drama, 2007

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KRISTYL DAWN TIFT

Major Professor:	Emily Sahakian
Committee:	Freda Scott Giles
	Marla Carlson
	Patricia del Rey

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory and work of Dr. José Esteban Muñoz and Audre Lorde. I also dedicate this book to Toni Morrison, who uses words to make black most beautiful.

And, to my niece, Lauryn…In the event that you feel isolated and alone (for whatever reason) and you need someone/thing to identify with, do not be afraid to be your own muse.

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To Helen—You have enriched my life beyond measure. You are my home. Je t'aime. To Ella—for the cuddles, long walks, private talks, loyalty, and patience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

I wear hat and suspenders
pants with high waist and cuffs
tie and pointed shoes shining.
I carry my staff and veil. flow into all my selves.
I am King. now and always. girl woman. seer. in this body.
today I say

I am right to be here
today I call my own name proudly
today I take old skin off and eat it
I am made new.

this is where it all comes together.
this is where we meet. The shift is now.
The Change has come. it is time.
I move from the crossroads
stand where all the rivers meet.[1]

—excerpt from *delta dandi*

[1] Sharon Bridgforth, *delta dandi*, in *solo/black/woman: scripts, interviews, and essays*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 220-21.

At the end of Sharon Bridgforth's *delta dandi* (2008), Gurl—"a child-slave born into bondage and reborn into violence in subsequent generations"—delivers the monologue excerpted above in which she asserts her racial, gender, and sexual identity—an *intersectional identity* that has become a source of power, rather than a limitation.[2] Gurl is a black lesbian woman who, by the end of the play, boldly identifies in gendered terms that extend beyond the feminine toward the masculine. Visibly black, woman, and queer, her body is a spectacular one that is rife with meaning.[3] It is a body that, in performance, subverts dominant cultural notions of blackness, womanness, and queerness by reconfiguring their meanings. The result of this is an embodied identity of Gurl's own making.

Gurl's intersectional identity is personal and political. It influences her perception of society and society's perception of her. Wrongly and repeatedly defined by others, she does not fit into and cannot comply with normative expectations of her race, gender, and sexuality. She is thus left longing for communities with which she can identify. Her assertion of a black queer identity, however, leads her *home*, to a place of comfort that she has struggled for generations to find. The end of this play is the beginning of a new life for Gurl. But, to pursue a viable future, the character has had to reclaim her body, rename it to reflect an identity that satisfies her, and reconcile past physical and emotional traumas.

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how black lesbian identity is represented in performance, to examine how black lesbian characters move beyond oppression by defining themselves in their own terms, and to explore the relationships these characters have to black and

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[2] See George Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman's, "I," in *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures (1)* (New York: Garland Science, 1999). My understanding of identity is based on their definition—"An individual's perception or sense of self" (383). I also recognize identity as political; it can be a source of power and can inform one's worldview.

[3] I am invoking Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which I will explain further. Also, "queer" is an umbrella term and an identity category along the LGBTQ spectrum. I use LGBTQ, lesbian, and queer interchangeably throughout.

queer communities. I use the term black lesbian feminist performance (BLFP) to group together plays and performances that have these features.

This dissertation is the first full-length study of black lesbian theatre and performance. I have chosen to analyze late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century plays and performances that explicitly focus on—and are created by—black lesbians. During this time, black lesbian artists were producing a relatively large number of works of this kind. I analyze Shirlene Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman* (1996) and *Remember What I Say!* (2004), Sharon Bridgforth's *the bull-jean stories* (1998), Donnetta Lavinia Grays's *the cowboy is dying* (2008), Staceyann Chin's "Cross–Fire" (2007), and Lenelle Moïse's "Madivinez" (2009). These works focus on serious issues—colorism, rape, domestic violence, spiritual violence, and abandonment—that impact the black lesbian protagonists and performers. They also engage with concepts of motherhood, the black church, butch–femme, and transnationalism.

Each of these works feature key moments of what I term *utopian mo(u)rning*—a performative act of grief and hope that ultimately allows the characters and their audiences to reclaim power, history, and place in the face of racial, gender, and sexual oppression. Utopian mo(u)rnings prepare black lesbians to find and feel home as intersectional bodies living at the crossroads of identity and culture. These acts are exchanges between bodies in which one character testifies to incidents of trauma as a result of racism, sexism, and homophobia, while the other actively witnesses her grief. In most cases, the roles then reverse and the witness testifies. Through a visible grieving process and unshakable hope, black lesbian protagonists and performers heal themselves and others from the effects of oppression. Utopian mo(u)rnings are liberatory (freeing) performances in which black lesbian characters create home (make families, self-define, and claim space as their own) by reckoning with traumatic pasts. These reckonings

are both joyous and painful and are represented through embodied acts of mourning (grief, anger, sorrow) *and* hope (prayer, affirmation, promise).

In the first half of the dissertation, I explore traditional plays and performance literature. In the second half, I explore nontraditional autobiographical solo performances. In BLFP, black lesbian artists embody and articulate their intersectional identities in ways that they are unable to in society. The lack of freedom to experiment openly with identity leads many black lesbian artists to: 1) show their characters identifying on and with their own terms, 2) write black lesbian bodies into the subject position, and 3) explore black lesbian narratives about identity and love. While intersecting systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, position black lesbians at the margins of society, BLFP provides room for black lesbians on the stage.[4]

My research methodology involves close textual readings of primary and secondary performance texts, and analyses of performance recordings and autobiographical prose, within socio-historical, literary, and biographical contexts (including interviews with the artists). I interpret contemporary texts and performances and offer a new analytic—utopian mo(u)rning—for understanding these works. I rely on my interviews with Holmes and Grays, as well as published interviews with Bridgforth, Chin, and Moïse as insight into the artist's intentions with this works. In analyzing the texts, I became interested in their use of symbolism and imagery of the black community, the black church, and the club. These institutions indelibly shape the black

[4] While black gay images and narratives are becoming more accessible to the public, black lesbian representations are still scarce. I am thinking of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney whose play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* (unpublished), was adapted into the critically acclaimed film *Moonlight* (2016), directed by Barry Jenkins. While Dee Rees's films *Pariah* (2010) and *Bessie* (2015) have received some praise for their black lesbian/queer character focus, more complex treatments of black lesbian identity and life are needed throughout media. There has also been a lot of research on black and latino gay men. Scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson, José Esteban Muñoz, Ramón H. Rivera Servera, Brian Herrera and Tabitha Chester have focused their performance research on the performativity of black and brown gay men. Recent published collections of black gay plays/performance texts include Djola Branner's *sash & trim and other plays* (Washington: RedBone Press, 2013) and Johnson's *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008).

lesbian protagonists and performers as they search for home. The artists position questions of maturing into black womanhood as central to this process of finding home. Thus, I integrate classic literature by and about black women to illustrate the historical, political, and social conditions that affect the development of black women protagonists and performers, across different gender identities and sexualities.

Many of the works I analyze are out of print or held in special collection archives. Holmes and Grays sent me unpublished plays that they thought fit with my overall study, along with links to production materials (such as, playbills, early drafts, and reviews) to consider. I consulted: the Shirlene Holmes Papers at the Auburn Avenue Library (African American LGBT Collection), in Atlanta, Georgia; Sharon Bridgforth's *blood pudding* at New Dramatists in New York City; and the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in New York City. I compared and contrasted the primary texts with the secondary texts to determine how the elements of the body, place, and history function in each. I also observed the varied aesthetics that BLFP artists use.

Styles and Aesthetics

In my approach, I focus intently on unpacking the performance texts. It is my view that many BLFP texts are performative. For an artist like Bridgforth, whose stylized scripts are essential to the productions of her plays, the text is key to communicating the vivid and meaningful symbolism, images, and messages in the works. The styles of the plays reflect traditional and nontraditional dramaturgical approaches, such as realism and the well-made play (*A Lady* and *Remember!*), the theatrical jazz aesthetic (*bull-jean*), the theatrical jazz aesthetic, magic, and musical theatre (*cowboy*), and slam poetry and spoken word ("Madivinez" and

"Cross–Fire"). These works all adhere to a black lesbian feminist aesthetic that privileges the image and narrative of the black lesbian protagonist and performer.

At the core of my understanding of black lesbian feminist performance are the same principles that inform a black feminist aesthetic, of which Lisa M. Anderson and Lynette Goddard have written at length. Anderson observes that black feminist playwrights "incorporate history into their works, ensuring that the histories they tell reveal an otherwise hidden history" and "fully embrace the questions of representation of black women and work to refine and reshape them,"[5] while Goddard argues that black feminist performance (as opposed to black women's performance) "is distinctly political" and "endeavor[s] to explore the limits of oppression and the ways that black women are positioned by racist, (hetero)sexist discourses."[6]

Anderson states that black feminist drama:

1. Uses incidents in the history of blacks in the United States, the diaspora, and Africa to tell a history that is generally unknown to most people in the United States, black and white;
2. Creates "imagined histories" to fill in the gaps in the histories of black women, particularly lesbians, gay men, and other black "queers," whose histories have been left out;
3. Directly confronts the racist, sexist images of black women that have been projected by the dominant culture;
4. Also confronts the racist, sexist images of black women that have been projected by the dominant culture;

[5] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 115.

[6] Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 41.

5. Reveals the abuse that black women suffer at the hands of men of all races;
6. Demonstrates the ways in which institutional racism affects blacks in their dealings with whites and with other blacks;
7. Emphasizes the importance of reproductive freedom for black women;
8. Incorporates oral folk culture or oral urban culture, depending on the focus of the work;
9. Looks deeply into the lives of young women and the challenges that face them, including gang life and education;
10. Addresses an important audience, whether that audience is black women, black people in general, or everyone.[7]

Building upon Goddard and Anderson's research on black feminist drama, I show how BLFP addresses the above issues *and* explicitly and unapologetically represents black lesbians, while considering lesbian gender identities and expressions (such as, butch–femme, lady–woman, and wo'mn). Sexuality, gender, and religion are also key themes in BLFP, and each artist addresses them all in their work.

Further, BLFP artists combine African diaspora, feminist/womanist, and queer cultural aesthetics. According to Philip U. Effiong, "[t]he concept of Africanisms in African-American art has evolved out of the pressing need for Black artists to resist stereotypes and redefine artistic forms that would address the unique conditions and struggles of their people."[8] *delta dandi* is a

[7] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 115-16. She states that black feminist playwrights consider some or all of the above.

[8] Philip U. Effiong, "Africanisms in African-American Drama," in *Encyclopedia of Africa and the Americas: Culture Politics, and History*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 378. Effiong, Barbara J. Molette, Carlton W. Molette, and Molefi Kete Asante have written at length about Africanisms in black art and drama. See the Molettes's *Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1986) and Asante's *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

model of intersectionality in performance that foregrounds "[b]lack [queer] heroism and cultural values by tapping from ritual designs, musical and dance patterns, and themes influenced by an African world-view."[9] Bridgforth also embraces an Africanist temporality—"[t]he past, the present, the future/the living, the dead, the not yet born, coexist"[10]—to signify that Gurl is moving from a turbulent past (American slavery) toward a more stable future. With the help of other African descendant-characters who hold powers and properties of the *orisha* (Yoruba deities), Gurl "work[s] through many lifetimes of abuse" that arise out of racist and heteropatriarchal conditions.[11]

Fusing Africanist, feminist/womanist, and queer themes, Bridgforth imbues many of her characters with queer gender identities. For example, she suggests that Baba (father) "be played by an identifiably gender queer person" and that the optional character, Conductor, "be a woman or identifiably gender queer."[12] (This can be achieved through costuming, hair, and makeup.) Another Africanist element that she employs is storytelling, which is meant to encourage a communal experience characteristic of *orality*—the tradition of communicating meaningful information through the spoken word. Not only is a historically rooted story being told by the performers to the audience, but the audience, as "active witness/participants,"[13] work with the performers by reading aloud dialogue given to them by the Conductor. Thus, by "helping to create a soundscape," the audience co-produces some of the meanings of Gurl's journey as she moves through time and space.[14] They witness her struggles as a multiply marginalized person

[9] Ibid. I insert queer, here, as this aesthetic and identity is central to Bridgforth's work. While queerness has often been dismissed or ignored in Afrocentric representations, it should be included in discussions of heroism in black art.

[10] Bridgforth, *delta dandi*, 186.

[11] Ibid, 187.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid, 222.

[14] Ibid.

and help to usher her home.

BLFP playwrights, like Bridgforth, attend to black lesbian histories in African American contexts. They are deeply concerned with relationships *between* black people. For example, despite her many traumatic experiences, Gurl finds community among other queer-oriented characters. Yet, she exists "within/without"[15] (inside and outside of) the African diaspora and "must negotiate [her] difference within [that] identity."[16] In black society, there are unwritten *politics of black respectability* (codes of appropriate behavior) that dictate acceptable racial, gender, and sexual behaviors for its members, whether they are adhered to or not.[17] These codes limit Gurl's ability to define herself and to feel a part of any one community.[18]

The Black Lesbian Romantic, Butch-Femme, and the Black Church

Much of contemporary BLFP explores what I call the *black lesbian romantic*—a thematic in which black lesbian identification and love relationships (of all kinds) are the objective without which home (utopia) is unattainable. The black lesbian romantic relates to black lesbian romance (women loving women) and other desires (family, kinship, friendships, community, God). In chapter four, for example, I analyze Lenelle Moïse's poem, "Madivinez." In it, Moïse writes about making a home with her lover. She does not focus on her romance with the woman

[15] *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Patricia Hill Collins illustrates this positionality through an analysis of black women domestics who worked in the homes of white families in the early-to-mid twentieth century. According to Collins, these women were considered, in some ways, a part of the family—due to their maternal roles—*and* as strangers because of their racial difference.

[16] Sandra Richards, "In the Kitchen, Cooking up Diaspora Possibilities: Bailey and Lewis's *Sistahs*," *Theatre Research International*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2010): 152.

[17] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[18] While so-called black and white American communities are kept separate in *delta dandi, the bull-jean stories*, and *A Lady and a Woman*, this does not mean that there is no interracial interaction. However, the primary geographies in these plays are southern and black, and the stories revolve around intraracial encounters. This insular focus reflects Du Bois's call for a theatre "about us...By us....For us....Near us" (134)—us being black people. See W.E.B. Du Bois's "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," *The Crisis* 32.3 (July 1926): 134.

directly, however; that relationship is stable. It is her relationship with her country of origin—Haiti—that is tenuous. In this poem, Moïse searches for a home within Haitian culture, as a lesbian; thus, Haiti (especially the language) becomes the romantic object of desire.

Black lesbian-feminist poet Audre Lorde's concept of *the erotic* is key to my dual understanding of the black lesbian romantic. *The erotic*, according to Lorde, is "an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered."[19] Lorde conceptualizes the erotic as a creative energy available to women through art; it is a source of power. She rejects the idea that the erotic is based in nature or wholly sexual, asserting that it has been "misnamed by men and used against women," resulting in the sexual objectification of the female body.[20] To reclaim the erotic, Lorde encourages women to move away from a self-deprecating erotic toward a self-actualizing erotic. She encourages women to reframe the erotic as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," and concludes that it can induce "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire."[21] Therefore, the erotic can symbolize an individual and communal force of will aroused through connections between women.

The erotic, in a sexual and nonsexual sense, is important to the relationships in the plays and performances in the first half of this dissertation. In chapter two, for example, I analyze two of Shirlene Holmes's plays in which the erotic is visible between the two main characters. *A Lady and a Woman* is a narrative of late-nineteenth century southern black lesbian womanhood, and *Remember What I Say!* is a late-twentieth century companion narrative. Both plays focus on the romantic, emotional, and spiritual relationship that develops between Biddie and Miss Flora

[19] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic is Power" (1978), in *Sister Outsider* (1984; repr., Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 55.
[20] Ibid, 54.
[21] Ibid, 59.

and Squirrel and Phyllis, respectively—independent African American lesbians who form familial bonds with each other. I explore the racial, gender, and sexual expectations of southern African American women during the late-1800s to illustrate how *A Lady* is a black lesbian-feminist narrative that reconfigures these politics into a love politic. In my analysis of *Remember!*, I explore the platonic love between two butch lesbians, of different generations, who meet at a Woolworth's lunch counter in the 1990s and exchange knowledge about their experiences as black butch lesbians in the old and new south.

Butch–femme gender roles are commonly represented in BLFP. In this dissertation, I understand butch–femme as a lesbian gender binary that is based on the traditional heterosexual coupling (male–female). The butch is the dominant/rmasculine figure and the femme is subordinate/feminine figure (as in *A Lady* and *Remember!*). The butch is a popular character type because she is a recognizable and spectacular figure. Lisa M. Anderson rightly posits that the image of the butch (masculine manner and dress) is performative in and out of black lesbian communities.[22] That is, there are physical characteristics of butchness that lead one to recognize a butch more easily than a femme. Notably, new generations of black lesbian artists are making new rules for identity and culture, and resisting heteronormative and homonormative notions of gender (as in *bull-jean* and *cowboy*).[23]

[22] For more on butch–femme aesthetics, generally, see Sue Ellen Case's Case's "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993). I have made a political choice not to engage directly with Case's research, as butch–femme in black lesbian communities functions in particular ways, which Lisa M. Anderson, who cites Case, clearly explains in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008).

[23] Michael Warner coined the term *heteronormativity* in "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," in *Social Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and Lisa Duggan subsequently coined the term *homonormativity* in *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

In chapter three, I analyze Bridgforth's *the bull-jean stories* and Grays's *a lady and woman* as erotic narratives between butch and femme characters. The difference between how the erotic is depicted in *A Lady* and these works is that hypermasculinity threatens the butch protagonists's black lesbian romantic—their desires for family, home, and community. Tracing the effects of excessive masculinity in these butch portrayals, I thoroughly investigate the image of the southern black butch in Bridgforth's *bull-jean* and Grays's *cowboy*. These works illustrate the performativity of the butch figure. Focusing on the butch's appropriation of hypermasculinity and its effects on the butch and the femme, I explain how the protagonists's butch performances: 1) diversify representations of southern black women, 2) disrupt traditional institutions like the black church, and 3) reconfigures the black family. Religion plays a significant role in the butch narrative. It is an institution, tradition, and idea that determines the ways that many black lesbians, like bull-jean and Donnetta, negotiate sexual and religious passion. I observe that the femme's body, in these plays, becomes a body that, like their own, the protagonists revere.

Identity, Homemaking, and Mo(u)rning

Identity is important for black lesbians, a group that has, according to the Combahee River Collective, been empowered through self-naming, self-defining, and other embodied acts of agency.[24] In full disclosure, I identify as a black queer woman, a performing artist, and a scholar. I take a black lesbian-feminist position that identity is important to the individual and collective liberation of the marginalized, especial lesbian women, whose identities, similar to mine, intersect race, gender, and sexuality. In my experience, identity can make the difference between life and death for black lesbians. However, identity is not fixed; it is, as Zora Neale

[24] See Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1977; repr. New York: The New Press, 1995).

Hurston beautifully writes of love, "uh movin' thing."[25] It is my observation that identity and love (especially self-love) are enmeshed in BLFP works. In them, black lesbian-feminist identification is a form of self-love.

In the second half of this dissertation, I focus on solo performances, as created for, by, and about the artists. Grays's *cowboy* mixes styles and aesthetics in ways that, at first, seem disparate, but eventually parallel the changing butch narratives of Donnetta and Bulldagger, both of whom must come to terms with the impact of their hypermasculine behaviors on the femmes they want to make homes with. This illustration of how identity can change, based on the needs of the protagonist/perfomer, leads me to me Chin and Moïse's black lesbian feminist performance poetry.

Chin and Moïse proclaim black lesbian-feminist identities in the works I analyze. Solo performance proves an appropriate style for their delivery and message of intersectional identity, displacement, and homemaking.[26] Solo performances require a proficient and dynamic performer who can portray multiple characters with various traits, perspectives, and knowledge bases. Scholar D. Soyini Madison writes:

> when a black woman stands onstage alone, she must become the consummate griot, the epic storyteller, the virtuosic alchemist letting lose blood, red, woman cycles of hard truth, unabashed literacies, and black female abjection. Like the

[25] This idea is taken from Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston's protagonist, Janie, a southern black woman, speaks of her love for the now-dead Tea Cake. Janie tells her friend, Pheoby, "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore" (191). That is, the subjects or objects of love shape the quality of it. Despite Janie having been married twice, her short romance with Tea Cake is the most genuine of her relationships. He treated Janie as a partner in life rather than his property.

[26] I am invoking José Esteban Muñoz's idea of homemaking, or worldmaking, here, which is essentially the process (through self-defining and developing meaningful relationships with other queer people) of creating a safe space where one can express identity and where their identities are embraced. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.

> griot, she is reader, singer, keeper, and destroyer of the record. She brushes the dust off the record book and opens it with purpose. This is a radical act of grand proportion and courage. She reclaims the record, holds the book to her ear, and listens to the spectrum of its horrors as well as its glorious triumphs.[27]

Capturing the contributions that one black female body can make in performance, Madison rightly identifies the "radical" potential of black women's solo performance.

In chapter four, Chin and Moïse's autobiographical solo performance poems illustrate the multiple ways in which these two women, as transnational black lesbians, have experienced displacement from their communities. Chin and Moïse articulate their intersectional identities and testify (directly to the audience) about key incidents of oppression that have shaped their search for home. With distinctly different performance styles, their poems are works of radical arts activism that cut to the core of their pain, identify its cause(s)—homophobia and religiosity in the Caribbean—and allow audiences to witness their ascent to joy (through utopian mo(u)rning). When Moïse searches for a word that brings her lesbian and Haitian identities together, she seems to feel at home. When Chin uses intersectional epistemology and pedagogy to educate a student about the beautiful contradictions that arise when one attempts to define an intersectional body in simplistic terms, she feels at home. Both solo artists cherish the tensions of their identity and resist oppressive systems that insist they pick a label or forego them all to assimilate and maintain social norms.

In this chapter, I rely on Chin's and Moïse's poetry and prose to highlight the significance of slam poetry—an underground art form developed in the 1980s that reached popular audiences in the early 2000s—on their identity-based writing and performance styles. I

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[27] D. Soyini Madison, "Foreword," in *solo/black/woman: scripts, interviews, and essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2014), xii.

also explore the history of slam poetry, which, I argue, is deeply rooted in African American culture. Early in their careers, Chin and Moïse relied on the slam (a space, form, and style) to articulate the conflict with home they experienced as black lesbian U.S. citizens of Caribbean descent. Homemaking, therefore, is important to them and helps them find comfort in uncomfortable spaces, actuating what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as "worldmaking."[28] Muñoz writes:

> The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of "truth" that subjugate minoritarian people.[29]

For queers of color, worldmaking can be an active response to dominant cultures that seek to marginalize them. By presenting another way of being—another way of living that validates their existence, sustains them, and resists norms—black lesbians can create conceptual and material worlds where their identities exceed the boundaries of normativity.

In chapter five, my conclusion, I synthesize my textual and performance analyses of utopian mo(u)rnings in black lesbian feminist performance. I restate my position that contemporary black lesbian feminist performance is grounded in a rich history, aesthetic, and tradition. I posit that the works of BLFP artists are flexible blueprints that inspire black lesbian artists who seek refuge in the theatre. I assert that Holmes, Bridgforth, Grays, Chin, and Moïse make space for black lesbian identity in their plays and performance pieces, claiming previously prohibited geographies to represent the diversity and nuance of black lesbian life. I hope that my

[28] Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.

[29] Ibid.

dissertation attests to the richness of contemporary black lesbian feminist performances. These texts and performances are viable objects of study that need: 1) to be critically analyzed and theorized, 2) to be produced at large theatres, and 3) to be published in theatre and performance anthologies. While playwrights and performers are creating new black lesbian feminist performances for receptive audiences, without critical attention, these works, like so many in the past, will be overlooked.

Disidentification, Intersectionality, and Differential Consciousness

To better understand these works, I examine the plays and performances through an intersectional framework, relying on concepts such as *disidentification, intersectionality, differential consciousness*. Queer of color, feminist, and race theorists have argued that identity serves a useful purpose for minorities who have been rejected because of their race, gender, and sexual orientation.[30] To avoid being confined by identity and culture, marginalized persons push beyond the boundaries of identity to expand its use for their changing lives. BLFP artists conceptualize a utopian space in which intersectional identity is normalized and comprehensible. In this space, black queer women can identify and disidentify with multiple groups; they can move through identity, fusing, and shedding the identities that feel right to them. They do this while adhering to or rejecting strict cultural politics inherent to these identity-based groups, which results in rich, dramatic interpretations of the complexities and contradictions of intersectional identities.

[30] See Ramon H. Rivera-Servera's *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), E. Patrick Johnson's "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community," *Callaloo*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1998), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Crossing Press, 1982).

I am indebted to scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw, José Esteban Muñoz, Chela Sandoval and Jill Dolan. Dolan and Muñoz have argued that the theatre is a safe space—a utopian space—in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons rehearse and perform identity without punishment.[31] Despite the liberatory potential of the theatre, African American lesbians are rarely represented in Performance Studies, Feminist, and LGBTQ scholarship. Most of the existing scholarship explores how white lesbians, white gay men, black gay men, and Latino gay men living in the United States rely on performance to resist what feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins terms *systems of oppression* (racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and xenophobia).[32] Thus, compared to white lesbians, white gay men, and black and Latino gay men—who are increasingly represented on stage, in society, and in performance scholarship—little attention is given to black lesbian feminist performance.

José Esteban Muñoz's concept of *disidentification* furthers feminist scholar Chela Sandoval's *differential consciousness* in the service of queers-of-color, explaining that queers-of-color use performance as a site of resistance to dominant gender and sexual norms. They appropriate identity, as needed, for self-preservation, while "reformatting" uncomplimentary or unnecessary excesses that conflict with their homemaking processes. Many black queer people regularly disidentify with black identity and culture. That is to say, they identify with blackness

[31] Punishment, here, should be understood as homophobia and transphobia, which can result in emotional, psychological, or physical violence. The theatre (as a space) and performance (as an act) provides LGBTQ persons a safe space to represent identity.

[32] See, for example, Sara Warner's *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012) for a study of white lesbian theatre collectives; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) for studies of white gay representation in literature; and E. Patrick Johnson's *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera's *Blacktino Queer Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) and Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) for studies of black and latina/o queer performance and performativity.

or black culture, but they do not actively embrace heterosexism, sexism, or homophobia as integral elements of their black identification. Heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia are not unique to black identity and culture, but they are prevalent in black cultural spaces. This leads many queers of color to disidentify with black culture. African American lesbians, especially those who identify as butch, actively disidentify through performances of self. To them, women are as entitled to masculinity as men are to femininity. This utopian ideal expands the possibilities for the gender categories of man and woman and revises the power dynamics attributed to gender.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (2009), Muñoz argues that home is an especially contested space for queers of color.[33] Muñoz's theory of *disidentification* assumes that, as a marginalized group, queers-of-color resist racial, gender, and sexual oppression by subverting identity through queer performances that allow them to exist more freely in society. He explains that these kinds of performances (such as those of Marga Gomez and Vaginal I Davis) resist white supremacy and heteronormativity. Muñoz asserts that queers-of-color appropriate identity for self-preservation and homemaking, as queerness can pose a threat to the dominant culture. As I understand Muñoz, queer performance can resist the narrow requirements of a heterosexist culture (that is, men must embody masculinity, women must embody femininity, both genders must maintain heterosexual unions, et cetera) by taking what is deemed abnormal by the dominant culture and making it normative in queer contexts.

Disidentification is also founded on Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's intersectionality, which is the idea that persons whose identities cross various categories simultaneously must

[33] Sandra L. Richards and Aída Hurtado have observed that home can be a contested space for women of the diaspora, especially transnational women of color. See Richards's "In the Kitchen, Cooking up Diaspora Possibilities," *Theatre Research International*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2010) and Hurtado's "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color," *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989).

negotiate their identities at their intersections to navigate systems of oppression that do not serve them outside of a "single-axis framework."[34] Crenshaw and other black feminist scholars have posited that black women's intersectionality reflects the interconnectedness of oppressive systems including but not limited to racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. These intersections, they argue, must be addressed for black women's identities and experiences of discrimination to be understood in all of their complexities. Furthermore, scholars have argued that African American lesbians qualify as an underserved and underprivileged population whose lives are indelibly shaped by intersecting systems of oppression that discount them as significant contributors to society and art.[35] Notably, black lesbians experience oppression at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and nation, as several influential black feminist scholars have argued (Barbara Smith, (Akasha) Gloria T. Hull, and Cheryl L. Clarke).[36] This reality keeps them and their needs out of public view and ensures that they will remain private. Reduced quality of life stems from rejection in their communities of origin, leading black lesbians on a lifelong journey for home.

In *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), Chela Sandoval asserts that "U.S. third world feminist" social movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s provide "access to a different way of

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[34] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *Critical Race Feminism*, 2nd ed., ed. AK Wing (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 24.

[35] See Aisha Moodie-Mills's "Jumping Beyond the Broom: Why Black Gay and Transgender Americans Need More Than Marriage Equality," *Center for American Progress* (January 2011). A public policy researcher, Moodie-Mills finds that oppressive systems not only affect the quality of life for black lesbians (e.g. how they are cared for and how they care for themselves) but also the length of their lives.

[36] See Barbara Smith's "Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), Gloria T. Hull's "Lines She Did Not Dare': Angelina Weld Grimké, Harlem Renaissance Poet," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Cheryl L. Clarke's "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," in *Home Girls*, 2nd edition (New York: Kitchen Table Women-of-color Press, 1983).

conceptualizing not just feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general."[37] This consciousness, she argues, was a *differential consciousness*—"a strategy of oppositional ideology [whose] powers can be thought of as mobile—not nomadic, but rather cinematographic: a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates *while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners."*[38] I envision differential consciousness as a series of snapshots, frames, or scenes of a subject taken over time within a particular context. The changes in composition appear slight, but the subject—the black lesbian character—moves and is moved. The characters in BLFP are oppositional ones that find ways to resist heterosexism in their communities, by being themselves. Their resistance alters their internal lives in ways that enable them, with help, to continue moving toward more livable futures in their communities.

In black lesbian feminist drama, these scenes of differential consciousness require a new awareness of the subject to understand the developing narrative. As with *delta dandi*, the artist *and* the spectator must participate in meaning making regarding the black lesbian to comprehend her narrative; thus, the plays dramatize how mobile (or fluid) identities, such as black lesbian identity, are performative. Judith Butler emphasizes that performativity is not the *performance* of identity; instead, it is the effect that one's performance has on other subjects. If identity is liberatory and performative, then it has the potential to bring BLFP theatre practitioners and audiences together.

The idea of the future is a common theme in the race, feminist, and queer theoretical scholarship that I have relied on in this study. However, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There*

[37] Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: Differential Social Movement I," in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 41-42. According to Sandoval, there are five modes of oppositional consciousness in social movement: 1) equal rights, 2) revolutionary, 3) supremacist, 4) separatist, and 5) differential consciousness.

[38] Ibid, 43 (emphasis added).

of Queer Futurity (2009), Muñoz complicates the idea that the future holds all of the answers for multiply marginalized people. He asserts that the present, too, must be considered a hopeful, if not a hope-filled, temporality. "[Q]ueerness," he writes, "is not yet here; thus, we [LGBTQ persons] must always be future bound in our desires and designs."[39] I heed Muñoz's political call to queer artists and scholars, as he advocates "to vacate the here and now for a then and there" and "step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present." I meld Munoz's claims with an Africanist approach that considers time and space as cyclical and, moreover, fluid—as he writes, "here," "now," "then," *and* "there."[40] This Africanist and queer sense of futurity informs my theorization that characters in BLFP pursue homemaking as a reproductive effort—to sustain themselves, their families, communities, and histories.

Black Lesbian Identity in the Scholarly Literature

While black lesbians are not yet the focus of much of queer-of-color performance scholarship, the interdisciplinary research in this area is growing. I am encouraged and enlightened by the scholarship of Lisa M. Anderson and Lynette Goddard—both of whom establish clear characteristics of black feminist theatre and illustrate the significance of black lesbian representation in black feminist drama. The research on black lesbian identity and performance spans Black Studies, Feminist Studies, Queer Studies, and Performance Studies. Scholars in these fields have explored black lesbian identity and queerness in ways that are useful to my study.

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[39] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185.

[40] Ibid. Queer futurity is Muñoz's response to what he calls "straight time." He is invoking a heterocentric utopian concept of time—"Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction" (22). If straight futures revolve around reproduction, then futurity has a different meaning for queer people who cannot reproduce in the same ways.

Scholars have observed the absence of black women's voices in theatre and performance. In the introduction of *solo/black/woman: scripts, interviews, and essays* (2014), editors E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera assert:

> The work of black women performers, playwrights, and critics in the African diaspora represents a diverse and critical component of black arts and letters. Although often overshadowed by the work of their male counterparts, black women artists' and critics' contributions to the black aesthetic reflect a deep and abiding commitment to the liberation of black people in general and to black women in particular.[41]

Johnson and Rivera-Servera's anthology highlights black women's contributions to theatre and performance and the significance of solo performance for black women dramatists and performance artists. I observe that Bridgforth's *delta dandi* is the only black lesbian play featured, which leads me to conclude that more BLFP texts need to be recovered, published, and critically evaluated to ensure that black lesbians are represented on stage and in the scholarship.

The absence of black lesbians in performance scholarship is evident in Black Studies and Queer Studies. Black lesbian images and narratives are ignored because of the systematic nature of respectability politics. Evelynn Hammonds's "Black W(h)oles and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" (1994) is an invaluable article on black lesbian sexuality and its place in the Lesbian and Gay Studies canon. Hammonds observes that black lesbians are missing in LGBTQ Studies because of the lack of effort by white gay and lesbian scholars to better understand the intersections of black lesbian identity. She then explains the origins of what Evelyn Brooks

[41] E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, eds. *solo/black/woman: scripts, interviews, and essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), xviii. This ambitious anthology includes scripts, interviews, and essays of/about Robbie McCauley, Rhodessa Jones, Nancy Cheryll Davis-Bellamy, Sharon Bridgforth, Stacey Karen Robinson, Misty DeBerry, and Edris Cooper-Anifowoshe.

Higginbotham terms *the politics of black respectability* and the concomitant politics of silence that inhibit Black Studies scholars from considering the legitimacy of black lesbian identity.

Higginbotham asserts, in *Righteous Discontent* (1993), that post slavery, African American clubwomen appropriated white respectability politics to counter racist notions of them being uncivilized, immoral, and savage.[42] Hammonds observes, "there were problems with this strategy": "First, it did not achieve its goal of ending the negative stereotyping of black women. And second, some middle-class black women engaged in policing the behavior of poor and working-class women and any who deviated from a Victorian norm in the name of protecting the 'race'."[43] Respectability politics did not spare middle-class black women from racism and it encouraged intra-racial oppression, such as colorism, classism, and heterosexism. Hammonds rightly claims that black lesbians are not visible in lesbian and gay scholarship, but white lesbians and gays are. In Black Studies, she observes, this group is also missing from the scholarship, an oversight that she attributes to politics of black respectability that lead black people to generally exclude queer contributions to black culture.

It is important that blackness and queerness be considered together in scholarship about black lesbians, otherwise analyses of both aesthetics and cultures are incomplete. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005) is an interdisciplinary collection of essays that initiated a much-needed discourse between Black Studies and Queer Studies. Co-editor E. Patrick Johnson, in "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," presents the basis for an analytic inspired by his grandmother's concept and use of the word *quar*e:

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[42] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[43] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6.2 + 3 (1994), 133.

> On the one hand, my grandmother uses 'quare' to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off-kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of 'queer.' On the other hand, she also deploys 'quare' to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience.[44]

Johnson repurposes queer theory to reflect not only his experience as a black gay man, but also his southern black grandmother's way of understanding people *like* him. African American culture, he observes, shares space with queerness and is, thereby, always already *quare*. I apply a quare lens to my readings of BLFP performances as it allows me to take seriously black heterocentric perspectives as important external factors for the characters.

Black lesbians often resist marginalization by asserting their blackness, queerness, and womanness pubicly. In "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" (1995), Cheryl L. Clarke argues that black communities must address their sexism and homophobia to achieve solidarity and liberation. She argues that lesbian-feminism is an ideology by which oppressed women can become emancipated and an effective method of resistance to obstruct patriarchy. Clarke is not suggesting that all women should be lesbians; she recognizes the impact of black lesbian-feminism and its potential to educate and empower women. Clarke's most recent writing, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005), expands her earlier work by focusing on black women poets writing during the Black Power Movement from 1968 to 1978. Her final chapter, "Transferences and Confluences: Black Arts and Black Lesbian-Feminism in Audre Lorde's 'The Black Unicorn'," presents analyses of Lorde's collection of poems and the

[44] E. Patrick Johnson, "Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 126.

impact of lesbian-feminist politics in art during and after the movement. This is relevant to my study because it lays out a black lesbian feminist politics, the foundation of black lesbian feminist performance. It is my view that a Lordeian erotic potential undergirds black lesbian feminism and can encourage women to move, act, speak, write, and create art from their perspectives.

Matt Richardson's *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (2013), which focuses on the literary contributions of several African American lesbian writers, including Bridgforth, argues that black lesbian literature offers routes to home "that [ultimately] point to what is *irresolute* and *irresolvable* about the Black relationship to normative definitions of gender, sexuality, and family."[45] Richardson defines that which is "irresolute" as "tak[ing] on the connotation of something unfixed, with movement and potential," while identifying the "irresolvable" as "how Blackness remains structurally positioned as 'Other' in dominant understandings of the human, which…cannot be resolved through respectability and civility."[46] The distinction Richardson makes between the irresolute and the irresolvable relates to black respectability politics. Black cultural spaces have been shaped by unspoken rules about how black people should carry themselves in public and in private to appear upstanding (for example, heterosexuality). Thus, it can be difficult for black straight and black queer people to come together as a single community.

With the intention of making space for black lesbians in theatre and performance, Lynette Goddard's *Staging Black Feminisms* (2007) focuses on the work of black British women playwrights, many of whom are first or second generation British citizens of African descent. Goddard explores black lesbianism in Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* (1986) and *Twice Over* (1988)

[45] Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 4-5.

[46] Ibid.

and Valerie Mason-John's *Sin Dykes* (1998)—plays "concerned with questions of black female sexual identity, categorisation and stereotype and consider the political and emotional choices of sexual behavior."[47] Goddard's attention to the taboo theme of bondage and sadomasochism in Mason-John's *Sin Dykes*, for example, exemplifies how important it is for scholars to examine subcultural practices in lesbian contexts. I join Goddard in exploring narratives in which black women have sexual agency outside of male-centered and/or heterosexual narratives. To this end, Goddard provides varied black lesbian feminist analyses of the few accessible works of this kind.

Again, the dominant image of black lesbian performance is the butch. The femme is present, but she is a peripheral character. The butch and the femme occupy unique positions in and out of straight and queer spaces. In *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008), Anderson (reading Peggy Phelan) posits that "there is a lesbian code of marked and unmarked. The unmarked lesbian is the butch; she functions as the visible lesbian both in lesbian culture and in the larger culture" while "[t]he femme […] is consciously the marked 'other' in the lesbian community […] because she is assumed to be the marked woman/unmarked heterosexual woman in the larger community."[48] In other words, Anderson suggests that outside of the *in-group*, butches cannot effectively pass, while femmes can. Because of this, the femme is deemed *other* within the group. This is the state in which I find the femme in the works I analyze. In my study, I argue that the femme typically occupies an outsider-within status in these narratives. When the butch narrative is the focus, the femme is usually silent or portrayed as an unreliable character.

The depiction of the silent femme is a problem. *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (2007), Kara Keeling investigates "the conditions of possibility for [black lesbians'] survival, as concepts, as identities, as communities,

[47] Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms*, 106.

[48] Anderson, 110-11, citing Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

and perhaps most important, as problems."[49] Keeling interrogates the visibility of the black butch and the invisibility of the black femme in cinema, determining that "mark[ing] a highly contested and contingent mode of existence—one that…cannot not speak or not appear or not re-member—the black femme sets us to work on questions of survival, including considerations of affective labor, excess, and the (re)production of value."[50] Keeling finds that contemporary representations of black lesbian life depict asymmetrical power dynamics between the butch and the femme, a phenomenon that is also apparent in BLFP. This is relevant to my study of black lesbian feminist performance because I observe that dramatists reevaluate the stereotypical presentation of the black butch to represent a more accurate portrayal, while neglecting to reevaluate the condition of the black femme.

Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2003) takes a materialist view of blackness and sexual difference as a way to "locate African American racial formations alongside other racial formations and within epistemological procedures believed to be unrelated or tangential to African American culture."[51] Ferguson's study extends queer-of-color theory to critique U.S. liberal capitalism and evince the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are considered in terms of cultural and economic value. Ferguson's work shows that, while black queers are devalued, commercialism can change that for better or worse, which is relevant to my study because it helps me to understand the role of commercialism in slam poetry. When black queer artists are represented in popular theatre, like the slam poetry of Chin and Moïse, their work may be altered to suit the needs of the dominant (read, non-LGBTQ)

[49] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.

audience. This can become an issue for political artists who do not want to sacrifice the radical quality of their work for money and popularity.

Black lesbian feminist performance has a rich history that is yet to be fully uncovered. It is clear that this genre has a broad scope and the potential to impact newer generations of theatre and performance artists for whom blackness, queerness, and womanness matter, as well as the potential to inform audiences about the specificities of black lesbian experience in the United States. It is also apparent that BLFP is both personal and political. The stakes are high for BLFP because the black lesbian artists who create these works are marginalized because of their race, gender, and sexuality. They create works about black lesbians in a society that values white, male, cisgender, heterosexual images and narratives. Still, BLFP artists continue to dramatize black lesbian identity on the stage and in creative ways for specific ends: visibility and survival. This dissertation lays some of the groundwork toward a larger analysis of BLFP.

CHAPTER 2

A WORLD OF HER OWN:

SHIRLENE HOLMES'S *A LADY AND A WOMAN* AND *REMEMBER WHAT I SAY!*

> "It was this meditation I was having about women's lives back in the 1800s and how they negotiated their lives, especially if they were same-sex loving. I wanted to write a play that was about African American women...and about the southern culture and the folk wisdom. I wanted to address issues about spirituality and sexuality…and deconstruct some ideas about how women lived their lives. What's a lady? What's a woman?"[52]

> "When African American women begin to write they write about something serious. When black women get the stage, they like to write about issues—serious matters. I write in that tradition."[53]

> "When I sat down [to write *A Lady and a Woman*] I said, 'I'm lonely. I'll make me a world.' I do that with my writing. If it's not there, I'll put it there."[54]
>
> —Shirlene Holmes

[52] Shirlene Holmes, Interview, "Theatre Rhinoceros presents *A Lady and a Woman* by Shirlene Holmes," https://youtu.be/0zwafHntuac (Accessed May 19, 2015).

[53] Ibid.

[54] Richard Dodds, "Where sex & spirit intersect" in *The Bay Area Reporter*, http://www.ebar.com/arts/art_article.php?sec=theatre&article=924 (Accessed May 20, 2015).

Introduction

According to Lisa M. Anderson, "Most plays featuring black lesbian characters are plays by black lesbians."[55] That is, if a playwright identifies as black, same-gender-loving, *and* woman, that identity will likely be reflected in the characters and stories she imagines for the stage. Shirlene Holmes (b. 1958), who, today, identifies as a "none"—"don't want none, don't get none, don't need none"—but at one point identified as a black lesbian, writes plays in which the act of self-defining (and redefining) is a theme.[56] In 1990, Holmes set out to make a world of her own in *A Lady and a Woman* and she continued to shape that world in *Remember What I Say*! (1996), an unproduced play in which she considers the significance of race, gender, age, religion, health, maternity, and sexuality in black womanhood.[57]

A Lady and a Woman, set in a southern black town in the 1890s, is a romance between two black women. Miss Flora Devine—a tall, feminine divorcee—is an innkeeper. Mary "Biddie" Higgins—a short, masculine butcher—is her new boarder. Brought together by happenstance and held together through conversation, they form a fast friendship. Through dialogue, they excavate old pain and support one another through the telling of that pain. Then, like any good romance, the unexpected happens and they fall in love. The play is written in a realistic style and constructed as a well-made play. However, as Anderson and Goddard observe, black feminist dramas often employ nonrealistic elements that disrupt what some black women playwrights consider to be constraints in the form. Holmes uses realism to establish Flora and Biddie in a historical southern geography, while subtly chipping away at the form with themes of

[55] Anderson, 96-97. She also notes that they are notably absent from most anthologies and are typically produced at small theatres that specialize in queer works" (Ibid).

[56] Interview with the playwright. August 2016.

[57] Both plays are featured in her Pride Play series. Some of Holmes's black queer one-act plays include: "Jo" (1993), "The Calling" (1999), "Dirty Glass" (2000), "Asia's Wedding Day" (2001), "Oh Lorde" (2001), "Good...Night" (2002), and "Heart Aches" (2005). All are unpublished.

the spectacular and the metaphysical (similar to August Wilson's plays).[58] Although realistic, Anderson asserts that *A Lady* has "a political focus" that "is in the situation she dramatizes: black women do fall in love with each other, make lives together, live various gender expressions, and are important parts of black communities."[59] Holmes sets the play when and where she does to recognize the historical presence of black lesbian unions.

Remember What I Say!, set in Atlanta in the late 1990s, is the story of a black lesbian friendship. Squirrel—an "African American dyke in her mid 70s" is retired—and Phyllis—an "African American lesbian in her early 30s"—is a Physical Education teacher.[60] The unlikely pair meet at a Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Atlanta. Squirrel has lived in the city for over 50 years and Phyllis has recently moved there from Chicago. Like Biddie and Flora, their relationship begins with polite conversation and deepens into a life-changing bond. Their butch–butch friendship quickly becomes a mother-daughter relationship. Both women rely on each other as *family*—a term and concept popular in black lesbian and gay communities to connote a queer family unrelated by blood.

I am particularly interested in this platonic black lesbian romance and the complications (and hilarity) that ensue when two black butch characters, from different generations, find home in one another, and compare notes on black lesbian womanhood. For example, when they try to flesh out a definition of what a black lesbian is, what she looks like, how she behaves, and how

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[58] This metaphysical is featured in nearly all of Wilson's works. See, for example, Bynum's obsession with the "Shiny Man" in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (New York: A Plume Book,1988).

[59] Lisa M. Anderson's "Signifying Black Lesbians: Dramatic Speculations," in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 111.

[60] Shirlene Holmes, "*Remember What I Say!:* A Pride Play in One Act" (1996; rev., unpublished, 2004). Also, the playwright uses the term "dyke" to describe Squirrel. It is used in a modern context and is similar to, if not the same as, "Bulldagger" in meaning. Many queer-identified women have reclaimed the homophobic epithet "dyke" and use it as an in-group term to identify a hard butch, one who assumes a masculinized persona and is lesbian. Sometimes "dyke" is used to describe a lesbian, regardless of gender identity or expression.

she thinks, Squirrel finds herself confused and Phyllis finds herself tired. While Squirrel takes a traditional butch view of gender and sexuality (she believes that a black lesbian couple should consist of a butch and femme), Phyllis is more fluid (she believes a butch can wear dresses, too).

In each play, respectively, Holmes deconstructs traditional notions of butch–femme and butch–butch relationships. To illustrate how she does this, I begin by engaging with butch–femme as it is commonly understood. I then clarify and explore the alternate terms in *A Lady*, which connote a slightly different lesbian gender binary (lady–woman). I then explain how Miss Flora, Biddie, Squirrel, and Phyllis disidentify with, but still remain a part of, a tight-knit southern black community that has, at times, oppressed them on the basis of skin color, gender, and sexuality. Further, I determine that all four characters resist notions of respectability (such as gender conformity, heterosexuality, and the traditional family unit) by disidentifying with those communities, by mourning the pain associated with their oppression, and by molding families.

A Lady and a Woman

A Lady and a Woman is a two-act play that premiered in 1990 at OutProud Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. Decades later, it provokes audiences to ask questions about black femininity, black spirituality, black community, and black lesbian romance.[61] The two central questions of the play are in its title: *What is a lady? What is a woman?* By posing these questions and suggesting that there is a difference between the gendered identities, Holmes troubles the idea of femininity. She proposes that lesbians, like heterosexuals, have ways of naming themselves and reasons for doing so.

In this play, the terms "lady" and "woman" lie along the gendered spectrum of the female. When they first meet, Biddie is checking into the Inn. Flora mistitles her as "Miss"—an

[61] The play was recently produced by Theatre Rhinocerous and directed by John Fisher at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco. See Appendix, figures 1-2.

honorofic commonly used to refer to an unmarried woman. Biddie rejects this title, defines these terms for Flora, and illustrates the social roles of a lady and a woman in relation to each other, as she understands them.

> MISS FLORA: You'll be in room 1-B. Miss Higgins, and...
>
> BIDDIE: Just call me Biddie. I reserve "Miss" for ladies.
>
> MISS FLORA: Ain't you a lady?
>
> BIDDIE: You're the lady, Miss Flora, I'm a woman.[62]

Flora is confused, at first. (Biddie looks like a lady; that is, she looks like a female). Lesbian gender norms, for Biddie, are specific and relate to a code of ethics and behavior that inform a particular black lesbian worldview.

Biddie explains that Flora is the lady and should be called *Miss*. Still, Flora is not quite sure of her meaning.

> BIDDIE: You're the flower. I'm the blade. You seal up and I open up. You the kind that carries and I'm the kind that hauls.
>
> MISS FLORA: I think I understand, but stick around till I'm real clear about it.
>
> BIDDIE: I will miss, Miss Flora.
>
> [*Pause.*][63]

Using double entendre, veiled in poetic language, Biddie compares and contrasts the two gendered categories—a woman, to her, is more masculine than a lady, and a lady is more feminine than a woman.

While these definitions are of Biddie's own making, they situate her within society's preferred heterosexual binary of man and woman *and* the lesbian gender binary of butch and

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[62] Shirlene Holmes, "A Lady and a Woman," in *Amazon All-Stars: Thirteen Lesbian Plays*, ed. Rosemary Keefe Curb (New York: Applause, 1996), 189.

[63] Ibid.

femme. Since the 1950s, butch and femme identity in lesbian and gay culture have been considered a bold affront to, and sometimes an appropriation of, heteronormativity.[64] Anderson observes, "By the 1990s, however, the academic investigations into butch and femme (as well as other lesbian identities) had reclaimed them not as mimicry of heterosexuality but as lesbian subject positions or as ways of being (in the phenomenological sense)."[65] Biddie's logic is informed by butch-femme, but is essentially womanist. She does not want to be a man; she is invested in her womanness, but not necessarily femininity. However, to accommodate her masculinity, she alters the terms to suit her identitarian needs.

A woman (the butch) might act as a protector of a lady (the femme). She might defend her honor and/or do physical labor in and around the home. When Biddie refers to herself as "the kind that hauls" and Flora as "the kind that carries," she positions the both of them, based on their gender expression, within masculine-feminine gender roles. She also suggests, using symbolism of a blade and a flower, that a lady and a woman assume different sexual roles or positions. However flawed, this lesson is a teaching moment. Biddie is teaching Flora, as she understands it, how black lesbians perform in the world. Hers is a butch epistemology informed by her experience as a lesbian and a woman, an intersection that is new to Flora.

Naming and defining oneself in public space is a powerful act. This is evident in Flora's reaction to Biddie—there is a pause, indicating that she is speechless and is processing Biddie's claims. Scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues that self-definition is important to black women because it can be a "part of the journey from victimization [internalized oppression] to a free mind."[66] In relaying this philosophy about ladies and women, Biddie both appropriates and

[64] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 104.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 123. Here, she discusses the importance of self-definition for a variety of black women, including writers and blueswomen, whose "assertion of self usually comes at

eschews traditional notions of gender. This serves her as she is empowered by performing butchness; however, by naming Flora a lady, she exacts a masculinist gaze onto the femme.

Biddie means well, but she makes an imposition on Flora's identity. This is ironic because over the course of the play, they both resist the gaze of their community. They do so by *disidentifying* "on, with, and against" the patriarchal and heteronormative notions that undergird their community.[67] Muñoz writes:

> Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.[68]

Biddie and Flora resist the constraints of "blackness" (read, the assumption of heterosexuality) that threaten their status as respectable women.

Working from within, they even make a family together, a seemingly small but impactful act of resistance that shows that their family is a black family, too. Muñoz continues:

> To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an

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the end of a song, after the description or analysis of the troublesome situation. This affirmation of self is often the only solution to that problem or situation" (124).

[67] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

[68] Ibid, 11-12.

> identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity.[69]

To disidentify does not mean that one does not identify as black, culturally or otherwise, it means that one "reformats" blackness to make space for their other identities.[70]

Wandering and the Myth of the Strong Black Woman

Before I analyze the play in depth, it is important to acknowledge the politics of wandering that leads Biddie to Flora's inn. Since she moves freely from town to town, her mobility is also indicative of power. Scholar Sarah Jane Cervenak characterizes *wandering* as a "mode of resistance" and a liberatory practice for racialized and gendered bodies that have been surveilled and punished for deviating from white heteropatriarchal expectations.[71] She writes:

> a philosophical performance that becomes itself outside of surveillance, outside the four-block restrictions of others' visions and fears of "dangerous dancing." Put another way, on the other side of stop and frisk, untravelable blocks, violent stares, and vicious (mis)readings, wandering still might get you home.[72]

The "home" that Cervenak refers to is not necessarily a physical space; it can be an intellectual or spiritual space.[73] This concept of home and the analytic of *wandering* are useful for understanding Biddie's and Flora's search for physical and romantic.

As Biddie physically wanders in out of black southern spaces, she exposes the pockets of queerness that exist within them. A visibly queer woman, she moves through these spaces with

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid, 12.

[71] Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 172.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Again, Cervenak defines "home" in a new way. Home is a safe space, be it physical, intellectual, or spiritual. It is a space that Trayvon Martin was prohibited from reaching when he was killed on February 26, 2012 for walking while black.

an ease that, I believe, comes from the residents' familiarity with her (and women like her). They also rely on her services to sustain the community. Helping families with their basic needs—from butchering their animals so that they can preserve the meat to carpentry and other labor-intensive duties—Biddie takes pride in her work. She wanders into black towns with an air of confidence and swagger. More importantly, she wanders into these spaces without shame.

Still, there is danger in wandering. For a masculine black female body moving in and through the south at this time (and even today), moving in and through racist and heterosexist spaces is a risk emotionally and physically. Biddie is recognizably (and, likely, passably) masculine. She wears men's clothing, and does work traditionally performed by men. Her sex is female, her gender is (decidedly) woman, and her lesbian/queer gender identity is along the butch spectrum. Hence, Biddie's black butch lesbian identity certainly puts her at risk for intense scrutiny and potential harm, yet her geographical, emotional, and intellectual wanderings enable her to find a way safely home—to Miss Flora.

At the beginning of Act I, Biddie enters Miss Flora's Inn with luggage in tow. It is a hot morning and Biddie has been traveling all night. Someone in the town has recommended Flora's Inn as a place for her to board in this town. When she enters the establishment she lays eyes on Flora and, as the stage directions indicate, "is immediately enraptured."[74] Biddie is in need of a temporary place to live as she is in the town to find work. Biddie is originally from Virginia, and she travels throughout the south to butcher hogs and other animals. The text reveals some of what/whom she has encountered during her travels, like some of the romantic trysts she has had throughout the years. One gets the impression that Biddie has had many romantic, emotional and sexual experiences—none of which have been long lasting. By the way that Biddie easily engages in conversation with Miss Flora and delves into her personal life, she is a charming

[74] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 186.

figure who is not particularly closeted in her queerness. By her manner, she is a southerner, referring to Flora throughout the play as Miss Flora. Her physique and gender expression are unusual for the time. She looks, walks, and talks differently than most women Flora encounters, as evidenced by her clothing—"leather hat, vest and pants"—and masculine comportment.[75] Biddie's wandering from town to town is, in my view, an example of kinesthetic wandering. She is able to physically move through white and black southern spaces with ease. An explanation for this freedom might be her external appearance as her masculinity might give her more freedom to roam. Nonethless, Biddie's ability to wander from town to town doing "men's work" does not help her escape the memories of an upbringing in which she was conditioned to believe that her dark skin was undesirable and an obstacle to overcome.

Visually, Holmes gives the two characters distinctly different looks. Biddie is a dark-skinned, "mannish," four-foot-eight butcher, while Miss Flora is a brown-skinned "buxom," six-foot tall innkeeper. This visible height difference further complicates the butch image and drives the audience to question the power dynamics between the women in ways that challenge their ideas of gender. Further, Flora gives off the impression that she is tough. Her height, likely, helps to add to that persona as well as her direct speech:

> MISS FLORA: Who are you and what's your business?
>
> BIDDIE: I'm a stranger in town in need of a place to stay, and I was wondering if Miss Devine can help me.
>
> MISS FLORA: She's me and the cost is $2.00 a night. Does that suit you?
>
> BIDDIE: Suits me fine. Sure got a nice place here. Yes, a fine place. How long you been in business?

[75] Ibid.

MISS FLORA: I've been running this inn for five years and been owning it for ten. If you want "business," you have to go down the street near the tavern. This ain't that kind of place.[76]

Miss Flora warns Biddie that she will only tolerate respectable tenants. She reiterates, "Now, this ain't no boarding house; I'm running an inn. A respectable place where strangers and locals come to rest their head if they want to." Although Flora is trying to avoid having her inn associated with a "business"—that is, an institution in which money is exchanged for a service without moral expectations from either party—she is still a woman in business. She is reinforcing a politics of black respectability in and for her business.

Biddie assures Miss Flora that she understands and only needs a place to rest until she earns enough money from her work to move elsewhere.

MISS FLORA: How long you need the room for?

BIDDIE: Can we just say "until"; I'll be needing the room until.

MISS FLORA: Until when?

BIDDIE: Until I don't need it no more.[77]

Their "playful banter" with the word *until* transforms this serious moment into a lighthearted one and Flora begins to show some levity.[78] Biddie's request for the room "until" suggests to the audience that the their relationship might extend beyond that scene.

As southerners often do, Flora asks Biddie questions to find out more about her. It is better for her business if she knows who her boarders are and, perhaps, she is interested in learning more about this mysterious migrant woman. Biddie tells Flora that she works as a butcher and Flora responds, "[T]hat's men's work." Biddie replies, "Not if I get to it first. I'm

[76] Ibid, 187.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Anderson, 99.

good. Just have to be. When you're dark and knee high to a duck's ass everything you do better be worth paying for."[79] Here, Biddie explains that she has had to compensate for her short stature by being physically strong (as strong as a man) in a society that deems her weak because of her appearance. She intimates that she has had to overcome negative perceptions of her dark skin color, indicating that racism and/or colorism have been a part of her life experience. Instead of succumbing to oppression, she has countered it with work. There is also a sexual overtone to Biddie's response that should not be overlooked.

Because she is not an imposing figure, physically, Biddie says that everything she does "better be worth paying for" (though not necessarily for sale). She is confident in her ability to do good work, but she is also signifying on her intimate life. Biddie, I belive, is also asserting that she has no problems pleasing her lover. Flora is speechless by the end of the scene—"[BIDDIE picks up the key, satchel, and suitcase and exits, leaving MISS FLORA watching in awe.]"[80] Biddie is a charming character; thus, it is not clear if Miss Flora's state of awe should be attributed to Biddie's gender nonconformity and unorthodox approach to moving through the world as a black woman in the period, or if it should be attributed to something more primal (such as sexual attraction). Either way, being attracted to another woman is new territory for Miss Flora. Throughout the play, she experiences moments of curiosity, doubt, and contentedness as the relationship progresses from a friendship to a romantic partnership.

Biddie and Flora are depicted as *strong black women*. They are confident, independent, businesswomen—characteristics that are not typically associated with dramatic representations of black womanhood.[81] In drama, black women are more often portrayed as disenfranchised—

[79] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 188.
[80] Ibid, 190.
[81] I am thinking of characters in African American Theatre plays. The strong black woman type is visible in many, including Hannah in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, in *Black Theatre U.S.A.* (1940; repr.,

financially, intellectually, and/or romantically—but their so-called strength enables them to persevere. Strength becomes a reflection of black womanhood in a black communal context; it "obliges Black women to exhibit a ready endurance to a life constructed against a backdrop of obstacles, unfairness, and tellingly, a lack of assistance from others."[82]

If a black woman character shows any sign of weakness—for example, if she cries, if she refuses to submit to a man or tolerate hypermasculine/misogynistic behavior—others around her may call her blackness and womanness into question. Challenging black women's authenticity might lead them to embody a performance of strength—a "defining quality of Black womanhood"—that has limiting outcomes.[83]Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant observes:

> As a racialized construction of gender, claims of strength by and about Black women not only emphasize their authenticity but their superiority over other women and men based on their abilities to weather all manner of hardship. [...] The normalization of struggle plays a critical role in marking a Black woman's strength so that women without observable or adequate adversity in their lives become contradictory figures.[84]

Representations of the strong black woman are commonly found in African American theatre plays, such as the works of August Wilson.[85] These plays reflect a history of African American women's struggles with race, class, and gender in the United States. Black women characters are

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New York: The Free Press, 1996), Tommy in Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* in *Black Theatre U.S.A.* (1969; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1996) and Big Girl in Ed Bullins's *Clara's Ole Man* in *Ed Bullins: Twelve Plays & Selected Writings* (1965; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

[82] Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 71.

[83] Ibid, 1.

[84] Ibid, 72.

[85] I am thinking of Rose Maxon in *Fences* (New York: A Plume Book, 1986), Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), and Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: A Plume Book, 1985).

often in distress, battling major conflicts within themselves, with others, or with situations out of their control. This leads to a crisis point that ultimately determines their fate. Holmes's semi-realistic plays do not comply with the myth of strength nor does it align with the structure of this kind of embodied drama.

Holmes reconfigures the myth of the strong black woman by portraying Biddie and Flora as agential figures with pain they have not yet dealt with. Through utopian mo(u)rning performances, they navigate the pain of racism/colorism, sexism, and homophobia together to redefine womanhood for their survival. Stereotypes associated with black womanhood still arise to challenge their freedom to self-define, but they are equipped to combat them having come to terms (and defined the terms) with their identities (biological and otherwise). For example, Biddie makes a baseless assumption, which Flora partially confirms, about Flora's character. Having asked Flora about her experience as a business owner and—presumably to pursue her—Biddie asks, "So it's safe to say you don't have a husband?" Flora responds, "Don't got one and don't want one. The one I had been tossed out about five years ago now."[86] Flora attempts to change the subject by telling Biddie where her room is located—"off to the back where no one can bother you."[87] Biddie finds another angle to ask Flora about her relationship status.

> BIDDIE: He left you with this inn to run?
>
> MISS FLORA: We had a parting of the ways or in other words I throw him out.
>
> BIDDIE: You look like the type.
>
> MISS FLORA: What type?
>
> BIDDIE: The type to put a train back on track if it get off, that's all.[88]

[86] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 187.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid, 187-88.

There is more to Biddie's perception of Flora as a no nonsense woman. This assumption feeds into the stereotype of the strong black woman and denies a place for softness in black womanhood. Flora is actually a sensitive woman, but she masks this characteristic with a tough visage that she quickly sheds as Biddie gets to know her.

Still, Biddie and Flora are equals in many ways, and this helps them to communicate more effectively, even when they misrecognize one another. They are both independent, working women who do not need each other for financial security. Thus, their romance seems genuine, as if they are young girls falling in love for the first time. In the beginning, they are unaffected by the world outside of the inn and their relationship is sustained by their common philosophies and dreams. However, their arrangement becomes a problem for the community as they become more visible as a couple outside of this space.

Scars, Stretch Marks, and other Markings

Biddie and Flora discuss their birthmarks, stretch marks, and scars—physical markings that represent joyous and painful life experiences, many of which are vivid and easily recalled through testimony and witness. Each of them is marked in some way and each scar has a story to go along with it. Miss Flora's scars are more apparent than Biddie's—she has a scar on her face and stretch marks across her stomach. She becomes visibly emotional when recalling how she got them. Biddie's scars, however, are less visible—she has emotional scars from being ostracized for having dark skin and for being a petite, masculine woman. Biddie has seemingly come to terms with her trauma, but she hides her pain behind a mask of strength—a mythical characteristic often associated with black women.

Throughout the play, Biddie and Flora share their markings and their stories with each other through testimony-witnessing exchanges. The first exchange occurs in Act I, Scene 1. After

talking with Flora about her ex-husband, Biddie concludes that Flora's scar—a "long keloid scar on the right side of her face"—must have come from their final (and possibly only) altercation.[89] Flora confirms, telling her new boarder that the scar resulted from a violent incident with her ex-husband five years prior: "That's what happened the night he hit me in my face," she says. "I went back into the wall mirror. The doctor wanted to stitch up my face, but I wouldn't have it. When I got my mind back, I was sitting in jail and he was gone."[90] Flora's ex-husband hit her, which indicates that she was a victim of domestic abuse, but this testimony also suggests she is a survivor. Furthermore, she has not been conditioned to take abuse; she fights back when attacked. It is safe to conclude that she successfully defended herself that night; she went to jail and he left town.

The scar is a daily reminder of a violent past. Flora's body is a canvas that leads Biddie to draw conclusions, a few of which Flora has either not considered or does not agree with. In *Recovering the Black Female Body* (2001), Carla L. Peterson writes about the body as a bastion of meaning and perception that can be read in multiple ways. She writes:

> When invoking the term "body," we tend to think at first of its materiality—its composition as flesh and bone, its outline and contours, its outgrowth of nail and hair. But the body, as we well know, is never simply matter, for it is never divorced from perception and interpretation. As matter, the body is there to be seen and felt, and in the process it is subject to examination and speculation.[91]

Biddie, therefore, is making meaning of Flora's scarred body, at first glance.

Peterson continues:

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[89] Ibid, 186.
[90] Ibid, 188.
[91] Carla L. Peterson, "Foreword: Eccentric Bodies," in *Recovering the Black Female Body* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), ix.

> Perception and interpretation come from different sources. Each of us has a sense of the body we inhabit; but others also look at our bodies and interpret them from their own particular standpoint—coincident with, different from, or supplemental to our own. Initiated from the outside, such perceptions are inevitably partial; nevertheless, we often incorporate them into our own sense of our bodies.[92]

Biddie perceives Flora's body—her scar—as a sign of strength and resilience and inadvertently objectifies her in a manner that Flora quickly corrects. Biddie does not do this with malice; she is enamored with Flora by now and her intent is to give a compliment. However, Flora disidentifies with the notion of strength that Biddie associates with her body. In her mind, she simply survived that night.

> MISS FLORA: Doctor say I'm lucky I got sight; I said he lucky he still got a behind. We both ate a lot of glass that night.
>
> BIDDIE: It's a beautiful scar. I think it adds something to you. It's just like a medal or something. Says you been in the war of life and made it back from the last battle. Hell I got some on me, too. You know, Miss Flora, I like looking up at you. From where I'm standing, you look just like a statue or something.
>
> MISS FLORA: I don't know about all that. I ain't no piece of stone. I'm flesh and blood.[93]

Here, Miss Flora's scarred body is a gateway for the women to connect, a material reality to which they have immediate access. Flora's scar is so apparent that Biddie's perception of it is visceral. Her articulation of its meaning(s), relating the scar to beauty and war, encourages Flora

[92] Ibid.
[93] *A Lady and a Woman*, 188.

to take some of the ache out of it; that is, the scar does not have to be a thing of pain, it can be a thing of beauty.

Historically, scarification is significant to black bodies. Slave masters, overseers, and slave catchers would enact physical violence against enslaved blacks to punish, tame, and mark them as property. In writer Toni Morrison's haunting masterpiece, *Beloved*, young Sethe's mother tells her daughter—whom she rarely sees because she labors long on the plantation—that if anything were to happen and Sethe could not recognize her by her face, she could identify her by a mark under her breast—"a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin"—likely a mark representing the plantation on which was enslaved.[94] Similarly, I read the scars on Biddie and Flora's bodies as a metaphor for black women's collective suffering.

The scars reflect a history of black women's disempowerment. They represent broken familial bonds as a result of slave trade and its racist and classist foundation. They represent broken vows as a result of sexism. They are the scars of "past/passed" black women, foremothers who carried similar markings, as enslaved women and the property of men.[95] These scars not

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[94] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, First Vintage International Edition (1987; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 72. Sethe's mother steals away with her daughter to show her this mark:

> She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. [...] 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark' (72).

[95] See Harvey Young's *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 49. My reading of Flora's scarred body and the "past/passed" bodies of enslaved black women is furthered by Young's discussion of mid-19th century daguerrotypes of enslaved blacks—"silver-surfaced plates polished to a mirrorlike finish onto which images are positively burned and later developed over mercury and fixed with salt solutions" (49). He writes:

> The capacity of the daguerreotype to serve as a spatial and temporal bridge allows the contemporary viewer to realize that neither race nor the history of 'race,' as a social concept, is something from which black bodies can easily escape. It does not instantly lose its meaning the moment that a century ends or a new millennium begins. It simply cannot be discarded because ethnologists in the past have employed the term to read black bodies as being different from and inferior to differently colored bodies. The daguerreotype shows us that past events continue to echo in the present. We can see

only represent traumatic incidents, they are signifiers of the struggle that southern black women have long endured. However, Biddie loves Miss Flora's scar. Instead of finding difference in Flora, she finds similarity and that, I believe, leads them to converse openly and often about their scars and other markings.

Through memory and storytelling, they broach the subjects of childbirth and mothering. The second exchange is an unusually vulnerable moment for Biddie, in which she tells Flora that she found a baby raccoon inside of an adult raccoon she had butchered earlier in the day. She recalls that when she saw it, she began to cry—"The biggest tears run down my face and I was trying to rub them out of the creases of my neck with my free hand."[96] She tells Flora that she's always wanted a child, a son, for no particular reason. When Flora says she still has time to have one, Biddie tells her that because she is a lady she should have a baby. "You're the one ought to be having the children. You're the lady," she says. Miss Flora, confused by Biddie's rationale replies, "I declare I don't understand you sometimes. Anyways, I have been down that dead end street and ain't going back. These stretch marks are crawling on me like worms."[97] The following dialogue ensues:

> BIDDIE: Someone should kiss every one of 'em. Those marks are a woman's honor.
>
> MISS FLORA: I ain't never heard that said before. Not many people know I'm a childless mother. I keeps my body hid; I had that child when I was eleven.
>
> [...]
>
> BIDDIE: Who fathered that chile?

---

ourselves in the past. They also reveal that the future—our ever evolving present viewed from a past perspective—is implicated in the past. This is why future is always passed (tense) (49-50).

[96] *A Lady and a Woman*, 190.

[97] Ibid, 191.

[*Pause.*]

MISS FLORA: My father.

BIDDIE: Your father or your mother's husband?

MISS FLORA: My mother's third husband. They locked me away in my auntie's house for almost a year.

BIDDIE: [*Holding and rocking* MISS FLORA.] It's all right, Miss Flora. I'm here now. No more pain.[98]

Miss Flora is understandably emotional when speaking of her childhood pregnancy. She feels responsible for the baby's death. At eleven years old, Flora—impregnated by her stepfather—gave birth to a dead baby, and as a grown woman she feels so ashamed that she covers her body to avoid remembering the experience.

Her mother responds in a less than nurturing way. She believes her daughter was in the wrong, the jezebel stereotype—a black girl or woman whose race and gender mark her as highly sexual and/or indiscriminant in sexual relations. If this stereotype is taken as a given, young Flora's skin and body mark her as oversexed and complicit in her rape and pregnancy. The most difficult part of the memory for Flora, even as a grown woman, is that her mother did not believe her story and, thus, believed that Flora pursued her stepfather sexually. This testimonial reflects why negative stereotypes are so damaging to black girls and women. By disbelieving Flora, her mother negated her voice and experience. This negation, arguably, impacted how she responded to subsequent instances of physical abuse. As an adult woman, Flora fights back. Also, she takes a defensive stance in her relationships with masculine-identified men *and* women.

In the third exchange, Biddie and Flora are having tea. In one of the more joyous moments in the play, they talk about birthmarks and the family folklore attached to them. Flora

[98] Ibid.

intuits by Biddie's appetite for her peach cobbler that she has an affinity for peaches. Biddie affirms this claim: "My mother say she marked me when she was carrying me 'cause it was winter and she couldn't get no peaches when she was craving them."[99] This is not a metaphorical mark; Biddie literally has a peach-shaped birthmark on her stomach. This reference, as indicated by the stage directions, is a point of entry for Biddie to woo Flora. Flora ignores Biddie's forwardness and responds by showing the pineapple-shaped birthmark on her ankle: "My mother say she got the pineapple, but it was the next day, so I got this light mark on my leg."[100] This is an instance in which two generations of black women's narratives collide, grounding Biddie and Flora in the past and present.

Bulldaggers, Black Respectability, and the Bedroom

At the end of Act I, Miss Flora and Biddie make love for the first time. Lesbian intimacy is a theme throughout this play and this scene is especially significant because it, based on my research, it is one of the first representations of black lesbian intimacy in American theatre. It is still rare for black women (queer or straight) to be depicted in sexual situations on stage.

> *[BIDDIE wraps her arms around MISS FLORA and kisses her cleavage. Pause.]*
>
> BIDDIE: Say something, Flora.
>
> MISS FLORA: You worrying me.
>
> BIDDIE: Worrying you?
>
> MISS FLORA: Since you been here, I been, been enjoying your company and...
>
> BIDDIE: What you trying to say, Miss Flora?
>
> MISS FLORA: I think I'm starting to...love you.
>
> [...]

[99] Ibid, 192.
[100] Ibid.

MISS FLORA: I don't know where these feelings to touch you is coming from, but they here and they so real. This seem like a funny way to be talking to a woman. I don't know if I'm saying the right things.

[Pause.][101]

Biddie's affectionate touching and kissing startles Flora. They have been close friends until this point, but both have amorous feelings. If Flora reciprocates, the status of their relationship will change; "Seem like one of us is gonna get in trouble," Flora says. Despite the repurcussions—which are unclear at this point—she is compelled to touch Biddie who has likely wanted Flora since they first met.

BIDDIE: Stay with me tonight, Miss Flora?

[Lights begin to soften as MISS FLORA crosses to the bed, but stops.]

Flora, who has not had a sexual relationship with another woman, hesitates:

MISS FLORA: Biddie, I don't know where the parts go. I ain't never read no book about this.

Biddie pulls her back in, assuring her:

BIDDIE: There ain't no book, Miss Flora. The parts go just where you want them to. Trust me, you'll know. *[In the soft light, the two get in the bed.]*

Flora asks for spiritual guidance in the matter.

FLORA: Lord.

Biddie redirects Flora.

BIDDIE: Trust me.

[They kiss and begin...as the lights fade.][102]

[101] Ibid, 197.
[102] Ibid.

Their mutual kiss breaks this tension and instead of a blackout, the lights fade to black. This lighting direction is important because the audience has the opportunity to see more than a kiss, a common signifier of love. This scene does not end abruptly, which enables the audience to linger with the images of black lesbian lovemaking.

There is double meaning in Flora "not knowing where the parts go." First, Flora has only had sexual relationships with men and second, she is not sure of how sex between women works, technically. This lack of knowledge also applies to the play, itself, as black lesbian romance is not often represented on stage. As a result of the latter, audiences are less familiar with black lesbian characters, romantic narratives, and sexual situations. Holmes's representation of a specific queer world in this play is not only radical but allows unfamiliar audiences to be exposed to black lesbian life, an existence in which romance is often a gateway to homemaking.

The morning after they first make love, Flora first speaks of her concern about the community's perception. By this time, they have only known each other for a month and Flora is falling in love with Biddie. She is also conflicted because she has never had a sexual relationship with another woman. Explaining how it feels in her body to be with another woman, she explains:

> MISS FLORA: I never felt nothing like this in my life; you so soft and gentle. [Pause.] I've had women friends for as long as I been in this world and never once laid hands on them. I always knew that wasn't right. But here you come and it seem like I'm supposed to. I keep searching myself. Looking up under all my feelings. Moving aside what I think people gonna say.

Flora has heard gossip about Biddie in town, but until now she has kept it to herself. It is likely that Biddie knows the town is talking about her gender expression and sexuality. But Flora is

noticeably concerned that she will be labeled a lesbian by association. Now that they have had sex, she is even more concerned that there will be spiritual and material repercussion. Flora is afraid of being demoted in the eyes of the townspeople, of being labeled immoral and unclean, of being disqualified as a model citizen.

According to Suzanne Pharr, it is not unusual in heterosexist cultures for women to be called (or, hailed) lesbian (in the negative sense) for enjoying the company of other women, romantically or otherwise.[103] Heterosexist culture assumes the power to dictate citizenship (to afford certain rights and privileges, through written and unwritten policies, to individuals and groups deemed worthy of them). On a micro level, some communities come to a consensus about what is and what is not "acceptable behavior" for its citizens; these politics extend to the individuals living in that society. If one cannot abide by the requirements of a heterosexist society—heterosexuality and gender conformity—they have two choices: 1) find another community to live in, or 2) assimilate to the current community. Biddie and Miss Flora can do neither and, more importantly, they have no desire to abandon their community. Instead, they manage to live at the interstices of each requirement as *outsiders-within*.[104] This positionality affords them insight into the black heteronormative culture in which they live, but they also disidentify with that culture.

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[103] Suzanne Pharr, "Homophobia and Sexism," in *Women: Images and Realities—A Multicultural Anthology* (1988; repr., New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012). Pharr calls this "lesbian baiting." She writes:

> Lesbian baiting is an attempt to control women by labeling us as lesbians because our behavior is not acceptable, that is, when we are being independent, going our own way, living whole lives, fighting for our rights, demanding equal pay, saying no to violence, being self-assertive, bonding with and loving the company of women, assuming the right to our bodies, insisting upon our own authority, making changes that include us in society's decision-making (423).

[104] See *Black Feminist Thought* (2000). Collins's research on African American women domestic workers also reveals that their work in white households left them outsiders within white society. This position gave her unique insight into white society and culture. Hill-Collins also observes that black women intellectuals and activists have been outsiders-within black and white societies.

Despite their growing connection, respectability politics threatens the foundation of their relationship. Flora recognizes that her close association with Biddie, someone she has grown to love, leaves her at risk of being labeled a "bulldagger." According to James F. Wilson, "Lesbians, who were referred to as 'bulldaggers' and 'bulldykes' (or 'bulldykers'), were associated with 'manliness' and masculine clothing."[105] Bulldagger has a history of being a pejorative term. However, some lesbians identify with bulldagger as an identity. Anderson writes, "Bulldagger is a label that attaches only to butchness" and can be signified by masculine carriage, clothing and a short haircut (such as "a very short afro" and "braids or cornrows").[106]

The community identifies a high level of masculinity in Biddie, and some of the townspeople associate this with male heterosexuality. This is the central problem. According to their politics, Biddie can look "like a man," but if she acts like one—if she has romantic and sexual desires for women (or ladies)—she is being excessive. Further, when they see Biddie with a single femme like Flora, a queer narrative quickly emerges—real or imagined—that puts the womens' respectability on the line.

To circumvent the town's speculation, the two conspire to keep their relationship private. It is too difficult for Flora to be marked an outcast. A spiritualist, Flora is also conflicted because of her religious faith and, therefore, must navigate several obstacles simultaneously to reach a space of comfort and security within herself. In one scene, "BIDDIE finds MISS FLORA in her room sitting weeping and cracking pecans. She looks very weary."[107] Miss Flora is struggling with people in the community "talking again" about her and Biddie's relationship. Apparently

[105] James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.
[106] Anderson, 108.
[107] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 208.

the townspeople have been speculating about the nature of the "bulldagger's" relationship with Miss Flora. Miss Flora explains:

> This morning when I was gathering dew water to make skin wash, I run into Cornelia Hooks and she see my finger and ask "When you get married, Flora?" I keep gathering cause I didn't like how she sound talking to me like that. Then she say "Flora Devine, are you married?" Then she turns her way backside round and says, "What you wearing that ring for?" "I married myself, is that all right with you?" That's what I say back to her, and soon as the words left my mouth, I felt this sharp pain dead in the center of my chest. That's the conviction pain you get when you lying and you know you lying and God knows you lying. It's still hurting.[108]

Ms. Flora's fear of losing the community's respect leads her to lie about her unofficial union with Biddie. This is why she is crying. She is not crying because she doubts the authenticity of her love for Biddie, she is crying because she cannot announce it publicly. She then tells Biddie: "I didn't mean to deny you. When I said I'd marry you, my word was good. I sat here crying so long 'cause I was scared. When you can't speak your heart, you need to be scared."[109] Biddie "rubs the center of [Flora's] chest" near her heart to soothe her. She, though, is upset that 1) Cornelia referred to "her wife" as Flora instead of "MISS Flora Devine," and 2) she is bothering Flora about a personal matter. Biddie says: "Nobody should be harassing my wife. One of these days I'm gonna lock the door on this place and we ain't never leaving." This is not a viable option. They have to live with and amongst their neighbors to survive.

[108] Ibid, 209.
[109] Ibid.

While Miss Flora could conform, Biddie would have to work harder to be a model black woman. Biddie's butchness is apparent in her mannish behavior and strength, both transgressions to traditional female gender roles; the concept of queerness is readily attached to her so much so that Miss Flora tells Biddie:

> MISS FLORA: I'm an upstanding woman in this town.
>
> BIDDIE: That ain't changed. Ain't nobody challenged your dignity and better not while I'm around.
>
> MISS FLORA: They whispering. Talking 'bout you all the time. How you think you're strong as a man.
>
> BIDDIE: I am. Stronger than many I know 'cause I can show my feelings. It's a waste of time measuring a woman to a man, ain't no comparison.
>
> MISS FLORA: They call you a BULLDAGGER WOMAN.
>
> BIDDIE: That's all right, I'd rather they call me a bulldagger than a nigger. Nothing hurts worse than that.[110]

Flora assumes that Biddie will be ashamed of what the neighbors think, but she is not ashamed. Biddie has accepted her sexuality and recognizes Flora's fear and confusion and responds as a "woman" might, by protecting the lady. The most striking part about this scene is that Biddie would rather have members of the black community call her a homophobic epithet (bulldagger) than to be called a racist epithet (nigger) by people in the white community. They are both hurtful labels, but at least the former has an intimate connection to her racialized community.

This is a complex justification that could mean one or both of the following: 1) Biddie has internalized her oppression as a sexual minority and/or 2) she understands racial and sexual oppression in a hierarchical way. If both are taken as givens (and the term "nigger" is not uttered

[110] Ibid, 199.

as a racial epithet when used amongst members of this group), then Biddie has faith in the black community's potential to tolerate her as a masculine lesbian. By contrast, she does not have faith in the white community's potential to tolerate her black skin. This is realistic considering the widespread white supremacist culture of the Reconstruction Era south. Thus, she would rather be called a homophobic epithet within the black community than be called a racial epithet in the white community that qualifies her as an outsider based on her skin color and phenotype, characteristics that she cannot hide.

Furthermore, she might assume that being called a bulldagger, in this context, is an empty word that will not result in emotional or physical violence. If this is Biddie's logic, then she and Flora have a similar reliance on respectability politics. That is, they both assume that respectability will save them from ridicule. Considering her popularity in the town, Biddie believes that the community members' respect for her as a laborer upon whom they rely puts her in high regard. "I may need them" she says, "but I ain't gonna let them control when I love and who I love. I'll tell wide behind Cornelia Hooks that you my wife and I'm your wife and that we are happy, and until she respect that don't speak to either one of us again."[111]

Although Biddie exudes physical, mental, and emotional strength, she (like Flora) straddles the line between being out and closeted. She does not hide her difference, it is all over her body, but she does not put her love for Flora on display for reasons that go unaddressed. I interpret her overprotection of Flora as a characteristic of butchness, as characteristic of a woman (in female masculine sense), and as a way to hold on to a delicate kind of love. Lesbianism, at this time, was frowned upon and out lesbians and same-sex couples would quickly be pressured

[111] Ibid, 209.

back into the closet or out of their relationships.[112] As long as she is not forthcoming about her relationship with Flora in public, they can avoid outside judgment. This assumption, however, is unstable. The community's speculation that Biddie and Flora are romantically involved could be proven true if, say, they are seen kissing or holding each other too closely. From this perspective, Flora's fears are warranted and Biddie's attitude towards privacy is idealistic. In a heterosexist society, their dilemma—to come out or remain closeted—is constant.

Love, Marriage, and Motherhood

The south in the 1890s is a questionable playing ground for black lesbian and heterosexual characters. Miss Flora and Biddie's foremothers were likely enslaved women in service of men in a deeply racist and patriarchal society. It is my view that the play could have been set in the American south in the twentieth century in which Holmes was writing, but the choice with the most potential for conflict was to set the play at the dawn of a new century. Perhaps Holmes's decision to write about black lesbians at this time symbolizes a shift. It is clear that Flora and Biddie must alter their normative views of the world to protect a new generation of black females.

In fact, Biddie envisions an ideal family unit with Miss Flora. The process of arriving at this utopian reality requires that she and Miss Flora recall and reconcile their experiences of oppression and dominance. Although they are not responsible for their own oppression, they are the ones who still suffer the impact and they need each other to resist the oppressive nature of

[112] For example, Harlem Renaissance singer and musician, Gladys Bentley, was "an avowed 'bulldagger' [...] famous for her suggestive songs and masculine appearance" (155). She was known for being a lesbian and butchness was also central to her performances. In his riveting chapter on Bentley, Wilson observes that she assumed a feminine persona in the 1940s and 1950s. Bentley presented as a femme, identified as heterosexual, and ditched her popular blues songs for jazz standards. She also became religious. The author essentially argues that the pressures of McCarthy-era surveillance and insistence on normativity, along with the need for financial security, forced Bentley to drastically modify her identity. See Wilson's "In My Well of Loneliness": Gladys Bentley's Bulldykin' Blues," in *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

their experiences. Flora and Biddie enjoy a courtship filled with adoration, respect, and concern. They appreciate each other and acknowledge and accept their respective imperfections. Biddie is Flora's source of support as she grapples with the shame, fear, and confusion that arise from her experiences of scrutiny and rejection by people in her community because of her relationship with Biddie.

In response to the uncomfortable exchange between Flora and Cornelia Hooks, Biddie says, in frustration, "Nobody should be harassing my wife. One of these days I'm gonna lock the door on this place and we ain't never leaving."[113] Flora is shelling pecans, and without thinking about how the gesture will make Biddie feel, Flora "[moves] BIDDIE'S hand" away and tells her that she is "losing [her] mind. What we gonna live on if we don't go outside?"[114] Biddie responds in what seems like an unrealistic way—"We'll eat love and drink prayer just like we been doing"[115]—but, here, she is invoking the fantastic to ease Flora's pain. She is encouraging Flora to come away with her into a utopia that she has conceived for them—a safe place for them to love. If she could lock them inside of Flora's Inn, she would, if for no other reason than to protect the woman she loves.

Miss Flora wants the larger community in which they live to support their union. But as Flora's emotional exchange with Biddie betrays, this is not likely to happen. Biddie encourages Flora to ignore the community on this issue. She suggests that the only way for them to be accepted is if *they* (individually) embrace their love for each other.

> FLORA: Why people hate you when you true to yourself? All I wanna do is love you.

[113] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 209.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.

> BIDDIE: Miss Flora, if you asking people if it's all right for you to love me, you'll be crying a long time 'cause they don't know. The answer ain't in them; it's in you. You only love when God let you; you been free to love me a long time; you just ain't grabbed that freedom yet.[116]

In other words, they must redefine themselves and their union as normative. Here, Biddie inserts the idea of God, which reflects not only the rootedness of religion in African American culture but also suggests that there exists an essential connection between love and God. If God is love, then their love must be righteous. For Biddie, who has accepted this, the next thing for Flora to do is embrace their union herself. But although Biddie gently encourages Flora to "[grab that] freedom," Flora is still unsure. Her lack of trust in love is directly related to her fear that the townspeople's judgment is valid.

Love is already a touchy subject for Flora, who "[believes] in people" (that is, those with whom she has platonic relationships) because "they ain't going no where." I interpet this statement as indicative that Flora has issues trusting the people closest to her (such as lovers and family members). Her relationship with her ex-husband has left her damaged and alone. Although she put him out of the home for physically assaulting her, she feels as if he abandoned her. He was not the husband she wanted. In fact, he was the husband her grandfather warned her about when he said, "Flora, if he raise his hand up make sure he go to jail, but if he bring that hand down, make sure you go to jail."[117] In this instance, her grandfather was telling her to protect herself and to defend herself. Here, with Biddie, she is still living defensively, which prohibits her from fully transitioning into a new romantic relationship. The fact that they are both women proves to be an even greater obstacle for her.

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[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid, 188.

The women are married in a spiritual sense, but they have not had a marriage ceremony. The ceremony is important to Biddie, who recognizes it as symbolic and binding. Flora is not invested the idea of a ceremony because 1) it won't be recognized by the community as a legitimate marriage, and 2) she is afraid to marry again, considering that her last marriage ended in divorce. She assumes that Biddie wants a traditional wedding with witnesses and wants the time to pray about it and consult with the spirit world.

> FLORA: I lit me a candle in the bathroom and burn me some sage, so I'm gonna let it rest. The answers be in the wax or the ashes tonight.
>
> BIDDIE: And you gonna pick this same burden up until you look in you 'staeda [instead of] in your signs and wonders.[118]

After some coaxing, Flora concedes. She then leads their marriage ceremony.

First, Flora spreads her purple apron out on the floor and they kneel on it—"we got to have some purple for under our feet."[119] Purple is an important color, personally and culturally. Flora says, "Purple makes my glory stand out"[120]—which relates to the Africanist symbolism of the color (a sign of royalty), which is often featured in weddings. They turn their bodies toward the "south, north, then west and east."[121] Then they pray. Miss Flora asks "Mother, Father, God" to marry them. By this label, Flora believes that God is neither woman nor man, but likely both. It is ironica that Flora can think abstractly about religion/spirituality, but not about her love life. This impromptu ceremony, which combines old and new ideas and traditions, solidifies Biddie and Flora's union.

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[118] Ibid, 210.
[119] Ibid, 211.
[120] Ibid, 197.
[121] Ibid, 211.

Motherhood becomes the next goal in their homemaking and, interestingly, the prospect of family seems to strengthen their commitment to one another. In black lesbian feminist performance, motherhood (biological or adoptive) is often a key plot point. This is significant politically because mothering (and other forms of affective labor) has been a topic of debate in feminism. However, in BLFP, motherhood is held up as an empowering option for black women.[122] Black feminist scholar bell hooks writes:

> Female parenting is significant and valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists. It should receive deserved recognition, praise, and celebration within a feminist context where there is renewed effort to rethink the nature of motherhood; to make motherhood neither a compulsory experience for women nor an exploitative or oppressive one; to make female parenting good, effective parenting whether it is done exclusively by women or in conjunction with men.[123]

Motherhood can be a resistant act for women, especially lesbians, who cannot procreate together. Because making and raising families is more difficult for lesbian couples, when they do, those families are meaningful, visible, and subversive.

Colorism and motherhood converge as Biddie and Flora prepare to expand their family. At the end of the play, Flora, who is also a midwife, helps to deliver a child born to Cora, an eleven-year-old girl, who was impregnanted by a family acquaintance. After a difficult delivery, the baby is born; she is dark-skinned. Of the child, Flora says, "She ain't black; she's blue black

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[122] Many black feminists such as Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks highlight the centrality of parenting/motherhood in their writing. See Lorde's "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," in *Sister Outsider* (1979; repr., Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007); Collins's "Rethinking Black Women's Activism," in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000); and hooks's "Revolutionary Parenting," in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984).

[123] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 136-37.

with a shine to her."[124] Cora will not even look at the baby, and the parents have rejected the baby. The family is concerned that the child is a less desirable shade of black, which, again, speaks to a politics of respectability in which color matters. The biological family's dismissal of the child is especially poignant for Biddie, who has experienced scrutiny from other black people based on her skin tone. She testifies to Miss Flora that, as a dark-skinned woman, she has had to be "better" and work harder to overcome the negative views of others. Monique W. Morris defines *colorism* as "a socially constructed hierarchy where lighter-skinned people are perceived as more socially acceptable than darker-skinned people."[125] As a result of being othered and conditioned to think about color in this way, Biddie has internalized these ideas, which affects her perception of what a black girl should be and do.

The discourse on colorism in black communities is abundant in African diaspora scholarship, literature, and media.[126] As Toni Morrison illustrates in her novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), colorism can negatively impact a black child's self esteem and sense of worth indefinitely. Dark-skinned women are often treated differently than light-skinned women, based on unfounded ideas that dark skin is not beautiful and that light-skinned women are more amiable than dark-skinned women. These notions are, at their core, racist notions that black people have internalized and passed on through generations. Even Miss Flora and Biddie, both outcasts, show concern about the baby's skin color and speculate as to how she came into the world so "black." The baby seems alien to Miss Flora, or other than black. Another kind of

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[124] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 217.

[125] Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York: New Press, 2016), 22.

[126] See JeffriAnne Wilders's *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), Kathy Russell-Cole, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall's *The Color Complex* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), Kimberly Jade Norwood's *Color Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2013), and Audrey Elisa Kerr's *The Paper Bag Principle* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).

black. Miss Flora says that the baby is "just as sweet and black. I mean the chile so black she blue. Seem like when you hold her, it's like having a piece of coal in your hand. You think some the black gonna come off on you when you put her down."[127] (And God forbid the black might rub off.)

However accepting they are, Biddie and Flora are conflicted about the child's skin color and the meanings attached to it—their meanings and society's meanings. Instead of blindly accepting their bias as fact, Miss Flora and Biddie toss ideas around as to the cause of the child's "condition." They decide that the baby's mother, Cora, drank too much coffee, "strong too," says Flora, "with lots of sugar and no cream."[128] This explanation for the child's dark skin tone is one of many myths that circulated in black communities post-slavery. There is humorous intent in the assertion that Cora drank too much dark coffee, but Miss Flora and Cora have some faith in this myth, however minute. Mythical beliefs steeped in colorism have long been a part of African American life, for good or for bad. Some of the "preventative measures" for ensuring that a baby would not be too "black" include lightly pinching a baby's nostrils to make it "keener" (to look more European) or encouraging a child to stay out of the sun so they would not become too dark.

Although these practices are symoblic of internalized oppression, skin color and phenotype were concerns for many African Americans who were trying to assimilate in white America. European standards of beauty were (and often still are) associated with privilege.[129]

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[127] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 216.

[128] Ibid, 217.

[129] See *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 141. I am reminded of the character, Mrs. Turner, in Hurston's novel. She is a light-skinned black woman for whom color matters. Janie's lover, Tea Cake, calls her "color struck." The evidence of her prejudice is her disdain for their relationship. Colorism leads her to believe the pair is ill-matched. Tea Cake is dark-skinned, while Janie is brighter-skinned with long hair and keen features. Speaking to Janie—who loves Tea Cake "fit to kill" (enough to kill for)—she says, "You'se different from me. Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself. 'Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off" (141).

To that end, Miss Flora and Biddie understand full well that color matters and they consider the implications of the child's dark complexion. They believe that she will not be loved like a lighter-skinned child with "good hair." They decide that if the child's biological family does not want her then they will raise her. They will be the answer to the question of how this baby is going to thrive in an antagonist world. The two understand that they are accepting an added challenge of raising a dark-skinned female child as lesbian mothers. They are not concerned that the child will be raised without a male influence in her life (arguably, Biddie can provide this). They are not concerned that she will experience sexism. And they are not concerned that she will be ostracized for having two female parents. Miss Flora and Biddie's primary concern relates to the struggles the baby will have because her skin is dark. They are concerned that she will be perceived as less valuable than lighter-skinned child.

> MISS FLORA. I want her. She's gonna need a lot of love 'cause she dark and this world hate dark skinned people.
>
> BIDDIE. I'll make sure she understands that. We can love that away.
>
> MISS FLORA. I'll take care of her hair. Never have my baby with a matted head from not combing it.
>
> BIDDIE. It wouldn't matter to me if you cut it off.
>
> MISS FLORA. Never mind. I'll make sure she's a lady.
>
> BIDDIE. And I'll make sure she's a woman.[130]

The dialogue reveals that they are committed to each other and to future family. It also shows that Miss Flora has adopted Biddie's terms. They vow to combine both ideas of the feminine and raise their daughter to be both a lady and a woman—a progressive notion in their conservative community.

[130] Holmes, *A Lady and a Woman*, 218.

The play ends with the couple clearing out a dresser drawer for the baby to sleep in. Filled with emotion, Flora thanks Biddie for supporting her and making her "dreams" come true. To which Biddie responds, "I don't believe in dreams; this is a vision and I seen it all along."[131] Her vision, I argue, is predicated on a traumatic past of black female exploitation, in which physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are part and parcel. Yet, this vision is a nod to a better future, one where Biddie and Flora reconfigure southern black womanhood and family.

Remember What I Say!

A play in two acts, *Remember What I Say*! is about a butch-butch friendship. Unlike *A Lady*, this play is unpublished and has never been produced. Whereas *A Lady* situtates black lesbian life within a more confining culture, time, and place, *Remember*—set in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1990s—represents black lesbian life in a freer, more accepting southern geography. The setting, alway significant to Holmes's work, leads to many years of funny, heartwarming, and heartbreaking discussions between two self-described butches—Phyllis and Squirrel—who share a similar experience with a host of differences.

Phyllis and Squirrel share a butch bond. They also share oppression. In "Between Butches" Judith Halberstam observes that, as a result of sexism, "the butch does not essentially and necessarily partake in the privileges assigned to masculinity in a male supremacist society."[132] "Butches suffer sexism," she writes, "butches experience misogyny; butches may not be strictly women but they are not exempt from female trouble."[133] Butches also suffer racism, heterosexism, and homophobia, all of which Phyllis and Squirrel have encountered. Of note, Halberstam writes: "Butches find solace in the revelations of other butches; it is as if the shame

[131] Ibid, 220.
[132] Judith Halberstam, "Between Butches," in *butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally R. Munt (London: Cassell, 1998), 64.
[133] Ibid.

of inappropriate gendering can be rendered more benign when it is shared across other bodies and other lives."[134] She is suggesting that there is a connection between butches. When women present as butches, they are resisting social norms. When butches inhabit the same space, they inevitably engage one another in discourse that has the potential to make them more comfortable in their bodies.

Phyllis and Squirrel engage in discourse across African American and LGBTQ cultural knowledge bases that help them better comprehend each other's life experiences. When Phyllis and Squirrel meet, they are seated "at a Woolworth's lunch counter" in downtown Atlanta, a public space that has a significant position in history for black southerners, like Squirrel, who lived there during the Jim Crow era.[135] Phyllis sits reading *Venus*—an Atlanta magazine for queers of color—as Squirrel begins eating a slice of pie.[136] Suddenly, Squirrel begins talking to Phyllis about the pie—"Damn nasty ass pie! Ain't got a lick of flavor. Taste like they couldn't even afford to make it. I hate that! Don't you?"[137] Reading intently, Phyllis "[d]oesn't respond."[138] Squirrel persists.

SQUIRREL: What's that you reading?

PHYLLIS: (A bit startled.) You talking to me? I'm sorry.

SQUIRREL: Yeah.

(Taking the magazine from her.)

What you reading. Venus Magazine. For lesbians and gays of color.

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Shirlene Holmes, *Remember What I Say!*, 2.

[136] In 1995, Charlene Cochran founded *Venus*—a magazine for black LGBT people. The free magazine could be found in and near Atlanta LGBT establishments until 2007, when she denounced homosexuality and rebranded the magazine as anti-gay. The magazine, subsequently, went out of print due to the pushback from the queer-of-color community.

[137] *Remember What I Say!*, 3.

[138] Ibid.

(She looks at PHYLLIS chuckling.)

Your Mama know you reading this?

PHYLLIS: (Smiling.) Yeah, but we don't talk about it.

SQUIRREL: (Thumbing through the pages.) I see why. Now on this cover—is this a man or a woman? Things done got so "creative" I can't tell. Used to be a time you could tell you know. In my day, you picked a side on the fence and stayed on it.[139]

In this play, being butch has different connotations for each character. However, the dominant quality of masculinity is evident in Squirrel's understanding (or, lackthereof) of queer gender identity and expression in the 1990s (and beyond). Squirrel, here, assumes a position of dominance over another butch, which suggests that she is trying to condition Phyllis in the way that she, herself, performs butchness. Phyllis, however, respectfully rejects this.

Notably, both women, at times, participate in mysoginistic dialogue. To bond, they devalue the feminine and, as a result, the femme becomes the punchline of their jokes. This relationship is a reflection of contemporary butch identity and butch-butch friendships. In "Studs and Protest-Hypermasculinity—an ethnographic study of South Carolina "studs"—"Black lesbian[s] who embody masculinity"—Laura Lane Steele concludes that many of them use masculine gender expression to resist racial, gender, and sexual oppression.[140] She argues that the studs she interviewed appropriate the gender expression of the most powerful sex/gender in their communities: black men.[141] Further, she asserts that this performance "is strategic because the aspects they do adopt function in ways that give these women privilege and power despite

[139] Ibid.

[140] Laura Lane Steele, "Studs and Protest-Hypermasculinity: The Tomboyism within Black Lesbian Female Masculinity," in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15, no. 4 (2011), 480.

[141] Ibid.

their subordinated position as lesbian women in a heteronormative, patriarchal culture."[142] This might explain the old school sexist and misogynist assumptions about butches and femmes held by Squirrel and passively accepted by Phyllis.

After Squirrel takes the magazine, she observes that Phyllis is "wearing gym clothes"—and asks her "What are you?"[143] The question, alone, reveals that Squirrel adheres to a specific performance of butchness. Her politics of black lesbian identity and recognition are historical and fixed. Though she accurately recognizes Phyllis as a lesbian based on her clothing, she assumes that the woman will identify as one thing or the other, not recognizing that a self-identified butch, such as Phyllis, could reject labels at will.

> PHYLLIS: I'm me.
>
> SQUIRREL: That's a good answer. I guess I can respect that.
>
> PHYLLIS: By the way, that's a man on the cover.
>
> SQUIRREL: (Incredulously.) A man!
>
> SQUIRREL: (Loudly.) With tiddies that big!
>
> (PHYLLIS looks around embarrassed.)
>
> Excuse me, honey. Things just amaze this old gal sometimes. When I was coming along, wasn't no magazines like this here.[144]

Humor takes the some of the awkwardness out of the exchange.

Squirrel tells Phyllis that she eats at Woolworth's lunch counter because black people were forbidden to eat there when she was a young woman.

> SQUIRREL: I come all the time because they HAVE to serve me now. Was a time when a Black couldn't eat nowhere here downtown. You don't know nothing

[142] Ibid, 483.
[143] Holmes, *Remember What I Say!*, 2.
[144] Ibid, 4.

> about that, but I used to be so hungry and thirsty and they wouldn't give me the time of day. Oh but when integration come, the first thing I did was come right here to this Woolworth counter for me some service, and I been coming ever since.[145]

Squirrel eats there now because she can, not because she enjoys the pie. She is still resisting a foregone southern culture in which Jim Crow laws deemed black people inferior to white people and, thus, unfit to eat at the same space.

Squirrel talks in a stream of consciousness, moving from one idea to the next. She has been through and seen a lot in her seventy years. She introduces herself to Phyllis, revealing that her real name is Margaret but her grandmother nicknamed her Squirrel because she had "always been cautious" as a girl. "See a little Squirrel always checking things out before making his move," she tells Phyllis.[146] "That's me. I took risks in my life, but I move like a squirrel. She saw that early in me and give me that name."[147] Squirrel's cautious nature explains how she navigates and negotiates living as an out lesbian and is evident in how she initiates the conversation with Phyllis. She begins by talking about something as mundane as food (the pie). This leads her to comment on a social issue (race). Then she positions herself in connection to the social issue (agential, free, resistant). And, lastly, she introduces herself to Phyllis (her given name and nickname). It is likely that Squirrel recognizes Phyllis right away as being "in the family" or lesbian/queer. As someone who has experienced the hardships of racism, sexism, and homophobia, Squirrel acknowledges, validates, and imparts knowledge to this young black lesbian. Perhaps Squirrel sees some of herself in the young lady in gym clothes.

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[145] Ibid, 5.
[146] Ibid, 7.
[147] Ibid.

Squirrel was raised in Tennessee and later moved to Atlanta in the 1940s. Still, she is vigilant about observing the southern and queer cultural norms she adhered to as a young woman. Phyllis was reared in Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s, a relatively progressive time and space, and she helps Phyllis to shed some of her cautious tendencies. While Squirrel is cautious in some ways, she has not resigned herself to a typical notion of senior living. She is fun with a lively personality, she still chases women, she drinks too much beer (she prefers a Guinness Stout) and she enjoys hanging out at nightclubs with Phyllis.

Holmes's use of time is cyclical as evidenced by Phyllis's narration between scenes. What the audience does not know until the end of the first scene is that Squirrel has died of pancreatic cancer. Phyllis is now recalling the story of their time together. Participating in the Africanist oral tradition, Phyllis has retained a family history through stories and is now passing that knowledge on to the audience-witnesses.

> PHYLLIS (to the audience): She was my Mom in the life. I never told many people about Squirrel. They wasn't ready. When I met her that day, my mom had just hung up on me, and I wanted to be left alone. I was still kinda new to Atlanta and the life. I'm glad Squirrel came along. These are just some of our times together.[148]

When Phyllis refers to "the life" she means life as a lesbian. Squirrel has helped her acclimate to lesbian life in a new city and to find a community in which she feels safe and nurtured. Squirrel, having lived through racial segregation in the south and homophobia in her family circle, assumed the responsibility of informing, guiding, and protecting the younger butch.

In the Woolworth's scene, Phyllis opens up to Squirrel rather quickly, asking the elder woman open-ended questions about her life and family. When Squirrel does the same, Phyllis

[148] Ibid, 11.

explains that she has a distant relationship with her mother who, she says, "gave up" on her because "she couldn't make her understand" her. It is implied that what her mother does not understand is Phyllis's same-sex desire. Squirrel can empathize with Phyllis because she had the same experience when she left her husband and stepchildren to run off to Atlanta with Sweet Georgia Brown, a woman she had fallen in love with. Although Squirrel identifies with Phyllis's apathy toward her mother, she also knows the effects of that distance. Her mother died before they could mend their relationship, and Squirrel still regrets that they did not come to a new understanding of one another. "You can replace a lot of things," Squirrel says, "but not your mother."[149]

As is often the case with LGBTQ persons who seek acceptance from their families, Phyllis has put her faith and love into another person (a love interest) to fill the void left by her mother's absence. In the following exchange, Squirrel—who knows well the pitfalls of misplaced emotion (having been there and done that) and of losing her mother's love, encourages Phyllis to mend her relationship with her mother.

> PHYLLIS: I got a girlie; I care about her. Everything else is on the back burner for now. I gotta survive; that's what I'm about right now.
>
> SQUIRREL: I was right where you were when I got a call saying my mother was dead.
>
> *(Pause.)*
>
> You might want to care about all the girls in your life, especially the one who gave you life. Think about it. You're a smart girl. Don't do nothing dumb and mess up. Take it from me. Many a day I wish I could dig my Momma up from the

[149] Ibid, 10.

> grave and just get to know her. I cut out so early we were strangers when her judgment come. I got to live with that.[150]

Squirrel not only stresses the importance of mother-daughter relationships, she practices what she preaches by being a mother figure to Phyllis. In LGBTQ communities, surrogate families often become support systems for queer people, as many families disown queer relatives because of their gender and sexual identities, desires, and behaviors. However, there is a space that has been a site of community for queers-of-color —*the club.* It is a space in which many queer families are formed.

In the Club

As a black butch mother, Squirrel accompanies Phyllis to the club. In this queer cultural space where nonnormative bodies move with and against one another, there is an abundance of embodied information produced and reproduced. In *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (2012), Ramón H. Rivera-Servera uses an analytical tool that he terms *theories in practice* (adapted from Cherríe Moraga's "theories of flesh")—"situated forms of knowing that emerge from live embodied contexts."[151] He concludes that the club, for queers of color, is an active counterpublic in which home, hope, utopia and friction are theories in practice. For Phyllis and Squirrel, the club is a space in which their epistemologies are rooted.

The setting of this club scene is "The Otherside"—an Atlanta nightclub popular in the 1980s and 1990s.[152] Phyllis is described as "wearing a rather sexy dress."[153] This does not go

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[150] Ibid, 9-10

[151] Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 18., citing Moraga's "Chicana Feminism as Theory in the Flesh," eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1981).

[152] The Otherside Lounge, known by frequent clubgoers as The Otherside, was firebombed in 1997, an event reminiscent of the Pulse nightclub shootings in Orlando, Florida, in 2016, a tragedy that left 50 people dead. Both instances are significant because the club, for LGBTQ people, has been a safe

over well with Squirrel, who is an old-school butch that believes that gender expression should be clear cut: butches wear pants and no makeup, while femmes wear dresses and lipstick. She stresses the significance of pants often in this scene. Yet Phyllis does not waver from her choice to wear a dress. She is, in fact, bending gender to her liking. She uses clothing as an accessory; a particular style of dress is not necessary to signify her butchness. In a funny exchange, they go back and forth describing their respective positions on butch–femme gender expression:

> PHYLLIS: It's just about expressing yourself.
>
> SQUIRREL: And you got lipstick on, too.
>
> PHYLLIS: But I still got on my boxers.
>
> SQUIRREL: *(Giving her a high-five.)*
>
> Had me worried. Thought you were getting soft on me.
>
> PHYLLIS: I am soft.

Phyllis is soft and butch, an identity that is foreign to Squirrel.

> SQUIRREL: I don't even wanna know about it. In my day, you put your pants on and stayed in 'em. I still got my pants on. It's a signal.
>
> PHYLLIS: It's not like that anymore. Don't let this lipstick fool ya. You better brush up on your game, Squirrel.[154]

Phyllis, here, is a keeper of knowledge. She knows that one's clothing does not determine one's identity. Identity is who she thinks she is, rather than her butch mother's perspective. By resisting Squirrel's lesbian gender ideals, Phyllis introduces a plausible black butch lesbian

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space where diverse groups congregate and feel safe. Acts of violence such as these shook the respective queer communities because of the significance of the club space for queers of color.

[153] Holmes, *Remember What I Say!*, 8.

[154] Ibid, 19-20.

embodiment. Squirrel does not fully accept this performance, and Phyllis refuses to cave in to Squirrel's rigid expectations.

Age factors into their different worldviews. Phyllis and Squirrel have a forty-year age difference that could, arguably, be an obstacle to effective communication. At times, the age gap prevents them from completely understanding one another but, mostly, it requires that they exchange knowledge and learn new literacies to speak across the divide. That said, Squirrel, as an elder, values her position as a keeper of knowledge—a *griot*. She "didn't get past grade school" but has learned at "the school of hard knocks: LIFE, baby."[155] Her epistemology is based on lived experience and she gladly imparts this wisdom to Phyllis, whether she asks for it or not.

Squirrel does not always give the most useful advice in matters of love. Since her partner's death, she lives like a bachelor. She has an apartment at a senior citizen's facility, she loves to drink Guiness Stout, and she is highly critically of other people's cooking. A flawed confidante and teacher, the elder Squirrel gives Phyllis questionable advice about how to find and keep a good woman, telling her to drink more, play the field and have sex with "big" women (her personal preference) as often as she can. Naturally, when Phyllis takes this dating advice, she finds herself further away from the lasting relationship she desires.

Like Phyllis, Squirrel has a history of investing a lot of energy into her lovers. In a representational scene between the two, Squirrel recalls that she arrived in Atlanta "[f]ollowing a dress tail"—or, chasing after a woman (Sweet Georgia Brown).[156] She explains that she had been married to a man named Earl for five years and even helped to raise his two sons. Squirrel suggests that they had an arrangement; Earl knew that she was attracted to women. She tells Phyllis, "Truth was I cared about him, but I didn't love him. I never loved a man, ever. I got

[155] Ibid, 6.
[156] Ibid, 7.

married 'cause that's what you did, and he asked me."[157] It seems that Phyllis fell victim to the pressures of heteronormativity, but she could not deny her romantic and sexual desire for women. When she meets Sweet Georgia Brown, she is compelled to run away with her.

Phyllis then asks, "Weren't you scared?" which reflects that she understands how big a risk it was for Squirrel to leave her husband and family for a new home. Squirrel replies, "Yeah, but sometimes you got to be bigger than your fear and do what you have to do. I'm glad you don't have to do nothing like that. You don't have to mess your paper work up; marriage ain't mandatory no more."[158] Paperwork, here, as I read it, refers to legal documentation (her marriage certificate) and her ethical paperwork (non-material, and perhaps, spiritual). She left her husband but did not seek a legal divorce; therefore, throughout her relationship with Sweet Georgia Brown, she was legally married to Earl but spiritually bound to Sweet Georgia. It must have been difficult for her to live a lie and assume a compulsory sexual identity.[159] Squirrel cannot conform completely to a heterosexual lifestyle. "He knew it was all over a woman," she says, "I never lied to him about me."[160] That is, she performed her part in a heterosexual relationship, but she did not deny her desire for another kind of relationship. Her performance of heterosexuality did not impact her same-sex/gender desire. Therefore, when she runs away, she giving up her unnatural arrangement with Earl.

Her cautious nature, however, motivates Squirrel and Sweet Georgia Brown to take care in how they interact with one another in public. They do so strategically, as they might be perceived as lesbians and punished for it. In the 1930s, homosexuality was taboo; thus, when

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[157] Ibid, 16.

[158] Ibid.

[159] See Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Feminism & Sexuality*, eds. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (1980; repr., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). Rich defines compulsory heterosexuality as "[t]he assumption...that women are 'innately' sexually oriented only toward men" (130).

[160] Holmes, *Remember What I Say!*, 16.

they arrived in Atlanta, they chose not to live together. It would have been unusual for adult women to be unmarried, and neither woman wanted to draw attention to themselves. "You had to be real careful back then," she tells Phyllis, "didn't want to lose no respect."[161] Again, respectability, for those who do not adhere to society's rules and restrictions, can mean the difference between a comfortable life and an uncomfortable one.

Black respectability politics has its origins in the black church. It has been a refuge for individuals of faith who rely on the spiritual and even financial support that the institution can offer.[162] A powerful space and idea, the black church has also influenced black culture and values. The physical space of the church is thought to be holy, and its leaders—preachers, bishops, Imams, and so forth—stand at the center of the space and are held in high regard. What they tell their congregations, in and out of the pulpit, is often taken as the gospel truth. Anderson argues that "[h]omophobic sentiments often emerge from within the Black Church."[163]

She writes:

> [T]he position of the black Baptist and AME churches, as well as the Nation of Islam, is that homosexuality is sinful. Largely, adherence to conservative interpretations of particular Old Testament books ostracizes the black homosexual (male or female) from black churches. Usually, ministers cite the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and a passage from Leviticus to bolster their claims of the sinfulness of homosexuality.[164]

Intentionally or unintentionally, the black church—a beacon of safety for many—can be a harmful space for others. That is, black church leaders—who are usually men—have the

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[161] Ibid.

[162] Anderson, 98. "The black church" is often used as a catchall phrase that includes, but is not limited to, the Black Baptist and Methodist churches, and Nation of Islam mosques.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Ibid.

platform to articulate to the masses what "black is" and what "black ain't."[165] Further, E. Patrick Johnson argues:

> But just as the black church has been a political and social force in the struggle for the racial freedom of its constituents, it has also, to a large extent, occluded sexual freedom for many of its practitioners, namely gays and lesbians. Typically, the stance taken by the black church is one of "don't ask, don't tell." In other words, gays and lesbians may actively participate in the church as long as they are silent about their homosexuality. This complicity of silence maintains not only the false dichotomy between the spirt and the flesh but also perpetuates the most oppressive and repressive aspects of fundamentalist Christiantity. In this context the homosexual's "membership" in the church is contingent on her or his willingness not only to remain silent about his or her sexuality, but also to fully participate in the activities of the church in spite of being denigrated by the rhetoric of the pulpit.[166]

That said, in the 1930s, lesbians in black communities would be shunned if they were found out. Squirrel and Sweet Georgia Brown share this concern, living in a racist and segregated part of the country where the only community they can depend on is their racialized one. An example of disidentification, the two women (knowingly or unknowingly) "perform within dominant ideologies in order to resist those same hegemonic structures."[167]

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[165] I am referring to Marlon Riggs's "Black Is...Black Ain't"—a documentary film that investigates meanings of blackness within and outside of black spaces, especially for black gay men. See Films for the Humanities & Sciences (Firm), and Films Media Group (2012). For a brilliant analysis of this film, see Johnson's "The Pot Is Brewing: Marlon Riggs's *Black Is...Black Ain't*," in *Appropriating Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[166] Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 38-39.

[167] Ibid, 39.

In these moments of dialogue between Squrrel and Phyllis that take place in and out of the club, the elder is "schooling" the youth. She is transmitting knowledge to her pupil. This information intersects race, gender, sexuality, and religion in ways that, in the future, become useful for Phyllis. That is, Squirrel's life becomes a blueprint for her to follow (and deviate from), even after Squirrel is gone. The stories she tells help Phyllis through a number of significant relationships, such as mending her relationship with her biological mother, deciding on the viability of her many love relationships, and coming to terms with losing her butch mother.

Testifying and Going Home

Death is symbolic in this play. As I said earlier, by the beginning of the play Squirrel has died. However, the audience does not have this information until the end of Woolworth's scene. The playwright sets up the relationship between the two characters, allowing the audience to invest in them and their unique bond, then shocks them by having Phyllis, in presentation style, tell the audience that Squirrel is dead. Again, this concept of cyclical time, reflects an Africanist temporality visible in much of black lesbian feminist performance. The scenes the audience sees between the two are flashbacks.

In the last scene, the audience finds out how Squirrel died. They also witness her mo(u)rning. It is Squirrel's birthday and Phyllis comes to her apartment, worried because she has not seen her friend in a while. Squirrel reveals to Phyllis that she is experiencing chronic pain in her stomach. Through African American folklore, she draws on a past encounter with her mother, which becomes key to her search for the source of her corporeal and emotional pain.

SQUIRREL: I been having this pain here in my left side. Wakes me up and stays all day like a haint. Old folks used to say when you got a pain like that locked up in your left side, it's a lie you told and it's getting the best of you.[168]

She pauses.

Now I could go to the doctor...or just tell it. What you think?[169]

There is another pause. Squirrel is asking for permission from Phyllis to tell the story behind the lie.

PHYLLIS: Maybe...you should...tell it first, then go to the doctor.

SQUIRREL: You know I'm always telling you to honor your Momma and everything.

(Pause).

Well, I didn't do that.

She asked me 2 things: never lie and always tell the truth.

(As she tells her tale, the pain rides her.)

One time I was alone in the back of the house and she was doing the wash and I was helping her. [...] I was stirring the clothes and she turned to me and said, "Margaret, I raised you never to lie to me. "Yes, ma'am" I say, just because that's what you had to do back then.

She went on:

"I had a dream that you were out in the back woods and you were with cats, just skinning them. Skinnin' 'em. Skinnin' 'em. You know how bad that sounds? Woke me up in a sweat. You should be riding dogs. Do you ride dogs? Do you![170]

[168] Holmes, *Remember What I Say!,* 41.
[169] Ibid.

In African American culture, some believe that dreams reveal truths. The symbols in the dreams reflect a reality. Squirrel's mother has created a narrative about Margaret in which the cats represent the female and skinnin' represents sexual activity. Squirrel's mother thinks that Squirrel is a lesbian but despearately wants her daughter to deny it.

> I took a little too long to answer, so she slapped me. It felt so loud my ears was ringing.
>
> "Answer me, Margaret!"
>
> She was sweating so hard, and her voice was low and I was dripping, too.
>
> I said, "Yes, ma'am. Yes I ride...dogs."
>
> She slapped me again, and that time every tender feeling that I might have ever had for her just died.[171]

Her mother knew that she was lying but wanted her to say that she was not a lesbian. It is interesting how Holmes depicts this mother-daughter relationship. Squirrel says that they had a tenuous relationship and she never believed that her mother loved her and she had little love for her mother.[172] If Squirrel is right about her mother, this scene is all the more violent.

> SQUIRREL: I lifted the stick at her, and was 'bout to come down with it, but dropped it and ran.
>
> I never saw her again...and don't do laundry to this day either.
>
> My mother is dead. Been dead many many years, but her dreams haunt me, and that lie I told that day.
>
> I believe that's what's trapped in my side. You think?

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[170] Ibid, 42.
[171] Ibid, 43.
[172] Ibid, 42.

PHYLLIS: It's out now. [173]

This testimony does not heal Squirrel's physical pain but it does repair the damage to her spirit.

Even after testifying to Phyllis, her pain intensifies. When Phyllis enters her apartment on her birthday, she is wondering where Squirrel has been. She has not seen her at the club or at Woolworth's—her usual hangouts. It turns out that Squirrel has gone to the doctor and received bad news. She argues that if she had not gone to the doctor, she would not be terminally ill. Of course, she means that she would not know it. Phyllis thinks her friend just needs to go out and party.

SQUIRREL: I don't want to go nowhere.

PHYLLIS: Something's up. This ain't my Squirrel talking like that.

SQUIRREL: I messed up and went to the doctor. I ain't done no dumb shit like that in 10 years. But I did like you said, go see about the pain I was having in my left side.

PHYLLIS: What he say?

SQUIRREL: SHE said the tests don't look good.

(Pause.)

It's in the pancreas. Cancer. Can't do nothing 'bout it, but use some chemicals.

(Pause.)

I ain't going back. Forget it. Gotta die ah [of] something.[174]

Offering to support her, Phyllis says that she will go with Squirrel for treatments. Squirrel resists—"I done said I ain't going back. I lived on my terms, and I'ma die on my terms."[175] Phyllis is fearful and does not want to lose her. In desperation, she tries a series of tactics to get

[173] Ibid, 41.
[174] Ibid, 46.
[175] Ibid.

Squirrel to seek medical treatment. She even resorts to asking her about herbal remedies that Squirrel believes can cure sicknesses.

> PHYLLIS: Maybe you can go see my doctor or something. Let's cook up something. I'll cook up some herbs and vitamins... You always talking about boiling up some seasonings and roots and shit....
>
> SQUIRREL: Hey, don't you be craking up in here and messing up your suit. And don't go getting pitiful. Part of saying hello is saying goodbye. The cost of being born is dying and you got to pay the bill. They go together, and nobody been strong enough to separate them or beat 'em.
>
> PHYLLIS: You my best.....buddy.[176]

Even though she is in pain, Squirrel models butchness to the end and forgoes medical attention.

Despite the sad circumstances, the two manage to joke around for the rest of the evening. Phyllis continues with the birthday festivities, giving Squirrel a card, gifts, and a Guiness Stout. They celebrate Squirrel's 77 years of life at home, together, rather than dwell on her illness.[177] Phyllis gives Squirrel a pipe set with smoking tobacco, Phyllis asks for Squirrel's advice. This is the first time she solicits advice from Squirrel and, of course, it is about a woman. Squirrel responds, already fatigued, "Oh damn. What you gonna do when I ain't here anymore." Still in denial, Phyllis replies, "You always gonna be here." A woman named Karen, who Phyllis has had a relationship with but lost to another man, has come back to her, and she is now pregnant. Karen wants Phyllis back. Phyllis misses her, too. Squirrel advises her to ignore Karen's phone calls, but Phyllis makes excuses about why she should take her back. It is

[176] Ibid, 47.
[177] Ibid, 50-53.

interesting that when Squirrel gives her sound advice for a change, Phyllis—hardheaded like her butch mother—does not take it readily.

> PHYLLIS: You taught me everything I know.
>
> SQUIRREL: Don't blame everything on me. I tried to teach you something. You better remember what I say.
>
> (They both continue drinking and laughing. SQUIRREL falls asleep. PHYLLIS covers her with a sheet. She grabs SQUIRREL'S last bottle of Guinness Stout and crosses downstage center to the audience...)[178]

The transition from celebration to death is quick. There are no tears. There are no goodbyes. Phyllis walks downstage with a bottle of stout in her hand and tells the audience, "Squirrel never woke up the next morning." She then pours some of the liquid onto the floor; she is pouring libations onto her best friend's grave. The "[l]ights fade to black," and Squirrel's voice saying "Remember what I say" is heard through speakers in the theater.[179]

Conclusion

In Shirlene Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman* and *Remember What I Say!,* the black lesbian romantic is situated in racist, heterosexist, and patriarchical geographies, yet Biddie, Flora, Squirrel and Phyllis disidentify with the southern norms that leave them cast out because they are black, women, and lesbian. Historically, black women have been raped and dominated for others' pleasure, for procreation, and for manual and affective labor, conditions that left many bound to economic and sexual futures they did not choose. Holmes's characters liberate themselves from this fate through self-definition/self-naming, disidentification and through utopian mo(u)rning. The worlds imagined by Holmes allow moving room in which black lesbian

[178] Ibid, 53.
[179] Ibid, 54.

characters can reimagine new scripts of gender and sexuality, which lead them to a place they can call home. These plays succeed in providing memorable and effective counternarratives to controlling images that are obstacles to black women's autonomy.

Biddie and Flora's black lesbian love story is a dangerous narrative for the time and place in which it is set. As black same-gender-loving women they are at risk for physical, emotional, and psychological violence from black and white southern communities for their difference. Outside of their insular black community, their skin signifies difference to the dominant culture—a white society which, at this time, was openly hostile to black people. Similarly, the way Biddie and Flora love signifies difference in both black and white communities, resulting in a double bind. In either community, they are considered *others.* The very idea that they could create pleasurable lives together is a response to the constraints of this double bind. Thus, when Holmes made a world in which two black women engage in a romantic, sexual, and emotional relationship, she situated her characters within a narrative that was both personal and political. Facing many obstacles to their pleasure, Biddie, Flora, Squirrel, and Phyllis find pleasure in one another.

While Squirrel and Phyllis share similar lesbian gender identities, Flora and Biddie are on completely opposite ends of a lesbian gender spectrum. The characteristics of womanhood that each espouses are different, reflecting a wider range of gender role possibilities in black lesbian romantic relationships. Biddie, having lived a lesbian existence longer, understands a particular kind of lesbian relationship—that of a lady and a woman. Flora, on the other hand, is not familiar with the life and does not know where to begin and how to name her relationship with Biddie. This gender trouble makes for a dramatic storyline that gives audience access to a different kind

of butch–femme representation than the one-dimensional characters they might be familiar with from films and television shows.

To complicate these representations, Miss Flora and Biddie are flawed characters who have experienced rejection and also traffic in respectability politics. They do not have all of the answers to difficult questions of race, gender, and sexuality, and they often go along with ideas that have left them oppressed, but they believe that they know enough about oppression to raise a child properly. For example, they vow to rear their baby with so much love that the pain she will experience (as a dark-skinned girl child) will be "loved away." The idea is that their love and experience with oppression can heal that which is not yet broken—a flawed, utopian notion guided by the healing they have experienced through loving each other and disidentifying with the outside world.

If one disidentifies with the identity politics of their racialized community, that does not necessarily mean that they must remove themselves altogether. As is evident by Flora and Biddie's decision to remain in the town and to adopt a child together as a married couple, their level of comfort outweighs their discomfort. This begs the question, *how? How could they feel comfort in an environment where their relationship is condemned?*

Muñoz finds that although one's racialized community is not necessarily home (in the sense that it is always already safe), living outside of that community can be even more dangerous and/or limiting for LGBTQ people-of-color. There is no perfect place to live. Thus, Miss Flora and Biddie feel safer amongst individuals and families that they are familiar with, a community that has been marginalized and oppressed on the basis of race and forced to build communities in which their families could thrive. In other words, black and queer communities are minoritarian publics whose members have experienced similar oppressive tactics, and, in a

way, their subjugation is a point of connection between them. Thus, Biddie and Miss Flora's situatedness in a southern geography in a highly conservative time requires that they give and take to achieve a black lesbian romantic, an effort that Holmes masterfully documents.

Holmes's black lesbian feminist plays are historical works that rely on a theatrical landscape. These works depict black women in a process of discovering and reinventing themselves. The playwright illustrates that the traumatic reality of abuse and the damage it causes black girls and women cannot be erased by developing a hardened demeanor—as Miss Flora dons at the beginning of the play—or by ignoring the pain of rejection, which Phyllis does having left her family in Chicago. Flora and Phyllis reconcile with the past, excavating their pain to find joy in the arms of women who genuinely love them as they are. In both plays, black lesbian romance and homemaking reconfigure stereotypes associated with black womanhood to evince the ways that memory and love can heal individuals and make them whole again. Miss Flora is made whole through Biddie's love and respect for her—scars and all. Phyllis is made whole through Squirrel's maternalism. While Squirrel cannot replace Phyllis's mother, she becomes a surrogate who urges Phyllis to embrace an identity she can call her own so that one day she can mend her relationship with her mother before it is too late. Holmes requires that these characters share the burden of the past, a benevolent act that lays the groundwork for a healthy romantic relationship in *A Lady* and a loving mother-daughter relationship in *Remember!*

CHAPTER 3

BREAKING FORM:

SHARON BRIDGFORTH'S *THE BULL-JEAN STORIES* AND DONNETTA LAVINIA GRAYS'S *THE COWBOY IS DYING*

you my
biscuits and gravy

the amen
at the end of my prayers you
my perfumed hallelujah
sweet chariot stop and let me ride/you
my southern comfort[180]

—excerpt from *the bull-jean stories*

Now I got something I can hold
A solid foundation to build a home
I know it sounds crazy
But I'm thinkin' 'bout babies[181]

—excerpt from *the cowboy is dying*

[180] Sharon Bridgforth, *the bull-jean stories* (Washington: RedBone Press, 1998), 48-49.
[181] Donnetta Lavinia Grays, *the cowboy is dying* (unpublished manuscript, 2008), 9.

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on Sharon Bridgforth's (b. 1958) Lambda Award-winning performance novel, *the bull-jean stories* (1998), and Donnetta Lavinia Grays's (b. 1977) one-woman show, *the cowboy is dying* (2008). The main characters, bull-jean and Donnetta, are black lesbians coming into identity in the south. An adult throughout the novel, bull-jean is an out lesbian living in 1920s Louisiana. Donnetta transitions from girlhood, in 1980s and 1990s South Carolina, to queer womanhood in New York City in the early 2000s.

Both characters experiment with *butchness-as-performance* in similar ways. Butchness, as I understand it, is a quality of female masculinity that can vary depending on the performer. Bridgforth and Grays "play" with the construction of masculinity by focusing their narratives on butch embodiment and experience. This effort exposes audiences to complex butch images and situations. For example, bull-jean is not only recognizably butch, but she is also a male impersonator who sings in nightclubs under the name b.j. la rue. Her embodiment of masculinity becomes layered as she assumes a *hypermasculine* worldview outside of the club space. When bull-jean behaves in hypermasculine ways—when she dominates, controls, and wanders—a power imbalance develops between her and the femme(s) she loves. This leads to discomfort (loneliness) for the butch *and* the femme.

In another way, bull-jean's double performance of masculinity reflects what Jill Dolan calls a *utopian performative*.[182] Through performance, bull-jean is liberated in a way that the femmes are not. Even though they all inhabit a space and time wherein queerness is taboo, especially for black women, bull-jean openly participates in lesbianism and other queer cultural practices (such as drag).

[182] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the* Theater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Dolan defines a utopian performative as a performance of hope that translates from the performer to the spectator.

Similarly, in *cowboy*, young Donnetta has a butch alter ego—Bulldagger. However, she cannot fully embrace this character because of her fear of societal rejection. Religion is central to her family life and becomes a hindrance to her fantasy of becoming the butch. As I discussed in chapter two, the black church has been a pivotal institution for black families. Donnetta's family has left the Baptist church for the Kingdom Hall. According to the character's monologues, the Jehovah's Witness denomination has strict requirements for girls and women. Regarding gender and sexuality, she is expected to be a "good" (straight and feminine) girl. Therefore, to become a righteous woman, she keeps Bulldagger and her same-sex desires hidden.

Gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation are key themes in both plays as the protagonists resist southern black cultural expectations of womanhood (such as the assumption that black women must present as feminine, be heterosexual, and remain rooted in family, church, and community). One might expect these requirements to leave bull-jean and Donnetta with little agency, but butch identity and queer community provide the support they are not guaranteed in southern black spaces. Notably, bull-jean remains in the south and is an active member in her communities, despite her butch presentation and well-known lesbian forays. Donnetta migrates north. The south is her home—she was raised there—but it is not the only one. New York City becomes an alternate geography where she constructs a racially mixed, queer, and feminist family of women who support her in her experimentation with lesbian gender identity and romance.

An important way that bull-jean and Donnetta resist societal pressures to do their race and gender "right" is through fantasy, which, Dolan argues, "offers the potential for changing gender-coded structures of power."[183] Fantasy enables bull-jean and Donnetta to disidentify with

[183] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 68.

institutions of power—namely, the church—that imply that their gender expression and sexual desire are deviant. While Donnetta moves in and out of the imaginary, bull-jean moves in and out of the romantic. The butch fantasies they conjure there empower them in ways that become useful for their individual development and their collective homemaking.

In this chapter, I analyze *bull-jean* and *cowboy* alongside one another for several reasons: 1) Bridgforth's performance novel was the inspiration for Grays's play and represents how the tradition of black lesbian feminist performance is transmitted from one generation of BLFP artists to another; 2) both present deconstructions of the butch stereotype through nontraditional playwriting styles, forms, and aesthetics; and 3) the protagonists find home by enacting utopian mo(u)rnings with other bodies in unexpected ways. For example, bull-jean finds home not only with her lover, mina, but through a moving utopian mo(u)rning with her long lost son. Donnetta, on the other hand, *returns* home by deconstructing her fantasy butch. She discovers, after failed attempts at becoming more like Bulldagger and finding a lover, that home is her mother's body—an aging feminine body that she once took for granted.

Butch–Femme and Black Quare

In both works, the focus moves from the butch to the femme, highlighting the intimate connection between masculinity and femininity in black lesbian feminist performance. As I argued in chapter 2, gender expression within black lesbian communities is subject to change, especially the terminology. This is evident in *bull-jean* and *cowboy*. If black (lesbian) feminism allows one to name and rename oneself, and to define and redefine one's manner and behavior, then these works are illustrations of black lesbian autonomy and mobility. That said, Bridgforth and Grays repurpose the term "bulldagger" and apply it to their lead characters. The epithet is embraced in these narratives and provides possibilities for the characters to resist shaming tactics

(such as name-calling) and to reshape existing language to feel powerful under a heterocentric gaze.

In *bull-jean* and *cowboy*, power and masculinity are not necessarily connected. Dolan rightly argues, "In a lesbian performance context...[p]ower is not inherently male; a woman who assumes a dominant role is only malelike if the culture considers power as a solely male attribute."[184] Being that these characters exist in two communities—black and queer—power is not always already associated with the masculine. Gender can be a less hierarchical notion in queer contexts. On the surface, butchness appears to be a powerful embodiment for bull-jean and Donnetta, but, upon closer reading, the characters that affect the storyline most significantly are the less-imposing, often-silent femmes.

The femmes in these plays—when they speak in the first person—hold significant power and incite a shift in the butch characters. This shift propels the butches to address past pain—loss, guilt, and other heartbreaks—that have led them to rely on hypermasculine behaviors to feel powerful. To be clear, hypermasculinity is not inherent to butch performance; it is excessive masculinity that appears to be a protective embodiment for the butches. When a butch character exhibits hypermasculine behavior, *the femme who speaks* (such as mina or Girlfriend) articulates resentment to being controlled and silenced. The femme resists this treatment through meaningful utterances that change her path and that of the butch. Together or separately, the butch and femme progress toward home.

In these works, the playwrights strip butch and femme of some of their old meaning. Although bull-jean and Donnetta adhere to aspects of butch identity—dress, hair, style, manner, et cetera—they adopt less rigid masculinities over time, allowing room for the femme/feminine

[184] Ibid.

to enter. Exemplifying how one's perception of butchness (in relation to masculinity) can change, Bridgforth recounts her initial reticence to being labeled butch by others. She writes:

> I've never wanted to be a man and
>
> I'm not interested in engaging with women who want a woman to be a man.
>
> so to be called butch to me / was like being called an oreo.
>
> I decided to work through my initial response to the word because people kept using it as a label to refer to me, during the process of working to understand why people saw me / called me butch
>
> a lot of things surfaced...[185]

Not only did she reject this label, she was confused and insulted by being associated with masculinity. Rather than dismissing the term altogether, she explored its origins and imagery. She eventually claimed butch as a part of her identity—"naming myself / butch gave me a lens to look through / a way to speak on, explore and understand my experiences and feelings."[186] It was important for her to interrogate existing butch imagery from multiple angles so that she could better understand and articulate her woman-centric butch identity.

Another framework applicable to Bridgforth and Grays's writing is E. Patrick Johnson's *quare*, which connotes black southern queerness.[187] In "Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," Johnson refers to his grandmother's perception of queers—or "quares" (as she pronounces it in her southern accent)—as source material. His grandmother knows queerness by its performance; that is, his grandmother recognizes queers by their embodied presentation, utterances, and behaviors. Hers

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[185] Sharon Bridgforth's "a wo'mn called sir," in *First Person Queer: Who We Are (so Far)* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 39.

[186] Ibid, 42.

[187] See *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

is essentially an observation of difference—of something "slightly off-kilter"—in relation to her heterocentric perspective.[188] Turning quare on its head, Johnson celebrates the performances of queerness that she recognizes, but challenges her rubric by pointing out that the queer characteristics she identifies in her neighbor, David, for example, do not apply to *him* (Johnson), also a gay man.

Therefore, a black queer point of view is needed to tell a more complete story of quare life. If queerness is never clearly detectable or definable based on how one looks, acts, or speaks, but assumptions of gender and sexuality are a part of southern black queer life, then a quare lens is useful to more accurately assess the experience. *the bull-jean stories* is performance literature that benefits from this framework. The most visible characters in the novel are unapologetically black *and* queer folk who inhabit space with straight black folk whose heterocentric assumptions color their homemaking.

The Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic

Bridgforth's unconventional writing style and form provide a spectacular playing ground for her queer folk hero, bull-jean. A black southern dialect is the predominant voice of the novel, a commonality between the straight and queer characters. Not only do they share space, but also they share language. To follow the story, the reader/spectator must adapt to the world of the play, including its nontraditional language, form, and style.

A poet, Bridgforth masterfully uses literary devices in her playmaking. When reading her plays and performance novels, it is clear that she invests in the text and its placement on the page. For example, she uses italics when a voice other than the narrator is speaking. This voice belongs to the femme character. bull-jean's voice is often emboldened, while the zigzagged placement of dialogue connotes her emotional state. Lowercase lettering, slashes, phonetic word

[188] Ibid, 126.

spellings, and unusual punctuation and spacing are strategically placed throughout the text. Slashes typically indicate the end of a thought, although the next line (post-slash) might extend that thought. In brief, the text is a code for how the piece should be read/performed. One has to adjust to the form to hear the *music* (flow and message) of the piece.

Bridgforth and scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones theorize this as *the jazz aesthetic*. It is not only a dramaturgical tool, it is a collaborative approach to playmaking—"an African American art creation [composed of] virtuosity, improvisation, being present, listening, witnessing, expansion, and exploration of time, polyrhythms, non-linear forms, breath, synchronicity, and transcendence."[189] Also, the invocation of *spirit* in Bridgforth's work symbolizes a desire to speak an essential "truth"—that which one knows for sure or believes to be true—and it is central to the texts and to the creative process of producing them as installations and performances. They write: "It [the jazz aesthetic] necessitates the fact that when the individual works from a place of deep truth, works hard to achieve an advanced level of craftspersonship, and unmasks, unleashes, and reveals spirit, the individual is able to hear more deeply and therefore is better able to create in concert with others."[190]

Bridgforth assigns the jazz aesthetic a female aura, describing it as active and "about revolution/the revolution of spirit."[191] Jones posits that the jazz aesthetic "is at its best used for

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[189] Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, et al., *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic*: *Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 15-16.

[190] Ibid, 16. On Friday, August 12, 2016, I participated in a 3-hour workshop—"The Theatrical Jazz Workshop"—facilitated by Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference. As an ensemble made up of teachers, scholars, and artists, we focused on creating a communal space. Our personal narratives about a variety of issues were the foundation for our community. This intimacy became important to our group presentations of 1-minute installations that encapsulated the themes, words, ideas, and emotions that we had discussed in the time we spent actively listening and embodying each other's stories. Before the workshop began, Jones prompted us to "try it all on on, be present, and be here." Notably, clapping was discouraged as to avoid "a certain kind of performing that is dishonest." Truth telling, honesty, and shameless embodiment, I discovered, are integral to the theatrical jazz aesthetic.

[191] Jones, et al., *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic*, 15-16.

the purpose of building, nurturing, extending, and celebrating the humanity, liberation, and dignity of all people globally."[192] The jazz aesthetic is a performance method based in activism and coalition building between women and other minorities. It is personal and political, and Bridgforth and Jones believe that women of all backgrounds can use it to create identity-based works. Grays uses elements of the jazz aesthetic in *the cowboy is dying* to explore butch identity in ways that converge with and divert from Bridgforth's story.

the bull-jean stories

When it was published in 1998, *the bull-jean stories* was one of the few illustrations of black lesbian life, aside from Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman*, in literature and performance. Representing butch identity and lesbian relationships, it is a universal story of love, loss, and reunification. bull-dog jean (bull-jean, for short) is its central character, a black butch figure that does not hide behind closed doors. While respectability politics may prevent her from being with the woman she loves, they do not hinder her identity-based performance of self. In devising a dramatic story around a character like bull-jean, Bridgforth validates the existence of the butch, and other queer identities, in art and life.

Of importance, it is not a traditional play, but a performance novel—a "[text] that [is] written both to have a life on the page and to be read aloud or performed onstage."[193] As literature and performance, it does the work of claiming space for black lesbian images and narratives in both art forms. That said, it is a text that can be produced in a multitude of ways. For example, it can be adapted into a solo performance (see Appendix, figures 3-4) or, like its

[192] Ibid, 16.

[193] Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 185.

play adaptation, *blood pudding*, as a ritual drama with multiple performers.[194] I have chosen to analyze the performance novel because it is a nontraditional text that has inspired the solo works of BLFP artists (such as Grays and Q-Roc Ragsdale), and because of its complex representations of butch–femme identity and relationships in black southern spaces.

In *bull-jean*, Bridgforth reimagines the lives of early twentieth century black lesbians who, due to conservative ideas and religious strictures, were not able to be open about their queer gender and sexual identities. The playwright has a spiritual connection with prior generations of southern black lesbians whose stories have yet to be told. She writes:

> though I can't dictate their particular words
>
> i do understand that the voice of **the bull-jean stories**
>
> belongs to them. these are the stories
>
> they didn't tell me the ones i needed most.
>
> bull-jean is the butch/southern/poet/warrior
>
> wo'mn hero *I wish i'd known*.[195]

The reason for this lack of knowledge is not only the generation gap, but it is, also, in part, because there are few recorded histories of black lesbians in the 1920s from which Bridgforth can draw inspiration.[196] To recoup some of this loss and to make room for her own interpretation of southern black lesbian life, Bridgforth dramatizes a fictive account of black lesbian

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[194] Bridgforth's *blood pudding* (unpublished manuscript, 1998) is housed at New Dramatists in New York City. For a thorough analysis of the play, see Anderson's "Signifying Black Lesbians: Dramatic Speculations," in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008).

[195] Bridgforth, *the bull-jean stories*, preface (emphasis added).

[196] Anderson, 95. She writes:

> Historical data for black lesbian life, on which creative artists might base their works, is relatively new. Though recent efforts have begun to uncover a black lesbian history, the amount of scholarship is significantly smaller than the histories of white lesbians and gay men and white queer communities (Ibid).

womanhood. Relying on the utopian potential of performance, Bridgforth invokes unrecorded histories and animates disavowed queer identities in *bull-jean*.

Beyond Butch

bull-jean is a complicated character whose butch performance does not align with the stereotype of the aggressive butch that, say, scholar Kara Keeling finds in cinematic representations as far back as 1960s Blaxploitation.[197] Her difference (from the stereotype) is evident by her sensitivity and emotional responses to others, such as her lovers, her womenkin, and her son. She is sentimental toward the many loves of her life. I do not mean to imply that butch lesbian characters in media do not have emotional attachments to others around them, but they often take a possessive stance (using anger and violence) to hold on to their loved ones.[198] bull-jean is a not that kind of butch.

Female butchness, male butchness, and misogyny have an unusual relationship in *bull-jean*. They are related yet distinct, the result of which is dissonance between the concepts of masculinity, femininity, and power. This is intentional on Bridgforth's part. She wants the reader/audience to recognize that hypermasculinity and butch (female or male) masculinity are not necessarily synonymous. She writes:

> i saw myself more like those butch men than the femmes that raised me/though i did not like the way the men underestimated talked down to and mistreated the

[197] See Kara Keeling's "A Blackbelt in Bar Stool," in *The Witch's Flight* (2007).

[198] I am thinking of Ed Bullin's "Clara's Ole Man," in *Ed Bullins: Twelve Plays & Selected Writings* (1965; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006). In this play, Big Girl is emotionally abusive to her lover, Clara, and physically abusive toward those who threaten to take Clara away. Other examples include Cleo (played by Queen Latifah) in the film, "Set It Off" (1996). I see these representations of the butch as one-dimensional, whereas butch-identified women of all races/ethnicities live nuanced existences and express gender in similar and complex ways. The stereotypes of black butches in film and television tend to resemble a costume party; the exterior is meant to symbolize a strong, tough, male-like figure for viewers/spectators to quickly recognize. This type is often reproduced in media.

> femmes. i understand now that the very conservative south they had all fled from/was present somehow within the confines of the female-male games they played.[199]

Conservatism is also present in the "female-female games" that the butches and femmes play in the novel. Further, she suggests that hypermasculinity (regardless of the sex/gender of the body performing it) is often an inauthentic performance. Thus, butchness, if unchecked, can be an embodiment with limitations for black lesbians.

With bull-jean, Bridgforth complicates the butch stereotype and extends the boundaries of what a butch can be and do on stage. The depiction of bull-jean as a masculine woman with feminine behaviors—such as teary-eyed lamentations—affects readers'/spectators' perception of the butch. When they think they have a firm hold on bull-jean's type, Bridgforth complicates that vision—she *quares* it. However, there are moments of identification for the audience when they clearly recognize bull-jean *beyond butch.* For example, while the narrators (bull-jean's womenkin) decry her pitiful state (begging, pleading, reciting poetry and "croon'n" outside of her lovers' windows), the audience empathizes with the sympathetic figure not as a butch, but as a person in pain.

Love often leaves bull-jean in emotional anguish. She becomes enmeshed with the subject/object of her desire. If the relationship fails, she falls into a deep depression. The narrators, many of whom are unnamed, black, and queer, can identify with her. Many of them have similar stories to tell. (Perhaps that is why they tease her so regularly.) For example, bugga—a lesbian who "counsel[s] wid" bull-jean—has made the same mistakes in love. This recognition prompts bugga to tell bull-jean to "RUN!!!" if she "feels anything what resemble

[199] Bridgforth, "a wo'mn called sir," 42.

Lovve."[200] Like bugga, bull-jean rarely takes this advice. She has romanticized love to such an extent that she expects for it to be painful.

While bull-jean's experiences of loss occur primarily in her romantic life, a more significant loss haunts her past. Many years earlier, her son was taken away from her by community members who judged her unfit to be a mother. In this instance, her nonnormative gender expression and sexuality violated the community's politics and action was taken to remove the child from her home. As a result, bull-jean is in a revolving love-loss-grief loop in her romantic life. When her son returns, years later, it becomes clear why she has not been able to get out of this painful cycle: motherhood was an organic source of power for her. When her son was taken, she lost the balance in her life.

The Club, Revisited

While bull-jean experiences considerable emotional pain, she also experiences pleasure. Normalizing queerness in a black southern context, Bridgforth illustrates that black butches have long been present in black communities. She does this, in part, by making the club an important social space for queer (and straight) black characters. In the 1920s, queer people could not publicly perform their identities or act out on romantic, emotional, and sexual desires without punishment. They were expected to assume heterosexual or asexual personas to assimilate to society. The club, however, was a subcultural space where queers encountered other queers and performed in ways that subverted the dominant culture.

In *bull-jean*, the popular hangout is Club Seeyaround where bull-jean lounges and sings as b.j. la rue. Of gender bending and the centrality of the club, Bridgforth writes:

> I intentionally, organically, always have him/shes. People who are complicated in their gender, queer characters, lesbians, gay men as holy people, and people who

[200] Bridgforth, *the bull-jean stories*, 34-37.

> are part of the communal process of invoking change. [...] In them juke joints, they was doin' everything, and they didn't have the hang-ups that we have today.[201]

The club, as she sees it, has been a space of freedom where alternative performances of gender and sexuality are accepted (even expected).[202] Of the rent parties in 1920s Harlem—similar to the weekend parties at southern juke joints—Wilson observes that "[t]he admixture of alcohol, jazz music, and feelings of political and social liberation engendered at these parties contributed to a sense of sexual freedom as well."[203] Scholar Ramón H. Rivera-Servera finds that the club can be a freeing space where queers of color practice "choreographies of resistance"—"embodied practices through which [they as] minoritarian subjects claim their space in social and cultural realms."[204] Choreographies of resistance can occur through communal engagement in pleasure making (singing, dancing, partying) in the club. Club Seeyaround functions similarly.

Anderson writes, "[It] is everyone's club; it is not exclusively lesbian or heterosexual space. The club is the primary representation of the inclusivity of the community. […] This is a community in which sexuality does not determine one's acceptance."[205] Thus, straight and queer worlds collide in this club. It is a diverse space where many of the characters come to relax from the pressures of normativity and respectability. bull-jean (as b.j. la rue) performs her own brand of masculinity, here, akin to what is known, today, as a Drag King performance in which women dress and perform as men. Claiming the stage with this male persona, bull-jean/b.j. makes the

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[201] Anita González, "Interview with Sharon Bridgforth," in *solo/black/woman: scripts, interviews, and essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 231.

[202] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 19.

[203] Ibid. The popular music at Club Seeyaround is blues, an appropriate style for the melancholy bull-jean.

[204] Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 161.

[205] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 102.

club home for the night. She/he asserts her/his right to be there and is supported by others (straight and queer) in that effort.

In the scene titled, "bull-jean is b.j. la rue," the narrator tells the audience that b.j. exists outside of the club space, as well, and he is affecting bull-jean's life negatively. What is happening, I argue, is that bull-jean is taking hypermasculinity, not b.j., into her daily life. This results in a schism between fantasy and reality. She is internalizing hypermasculine characteristics—such as egocentrism and dominance—from her performance. The narrator divulges that she thought bull-jean *was* a man by her appearance and behavior on stage. However, when she heard b.j. sing, she was reminded of tootie la rue, bull-jean's father.[206] bull-jean may be affecting her father's singing voice to appear more authentic. The narrator explains, "the club owners twist off she name / make more money letting the mens think / her a man-sangn-man-sorrows."[207] Not only can bull-jean pass for a man, but passing is profitable for her.

There is also a certain pleasure, for her, in being unrecognizable as a woman. As b.j., she is able to move in and out of heteronormative culture with some flexibility. That is, she benefits from male privilege. Judith Butler asserts:

> There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. It may well be that my sense of social belonging is impaired by the distance I take, but surely that estrangement is preferable to gaining a sense of

[206] Bridgforth, *the bull-jean stories*, 64.
[207] Ibid, 66-67.

> intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do me in from another direction. Indeed, the capacity to develop a critical relation to these norms presupposes a distance from them, an ability to suspend or defer the need for them, even as there is a desire for norms that might let one live. The critical relation depends as well on a capacity, invariably collective, to articulate an alternative, minority version of sustaining norms or ideals that enable me to act.[208]

From a heterocentric perspective, bull-jean is masculine—or "like a man"—and is, therefore, not completely legible as a man or a woman. When she is b.j., however, she is almost unrecognizable as a woman; she is intelligible as a man. To clarify, b.j. is not a disguise and he is not a habitual embodiment for bull-jean; he is a performance within a performance that satisfies a diverse audience. He also provides some protection for the tenderhearted bull-jean.

bull-jean and the Women

These complications of identity intensify as bull-jean engages in a series of romantic relationships with women who do not stay with her. The major question of the novel is: Will bull-jean eventually find a woman who reciprocates love? Her lovers—the wo'mn, babett, clara, sugga, safirra, and serafine—are basically the same type. They are femmes who seem to be experimenting with lesbianism. They may give bull-jean "everthang," but they also take what matters most to her: her heart.[209] What Anderson calls the "transgressive" quality of the butch—"because she does not embody the cultural standard female position"[210]—is also evident in the femme. Many of bull-jean's femme lovers have engaged in sexual relationships with men and women. This behavior is not the "standard" for women. They can also pass for straight. Thus, the femmes, like bull-jean, can slip in and out of heteronormativity.

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[208] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.
[209] Bridgforth, *the bull-jean stories*, 86.
[210] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 109.

The femmes rarely speak, but are portrayed as manipulative figures who are unsure if they want to be with a woman or a man. Usually, a butch narrator describes the femme, which, I argue, leaves room for doubt as to the accuracy of their interpretations. Neither bisexual identity nor sexual fluidity is considered (by the butches) as a possible motivation for the femmes' treatment of bull-jean (leaving her). Scholar Lisa M. Diamond, in *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (2008), writes:

> [Sexual fluidity] means situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness. This flexibility makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation…[W]omen of all orientations may experience variation in their erotic and affectional feelings as they encounter different situations, relationships, and life stages.[211]

Many of the femmes described in *bull-jean* are sexually fluid, be it a result of genuine desire or social pressure. Perhaps the femme characters experience moments of indecision. Perhaps they are confused about their sexualities. Perhaps they are insecure and fall victim to traditional expectations of southern black womanhood. It is plausible that the femmes in the novel—characters constructed as cisgender women who "appear" heterosexual—are pressured to conform to heterocentric norms. An actress playing a character like the wo'mn—a voluptuous femme who does not speak, but moves through space in a highly sexual manner—might consider these motivations in her portrayal. The wo'mn embodies sex, according to bull-jean, but there is more to her than that.

[211] Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

Generally, the butch characters who comment on the femme do not acknowledge fear of societal judgment as a factor in the femme's actions. They (the butches) occupy a masculine position and often interpret the feminine players in misogynistic, rather than feminist, ways. This reflects the playwright's concern with the conflation of masculinity and power. The femme, unlike the butch, does not have the freedom to wander through black southern spaces in nonnormative ways without being judged for her behaviors (intentional or unintentional). And when the femme hurts the butch, she pays with the loss of her voice.

The narrators take the position that a "good" femme is hard to find. safirra goode—one of bull-jean's "bad" femmes—is described as follows:

> ain't nuthn but two-sided/walk
>
> ever whicha way/lik she gots to have it all
>
> mens in the street/bull-jean
>
> in the sheets/jes
>
> all-of-it.[212]

safirra is described as bisexual and indiscriminant about her sexual partners. I observe that she is experimenting with sexuality in a way that is atypical for a feminine woman in masculinized spaces. The narrator polices safirra, evaluating her choices against normative standards of acceptable feminine behavior. When bull-jean plays the field, it is expected that she will have numerous romantic and sexual relationships with women. However, when safirra does it, her actions are a problem (for both straight and queer people).

In another scene, concerning the wo'mn, bull-jean, and jucey la bloom sit drinking and crying. The wo'mn has broken bull-jean's heart. According to the narrator, "jucey say / *she ain't*

[212] Bridgforth, *the bull-jean stories*, 45.

nuthn but a periodic-ho / ain't even got sense nuff / to charge on a regular basis."[213] This dig at the wo'mn is a reflection of jucey and bull-jean's butch bond—"they so close they feel one-the-other's pain"—and the ways in which they engage in the kind of misogynistic talk that many men do.[214] This explains why jucey castigates the wo'mn, but does not admonish bull-jean for the same behavior.

bull-jean's choices about the women she loves is a part of the reason they do not stay. By objectifying the femmes, she is misled by superficial factors (such as the wo'mn's physique) as signifiers of a quality romantic partner. Talking with jucey, bull-jean speaks about the wo'mn. The monologue, as printed, is emboldened and indicates that she is telling the truth.

> **russling skirt/jiggling jewelry/clicking**
>
> **heels trouble/came in**
>
> **smelt lik sunshine lik**
>
> **freedom on a bed of posies/trouble**
>
> **made me want her**
>
> **befo i ever saw her face she**
>
> **entered my Heart**
>
> **and held me/trouble**
>
> **came in ass popping**
>
> **from side to side**[215]

Trouble, *it*, and *she* are interchangeable in this excerpt. the wo'mn is an object *and* a subject of desire. bull-jean is immediately taken with the wo'mn's feminine gender presentation, which, for reasons that are unclear—but, likely, related to past experience—is symbolic of the pleasure and

[213] Ibid, 24.
[214] Ibid, 23.
[215] Ibid, 25 (emphasis in original).

pain she expects from love. bull-jean invests emotion in femmes whom she hopes will fill the empty space left by the absence of her son. Naturally, the wo'mn does not stay. She cannot possibly fill this void because bull-jean has yet to acknowledge the specificities of this great loss. As is bull-jean's habit (love-loss-grief), she falls in love with yet another femme, sugga, who will not stay either.

An important temporal concept, "last-Life" is significant to bull-jean's struggles. The repetition of love and loss in the novel helps the audience understand that bull-jean has led many lives prior to her current existence. It also indicates that the quality of her relationships in this life will determine that of those in her next one. bull-jean becomes so enamored with sugga that she stands in her yard, singing and rapping poetry toward her bedroom window. The scene is oddly reminiscent of the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*. The narrator, sugga's gran-aunty—a woman who has had intimate relationships with women—candidly tells bull-jean that sugga is not interested in her advances. sugga's gran-aunty is a voice of reason, but bull-jean is blinded by her fantasies of a future with sugga. To encourage bull-jean to give up on her niece as a prospect for partnership, sugga's gran-aunty invokes the implications of "last–Life" on bull-jean's present predicament: "na/I done had enough pussay to last till i returns…you on the other hand needs some gurl…i don't know what you done-done to that gal last-Life but i don't reckon she near fixnta let you Lovve her this one…so go on wid yo-self!"[216] sugga's grand-aunty assumes that bull-jean will listen to spiritual reason. According to this logic, bull-jean never had a chance with sugga.

Spirituality, religion, and love converge in "bull-jean & next life/blues." In this scene, the audience learns more about bull-jean's romantic relationship with safirra goode, a local preacher's daughter. safirra and sampson tucka johnson—a juke joint owner and a preacher's

[216] Ibid, 34-35.

son—are ne'er-do-wells. Their fathers (the reverends) arrange a marriage between the two in hopes that they will settle down and change their sinful ways. As a matter of respectability, they agree to marry in a church ceremony. bull-jean, of course, is the sacrifice that safirra makes for security and her father's love. When the narrator unveils the reverends' goal (to make their children god-fearing and righteous), she intimates that safirra's "sin" is lesbianism. The community, the narrator asserts, is fully aware that she is "bull-jean's wo'mn!"[217]

In a strange turn of events, safirra convinces bull-jean to attend the wedding and witness "the most important event in [her] life."[218] This is painful for bull-jean to hear, but she agrees to be present. Being the hero figure, though, she cannot sit idly by as her lover marries someone else. bull-jean sits in the congregation of the church, watching safirra prepare to officially marry tucka. When the preacher asks if anyone in the congregation objects to the marriage, bull-jean boldly stands up in the middle of the ceremony and professes her love for safirra and her displeasure with the union:

bull-jean
stood
up
  had on she best suit/pressed and all
say
looka here
this
ain't no binding/and it
sho ain't none of God's choosing i

[217] Ibid, 44.
[218] Ibid, 45-46.

the one put on this earth

to walk wid that wo'mn and/i

the one oughta be up there wid her na/so

yessuh

mr. reverend preacher man

i take the right to make objection

to this

lie-befo God.[219]

Objecting to the marriage, bull-jean steals focus. To her, this "binding" is illegitimate; it does not reflect true love. At once, she stands within and outside of the community.

The congregation becomes silent, mostly, but some characters laugh at bull-jean. When conchita la fraud and wee wee "[giggle] in the back of the church," they are responding not only to bull-jean, but to the entire spectacle.[220] They know that she and safirra were lovers and that bull-jean has been humiliated by the engagement. They also know, per the community's politics of respectability, that bull-jean will not achieve her desired outcome (safirra's hand in marriage) by resisting in the church space. This dual response from the congregation—silence and laughter—comes about for several reasons, one of which is that bull-jean is dressed in men's formal wear. Again, she is unintelligible as a man outside of the club and, therefore, does not fit into the society's conceptualization of a proper man or woman. Although she is comfortable in her suit, the attendees are not necessarily comfortable with her in it. bull-jean's clothing also suggests that she wants to stand in the groom's place. She is prepared to step into that role, if safirra will have her.

[219] Ibid, 47-48.
[220] Ibid, 50-51.

This idealistic view of partnership, for the congregation, is incomprehensible. By their logic, she should not love another woman or wear men's clothing. (She should be ashamed of herself.) However, bull-jean suggests that safirra, tucka, and the reverends should be ashamed of themselves. She assumes the position that a marriage is a spiritual act of love rather than a business arrangement. It is clear, by her actions in this scene, that bull-jean was reared in the black church and is familiar with the underlying meanings of the institution's religious traditions and practices. Although she is queer, she adheres to a Christian value system in which lying is sinful. bull-jean stands up for what she believes as a Christian and as a masculine-identified lesbian, an act that signals to the audience that she is a principled character who is not only representing herself, but bodies like hers, as well.

It is unlikely that this scene would have taken place in a black church in the 1920s, without recourse, but because this is speculative fiction, a folk-hero can stand up in a religious space and profess her love for a woman. She proudly claims the sacred space in "this life" to lay the groundwork for the next life. This time around, she is uninterested in being safirra's lover on the side—a position that many closeted lesbians and gays occupy to remain safe from the gaze of heterocentric society. Exemplifying disidentification and differential consciousness, bull-jean articulates a utopia in which it is only natural for two lovers, regardless of sex/gender, to have a traditional union.

Ironically, after safirra and tucka marry, safirra becomes more passionate about religion.[221] One could argue that her feelings for bull-jean are genuine, but not conducive for her survival as a black woman in the south. The children of preachers, both safirra and tucka are held to a higher standard of morality and virtue than others around them. To represent their families in a positive light, they are expected to make traditional choices in how they live their lives. Thus,

[221] Ibid, 54.

they settle into a heteronormative lifestyle. While safirra's spiritual life becomes more animated, her romantic life becomes dull. In a sense, she is paying a price for being a "respectable" woman. One can infer that she has redirected her former passions (love, sex) toward another focus: the church. She survives by conforming to prevailing expectations of black womanhood. Her choice to marry tucka is a practical one, considering the societal pressures she is under. Although safirra and bull-jean approach homemaking differently, they strive for the same result: to make a family.

mina come stay

mina is bull-jean's last attempt at homemaking. In the final section of the novel, bull-jean asks mina to be her wife. Instead of joy, the proposal incites a tense exchange. The narrator, an unnamed relative of mina's, briefly summarizes their family history, noting a tendency amongst their kin to resist authority. This is important information because bull-jean exhibits hypermasculine behavior, at times, and mina refuses to be subordinate to her. When mina questions bull-jean's intentions, she speaks for "the different wy'mns" that have loved and left bull-jean.

bull-jean's behavior, over the course of the relationship, makes mina concerned that her lover cannot see her beyond the femme stereotype. mina was married to a dominant male partner and does not want to be anyone's "wife" again, in the traditional sense. mina is searching for a deeper intimacy with her partner, not to be property. She says:

> *look lik wife*
>
> *is a word folk use when they want*
>
> *license to control you if you trying*
>
> *to claim me bull-jean/jes call me yo wo'mn*
>
> *that's what i am*

a wo'mn

complete

wid or widout you.[222]

It seems that bull-jean's treatment of mina (and mina's refusal to tolerate it) is the source of their communication problems. They have difficulty speaking across the butch-femme divide. This confrontation, therefore, is a moment of crisis. If they are to make a family together, bull-jean has to adjust her butch performance and mina has to speak up for herself.

As the narrator observes, bull-jean is used to having her way with women. mina, however, having been shaped by a family of women that resist the status quo, will not tolerate bull-jean's "doggish" ways. The narrator advises:

bull-jean want mina stay mus talk no-bark no act-out

cause mina see a barkn dog/move on

bull-jean cain't capture mina/mina got ta want come

stay.[223]

bull-jean must soften if she wants mina to stay and mina must decide to remain with her. Ever the poet, bull-jean has to find the "right" word(s) to get mina to stay because "wife ain't saying nuthn right/in [mina's] mind!" mina associates the word "wife" with bad feelings.[224] She prefers the word "wo'mn" in her relationship with bull-jean. In this way, mina aligns herself with a feminist/femme worldview that requires bull-jean to reconsider the role of the femme lesbian in relation to the butch lesbian.

"Wo'mn" has utopian potential. It is not a part of a binary (such as woman–man, lady–woman, masculine–feminine) and can bring them closer together; bull-jean can be a wo'mn, too.

[222] Ibid, 88.
[223] Ibid, 87.
[224] Ibid, 88.

Initially, this confuses bull-jean, who understands the power dynamics of a relationship between a masculine woman and a feminine woman as always unequal. Forced to listen to mina, or lose her, bull-jean realizes that "wo'mn" signifies mina's desire for parity with her partner. In mina's utopia, love is not one-sided. Both women can have equal emotional ownership of the other and of herself.

Watching the scene unfold, the narrator stands nervously on her porch. She is enthralled with the drama of the exchange and has to know how it ends. To break the silence, bull-jean proposes anew. She improvises sweet poetry about wanting to "wake to the smell of [mina's] hair…each morning" and she evokes sensual images of wanting "to Pray in the curve of [mina's] hips."[225] By invoking religious and sexual imagery, here, bull-jean has positioned both Christianity and lebianism as central to the way she will love mina. The passion that she has for God and for her lover come together; they are not mutually exclusive ideas. If God is love and if bull-jean loves mina—romantically, sexually, and emotionally—then the image of her praying to to another woman's body holds the quality of religious devotion.

Then, bull-jean tells mina what she needs to hear:

i want you to

stay

be who you are wid fierceness

be honest wid me

and see me when you look

that is what i want/that's

what i am asking be

[225] Ibid, 90.

my wo'mn mina[226]

When bull-jean asks mina to *see her,* she is suggesting that the persona she presents to the outside world is not a complete portrait of herself. Also, by valuing mina's needs as highly as her own, she pleases mina. In calling out and resisting bull-jean's bad behavior, mina has occupied the mother role to bull-jean, inspiring her to embrace a realistic love, rather than an idealistic one.

Of significance, bull-jean uses mina's label in her proposal:

bull-jean breathe those last words into mina

be my wo'mn mina

three times

and three times mina breathe back[227]

This ritual is similar to the exchange of rings in a marriage ceremony. mina accepts bull-jean's hand and agrees to be her wo'mn. Conversely, mina accepts bull-jean as *her* wo'mn. They agree on an alternate term that they can both identify with—a word that represents their roles in the relationship, thereafter. This is a satisfying ending for the narrator and the audience. It primes them for the most dramatic encounter in the novel.

pontificuss devine johnson, a neighbor everyone calls "cuss," narrates the final section, "bull-jean & the question of family." The couple has prospered. They are now mothers to numerous children who regularly disrupt cuss's peace and quiet. She explains that the children are not all biological—"some is theys/some is nieces nephews / neighbors and cousins."[228] The family is not complete, however, until bull-jean's son, son-man, returns.

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[226] Ibid, 91 (emphasis in the original).
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid, 99-100.

In a surprising revelation, cuss reports that son-man has reconnected with bull-jean. He arrived on the couple's porch, one Saturday, with his adopted son. In her emotional retelling of son-man's return, the dialogue shifts from the third person (cuss) to the first person (son-man) and back to the third person (cuss). He has had a hard life, as evidenced by the condition of his body—"a scar from eye to chin down the right side of his face / muscles as big as bull-jean's / hands knicked and callused."[229] mina sees him first, then calls bull-jean to the porch. Clearly, bull-jean has talked about him because this is the first time mina and son-man meet, yet "[she] know him right off." bull-jean is stunned by his presence—"soon as bull-jean step to the porch/eye catch that man's / her had to sit down / she Heart stop i know cause i felt the pause."[230] Then, son-man delivers a long, heart-wrenching monologue detailing his journey home. He verbally testifies about his pain and bull-jean validates his testimony through weeping. She does not say a word, but her body speaks volumes. This exchange is bull-jean's mo(u)rning.

cuss bears witness to the details and relays them to the audience. son-man sits at bull-jean's feet. The events he describes can be staged: a boy-child is taken from his mother and forced into the arms of new one. In this new family unit, religion (symbolized by a bible) is used as a corrective. son-man describes his experiences, from boyhood to manhood, without her. Having been raised by a black queer woman, he saw the world differently. It was difficult for him to internalize the anti-gay/homophobic rhetoric of the church folk responsible for his displacement. The suffering that son-man recalls is devastating for bull-jean, too, as she cannot form words to soothe him. He says:

they called you unholy

a sinner gonn burn in hell said you was unnatural

[229] Ibid, 102.
[230] Ibid.

and unsafe for children to be around / that they'd see you

rot under the jail if I so much as stepped to your gate.[231]

"They" imposed their interpretations of biblical scripture upon him in hopes that he would turn against her. What's more, they falsely suggested that bull-jean's gender queerness and lesbianism made her incapable of being an effective parent.

son-man admits that being separated from bull-jean left him without a stable foundation. He tells her that she taught him how to be a man, how to survive, and be self-sufficient. Here, he rejects the rhetoric in black communities that black women cannot raise black men—that is, that there needs to be a male figure in the home for boys to acquire certain racialized and gendered lessons and life skills. To him, bull-jean raised him well.

With bull-jean and son-man, female masculinity and male masculinity meet in a positive (rather than antagonistic) way. His liberation as a man is connected to her liberation as a *wo'mn.* The narrator observes:

bull-jean

she couldn't talk for a long time / just sit

hold the hands of her manchild / crying

out the left side she face

smiling.[232]

A butch mother, bull-jean is literally both sad and happy. She is both grieving the loss of her child and hoping for more time with him. The past and future meet in the present as bull-jean reconciles her deepest loss in hopes of joyous future. Moved to tears by their reunion, cuss says,

[231] Ibid, 103.
[232] Ibid, 108.

"gotdamniit / they had me crying so that day / i ain't been the same since."[233] She gushes with pride, curses, and praises God:

> bull-jean's son-man say he gots two mammas na / mo
>
> Lovve-mo hugs-mo good cooking
>
> mo joy for him and the boy [...]
>
> and gotdamnit
>
> i think thats Blessed assurance that God is good/make everthang alright in time
>
> yeah![234]

A curmudgeonly witness, cuss pretends to be unfazed by the scene, but she, like the audience, is caught up in the emotion of the exchange. She secretly roots for bull-jean and mina's family to thrive. Her joy is infectious and the audience gets the ending they hoped for (and more).

the cowboy is dying

Donnetta Lavinia Grays's *the cowboy is dying* is a one-woman show inspired by *the bull-jean stories*. A playwright and performer, Grays has said, "I think reading Sharon Bridgforth's work gave me permission to write because I saw [someone] like me in her and her words."[235] This powerful statement supports my position that black lesbian feminist performance artists and their works are important to subsequent generations of artists. By continuing to devise nontraditional plays and performances that center on black lesbian identity, artists, like Bridgforth, are passing down an Africanist, feminist/womanist, and queer tradition to BLFP artists who continue to create similarly-themed performance works in new and innovative ways.

[233] Ibid, 107.
[234] Ibid, 108.
[235] Email correspondence with Grays (October 22, 2011).

In *cowboy*, Grays reconfigures the butch type through an imaginative solo performance that combines a variety of theatrical aesthetics.[236] A semi-autobiographical comedy about a black queer girl's journey to womanhood, Grays relies on aspects of her life for the story and bull-jean as a model for her butch hero, Bulldagger. She combines the theatrical jazz aesthetic with elements of realism, magic, and musical theatre. Structurally, the play is made up of a series of continuous scenes in which one performer—originally Grays—plays up to 20 characters.[237] They include: Donnetta (as a child, teenager, and adult); Bulldagger, a cowboy type; Donnie, her older sister; her mother; Adriana, her first real love interest; and Girlfriend, an adult partner.

The play follows Donnetta from eight years old to her late-20s and is set in multiple locations—Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina, and Brooklyn, New York. A minimalist play, Grays suggests that the lighting and sound be designed in creative ways to suggest these cities, as opposed "to [using] any large set pieces" to represent them.[238] The stage is split; there is an empty playing space on one side "where Donnetta lives" and a space set up as an apartment "where Bulldagger lives."[239] While the characters inhabit different playing spaces on the stage, they share realistic psychological worlds. That is, although Bulldagger is a fantastical alter ego that young Donnetta shapes in her imagination, Bulldagger is "not otherworldly."[240] She has a reality, too. As the play unfolds, Bulldagger and Donnetta's worlds (physical and psychological) should merge seamlessly. Here, Grays deviates slightly from the jazz aesthetic into the realm of domestic realism, but she is not beholden to any one convention in this play. It is an amalgam of aesthetics, which results in a fast-paced, riveting, and, at times, disorienting solo performance.

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[236] See Appendix, figures 5-6.

[237] This solo performance requires a "small-framed" actress—a strong visual choice because Donnetta and Bulldagger envision themselves as larger-than-life and ultimately arrive at the realization that they are not.

[238] Grays, *the cowboy is dying*, 2.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Ibid.

While there are notable stylistic and aesthetic differences between *bull-jean* and *cowboy*, there are many similarities in their images and narratives. First, Bulldagger is a visibly butch character who dresses in cowboy attire. Her masculine embodiment is striking (to the audience and to young Donnetta). The playwright describes Bulldagger as "solid and strong, but embattled."[241] Second, the search for love is a central theme. Bulldagger, who, like bull-jean, is consumed by love, wants to sustain a romantic relationship with the lover and Donnetta wants to begin a substantive lesbian relationship. Third, the femme is, generally, a shadowy figure. For example, the lover is a butch ideal in Bulldagger's world. The femme develops into an agential character, Girlfriend, in Donnetta's world, though. To bring both worlds together, Girlfriend emerges as *the femme who speaks.* As in *bull-jean*, when the femme speaks, what she says (and the butch's response to it) changes the life paths of the butch and the femme. Fourth, the trope of motherhood is key. Donnetta's mother is an important, though peripheral, maternal figure who symbolizes a permanent home. When Donnetta cannot sustain an ideal romantic relationship with the femme, she discovers that her mother is a stable figure to whom she can always return.

Making the Cowboy

The opening scene of the play is set outside of Bulldagger's apartment. The lover is inside and Bulldagger is preparing to propose marriage. She paces the hallway anxiously and tries to recite her speech, but no sound comes out. When her voice fails, she begins to sing "Feel Good"—a song whose sensual lyrics imply body worship.[242] Throughout the play, Bulldagger expresses love through music. Her a capella songs serve a specific function: to comment on her "relationship with the 'lover' in real time."[243] Bulldagger sings *about* her rocky relationship with

[241] Ibid, 3.

[242] Ibid. Listen to audio version of this song (under the title, "Make Me Feel Good") at https://soundcloud.com/donnetta-grays/make-me-feel-good. Posted by Grays. Accessed March 5, 2017.

[243] Grays, *the cowboy is dying*, 2

the lover, but the lover never appears on stage. The audience is more likely to accept Bulldagger's intoned commentary as truth because there is no alternate femme narrative provided for the audience. Therefore, Bulldagger is secure in the role of storyteller.

"Feel Good" is a driving, mid-tempo blues. Grays assures that the actor playing Bulldagger need not be a good singer—she "should not have a standard musical theatre style voice." The voice can be "[u]ntrained, raw with pitch problems and all." [244] Grays (as Bulldagger) originally sang the song in a smooth, soulful, alto voice:

> See, you got a religiously
>
> sexy, sexy, sexy
>
> Got me praying to your
>
> Body, body, body[245]

Like bull-jean, Grays brings spirituality and the body together in this song to reflect not only Bulldagger's investment in the lover's body as sacred space, but also to hint at Donnetta's obsession with religion. In the next scene, which I will analyze, the audience discovers that religious faith, gender, and sexuality intersect and impact Donnetta's girlhood dreams. Bulldagger continues:

> Can't think of myself with any other body
>
> *(Pause)*
>
> Come on and make me feel good
>
> It's time to make me feel good.[246]

[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid, 4.
[246] Ibid.

The fact that the song focuses so intensely on the lover's body indicates that the feminine body is a place where the cowboy feels safe. She is devoted to this particular body and relies on it for security.

During the song, Bulldagger tries out some blocking, such as "[removing] her flannel shirt and belt."[247] She believes that if she performs the proposal "right"—if she is sexy, macho, and sweet—then the lover will accept her proposal and make her (Bulldagger) "feel good." Although it is a serious moment for Bulldagger, the audience is supposed to laugh during this scene. The humor, here, is in the character's exaggerated rehearsal of the courting ritual. The song gets her through the front door.

Then, there is a transition to a scene with young Donnetta, who is seated "in the backyard of her parent's house in Columbia, South Carolina."[248] Grays switches between portraying young and adult Donnetta, as she recounts her adolescent experiences: "Our backyard is so huge. I like to come out here barefoot so I can feel the thick blades of grass run between my toes. I center myself between the tiny weeping willow tree and the deck. And I am waiting for my rainstorm to arrive."[249] The storm is a metaphor for life. At eight years old, Donnetta fearlessly takes control of "her" rainstorm; she claims it as her own. She has an intimate connection with nature that relates directly to her faith in God. To her, God is the creator of nature and she can converse with him. In her yard, she speaks to God as if he were a friend or playmate.

A lively and imaginative child, she believes that she can control nature. The young girl directs her monologue upward (to heaven). God becomes the "dark cloud" moving in over the city. She yells:

[247] Ibid, 3.
[248] Ibid, 4.
[249] Ibid.

> I am the shore. Wash your dark tide upon me great big ole dark storm cloud! Come on. Come on. I am a conductor of the thunder, a coddler of lightning. A sorcerer who calls down the rains in all their glorious frenzy. I am a challenger. I am…eight years old. And I have the balls to challenge God. I can do it 'cause we're tight.[250]

She is tussling with God, even at a young age. Using the trope of religion as promise and obstacle, Grays gives her young protagonist the possibility of a life path that few black women achieve—that of an evangelist, one who is "tight" with God. To be detached from God, as young Donnetta has been taught, would result in negative consequences for her: damnation to Hell.

Like Bridgforth's "last-Life," the concept of the spiritual "after life" is important in this play. Donnetta reveals that her family has recently changed denominations. She describes them as "transitional Southern Baptist/semi-practicing Jehovah's Witness[es]."[251] Her new bible study teacher has taught her that there are only 144,000 people on earth who are "truly saved." Only they "will be called upon to live in heaven and serve alongside God after Armageddon." Adhering to this foundational tenet of the Jehovah's Witness faith, Donnetta wants to be one of the 144,000 to "serve God in the afterlife."[252]

Through her conversations with God, she believes that she has been "called" to be a minister. Young Donnetta's reverence toward the storm is symbolic of how "tight" she is with God. She exclaims:

> DONNETTA (To God): […] God tells me...I got me a slot! He tells me that I am called to preach. He tells me that I am called into the ministry. I imagine great sermons. I imagine inspiring large groups of people to do good deeds. [...]

[250] Ibid, 5.
[251] Ibid, 10.
[252] Ibid.

> DONNETTA: (To God) I accept. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you! In Jesus name, Amen.[253]

Donnetta's experience of hearing God's "call" is an ecstatic moment. It also poses a major obstacle for a girl who has begun to have homoerotic desires for her bible study teacher and other girls her age, and whose ideal embodiment is Bulldagger, a butch woman-loving cowboy. These disparate ideas result in a painfully funny coming-of-age story.

As time passes, Donnetta determines that being "called by God" is a difficult position to be in, especially for her:

> DONNETTA: [...] I am finding that there is a lot of work entailed with being chosen. I have to lie a lot! You know, to myself. To God. A little. Say I don't want things that I actually do. (Pause) God is telling me to stop having dirty thoughts about other girls and it is ruining my spiritual life![254]

Spirituality, as the character articulates it, is a barrier to a symbiotic relationship between her sexual and religious identities.

As I explained in the previous chapter, religion is central to African American culture. Traditions (such as attending church services, prayer meetings, bible study classes, and Sunday school) are family and community-building activities. Black people raised in the church environment often fondly associate their childhoods with these social events and the messages communicated by religious leaders (preachers, pastors). Homosexuality, if discussed at all, is often touted as sinful. Therefore, Donnetta's internal conflict stems from a fear of being the outsider within her community and, more specifically, being unfit to lead a congregation because she is a lesbian. This adds an element of anxiety to her young life. If she has been called to serve

[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid, 11.

God as a leader, she cannot be attracted to the same sex/gender. To achieve her overarching goal of becoming a preacher, she resorts to suppressing her feelings and "lying" to herself. Donnetta continues:

> In any case, this is how God orders it up for me. And I follow the course. Yeah, I don't sit and fantasize any more about Mackenzie Washington in her gym shorts. […]And how Daydra Morehouse has the most incredibly smooth and silky black skin I have ever seen in my life. [...] Nope. Don't think about them at all. But I do think that God must be some kind of wonderful to make girls the way he does.[255]

She is clearly still attracted to girls, but she wants to follow God's "course" for her life.

Her adolescent experience is shaped by gender and sexual politics. Feminist theorists, like Judith Lorber, argue that gender is learned and children are taught the behavioral expectations associated with being a boy or a girl.[256] Gender, therefore, is a social construction, the impact of which is obvious in the scenes with young Donnetta. The character has been taught that men perform in particular ways in relation to women, and vice versa. This conditioning informs her alter ego's performance of masculinity, which looks a lot like the macho cowboy type in Western films who saves the town and gets the girl in the end. This is a performance that Donnetta wants to embody, but cannot because of the restrictions of her faith.

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[255] Ibid.

[256] Judith Lorber, "Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender," in *Women: Images and Realities – A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. by Suzanne Kelly, Gowri Parameswaran, and Nancy Schniedwind (1994; repr., New York: McGraw Hill, 2008). She writes:

> To explain why gendering is done from birth, constantly and by everyone, we have to look not only at the way individuals experience gender but at gender as a social construction. As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. [...] The process of gendering and its outcome are legitimated by religion, law, science, and the society's entire set of values" (68).

Following her "destiny in becoming a world class preacher," she begins taking drama classes in high school.[257] Her participation in theatre reflects her observation that preaching requires elements of performance. She must have presence, be a convincing orator, and collaborate with others. While she learns these techniques, her lesbian desires resurface. She develops a crush on Adriana, a female classmate and fellow drama club member.[258] Donnetta believes that Adriana has the same feelings for her. Reading more into the gesture than what was intended, she recalls that Adriana hugged her and exclaimed, "I could kiss you!," in a moment of excitement about their drama club being invited to a theatre competition at Clemson University.[259]

What's more, they get to room with each other on the trip. Their bodies can be in closer proximity, which further excites teenage Donnetta. That night, in their hotel room, Donnetta imagines what kissing her friend would be like. She says, of Adriana, "She's Juliet," then *"([p]oints to herself, as in 'I am Romeo')*."[260] Having taken Adriana's statement out of context, Donnetta intends to profess her love the next day; however, she is devastated when she sees her friend hug a male student and repeat, "I could kiss you!" (Apparently, Adriana says this to everybody.) Again, the butch is on the receiving end of heartbreak; however, Donnetta does not believe Adriana meant to mislead her. She realizes that she misinterpreted the situation and does not take the loss personally.

Instead, with each experience in love, she purchases a piece of clothing or accessory that adorns her body and brings Bulldagger into her world. Piece by piece, she transforms into the cowboy. On the significance of clothing for butch identification, Anderson finds that "in

[257] Grays, *the cowboy is dying*, 11.
[258] Ibid, 12.
[259] Ibid, 15.
[260] Ibid.

performance it is necessary to physically represent butch and femme identities to the audience. The 'butch' and 'femme' identities must be readable to [them]."[261] Grays is specific about the cowboy's style of dress and she takes care in describing the accessories. Bulldagger wears a flannel shirt, cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, and a thick belt. She also holds a matchstick in her mouth. She is the butch Donnetta hopes to be—an idea that she holds onto as she comes of age and becomes more comfortable with her sexual orientation.

Clothing is also significant for identifying other characters that exist along the spectrum of female masculinity in the play. Still in high school, Donnetta meets Katherine, who wears "jeans with a hard rolled cuff at the bottom, white t-shirt with short sleeves rolled up to her armpits, an old military belt, a man's wallet that connects to [it] with a chain and combat boots or Doc Martens."[262] Katherine is likely a queer girl and, in a moment of recognition, Donnetta says, "There's something funny about the way she looks at me."[263] Initially, Donnetta is uncomfortable with Katherine's gaze, but she soon finds that they are similar. There is no discussion of sexuality but, in terms of gender expression, they are both queer kids. As is often the case with queer youth, Donnetta and Katherine recognize *difference* in each other. As I have mentioned, recognition, in queer communities, can be important for creating and sustaining relationships.

While Donnetta becomes close with different girls and women in a variety of contexts, she still resists her lesbian desires. To combat her spiritual guilt, she begins to date boys in college. Ed, her "second and last boyfriend," with whom she is not interested in being intimate, tells her that because she does not engage in sexual relations with him, he no longer wants to be

[261] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 106.
[262] Grays, the *cowboy is dying*, 13.
[263] Ibid.

in a relationship with her.[264] "You might be too strong for me," he says. In a rage, Donnetta reacts as a scorned lover might—cursing and screaming at him. (Although she is not in love with Ed, it seems like the thing to do.) She is insulted that he would be intimidated by a woman's strength. Her refusal to have sex with him is the problem, not how "strong" she is. Her anger comes out of frustration.

Contradictory heterosexist racial, gender, and sexual politics fuel Donnetta's response. According to society, Donnetta and Ed—being a female and a male—should be together, fall in love, and have sexual relations, but not until they are married. This logic is even more confusing when Ed suggests that Donnetta's ability to abstain from sex is a problem, rather than a sign of good morals. It is understandable that Donnetta is upset. This exchange is the catalyst for the change in her views about identity. When they break up, she begins to embrace and embody strength in positive ways as she comes into a black lesbian-feminist consciousness.

Northern Exposure

In the next scene, Donnetta has moved to New York City to pursue her acting career. She has gained fifteen pounds of muscle mass and cut her hair into a cropped Afro hairstyle. She is stronger, more liberated, and on a path to becoming a working artist. Donnetta says, "I'm kind of a stud. The cowboy of my youth. Quiet. Not brooding yet, mysterious. A seriously intense lover of great dimension. *(Beat)*."[265] It is interesting that, now, she sees herself as "[t]he cowboy of [her] youth." This line suggests that the changes she has made—ending her relationship with Ed and moving away from home—have led her to affirm her butch identity. By leaving South Carolina, the only home she has ever known, Donnetta comes into womanhood.

[264] Ibid, 19.
[265] Ibid, 19-20.

Home is South Carolina *and* New York City for very different reasons. South Carolina is nostalgic—it represents family, community, religion, and nature. New York represents family, community, spirituality, art, and identity. For queer youth raised in the south, the region can become a less safe place to call home as they mature, especially if they self-identify along the LGBTQ spectrum and desire to be transparent about their identity. This often leads to a migration to more accepting geographies. While Donnetta essentially migrates north for a better life, she finds that, even there, finding a home requires work. She must coordinate a support system. She also must make the decision to date women and pursue that desire.

Stacey, a friend, is Donnetta's first lover. The relationship does not progress, as they both understand the situation to have been a one-night stand. This is a first-time experience for Donnetta and it becomes a rite of passage. After she and Stacey make love, Donnetta goes out to buy a new pair of boots. This sexual experience gives her the confidence to continue dating women—to seek them out—but she is not completely secure. Even after having success with dating women, she thinks that she should be more masculine. She says:

> After Stacey, my problem isn't bringing women into my life or making love to them for that matter. I mean I'm no lady killer or anything but, I begin to present my heart as a home of sorts and they respond by looking down at my feet and seeing what they believe to be a grounded pair of size nines, that my frame is sturdy and that maybe, just maybe…a cowboy's finally come to their rescue.[266]

This last statement may or may not be true. Again, the butch worldview, in BLFP, can be one-sided and can privilege the butch's ego over the femme's. The femmes Donnetta refers to do not speak for themselves in the play, which limits what the audience can know about their relationship. The important information, here, relates to how Donnetta sees herself. She does not

[266] Ibid, 22.

believe that she is the cowboy, yet. Her performance is not convincing and she fears that her lovers will either overwhelm her or leave her.[267]

As a support system, Donnetta builds community with a group of bohemian friends—a multi-racial group of lesbian women who come together to cook, eat, and talk about a myriad of topics, such as religion and race. In a pivotal scene that is both enlightening and overwhelming for Donnetta, who is coming into political consciousness, the women offer her advice on how to come to terms with her religious guilt:

> WHITE DYKE: You know, Donnetta—god, fried tofu and sea salt. That's all you need really–The bible has been manipulated historically as a means to oppress women and blacks, and the Christian right hates gays, and why would you *want* to worship a white male glorified westernized depiction of God?
>
> BLACK DYKE: Yeah, you need to look to your African roots and become a true part of the same gender loving daughters of the Diaspora! I have been trying to get you to come to our drumming circle for months now.
>
> DONNETTA: I nod in general agreement. I haven't got a clue what they're talking about. I'm from the South! I have, however, renamed myself, "spiritual" which basically means I sleep in on Sundays and contemplate my existence while curled up with my pillow.[268]

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[267] She explains:

> Sometimes I wish for them to take up more space in me than they are willing to fill. No, the problem isn't them entering the house. It's hoping for the heat of a passionate love but, at the same time, making sure that heat isn't too close to the house to burn it down (Ibid).

[268] Ibid, 24.

Donnetta is not sure about her friends' suggestions that she abandon religion, become queerer, and more Afrocentric, but she is thinking about God outside of the religious doctrine she was taught as a girl. Evidently, she no longer plans to be a minister.

This new perspective on faith allows her to focus on her newly acquired Girlfriend, whom she affectionately calls the lover. She tells the audience:

> I stare at my girlfriend. Gaze at her long graceful neck, huge almond shaped eyes, luscious ta tas. I make her laugh you know, I make that sweet cackle come out of that gorgeous mouth of hers. […] When I closed my eyes as a kid this was the woman I imagined. Her. Complex, different, soulful. She even shares my views on spirituality and we share glorious lazy Sunday mornings in bed, in each other's arms. Look at what God has given me. This is the one.[269]

With Girlfriend, Donnetta appears less conflicted and more comfortable with her faith and sexuality than she once was. There are moments of genuine love and acceptance. For example, on Donnetta's birthday, Girlfriend presents her with a belt buckle ("for my itty bitty cowboy") as a gift. Donnetta then says, "I love you" to a woman for the first time and, in doing so, I argue, transfers some of the devotion she had for God to her lover. That is not to say she no longer has faith in God—she does—but this is the first time she invests emotionally in a female lover, the effect of which is pleasure:

> DONNETTA: You know, there was a kind of freedom when I let go of my brief calling to the ministry. And now here, on my birthday, as we drive away from the most spiritually fulfilling day of my adult life I notice just how the light from the sunset dims around her face.[270]

[269] Ibid, 25.
[270] Ibid.

Here, she acknowledges the constraints of religion—that to be an acceptable Christian, she would have to perform femininity and heterosexuality convincingly. This performance would be uncomfortable for her because she is a masculine woman who is exclusively attracted to women. This moment illustrates that Donnetta is resisting the pressure to conform to a particular model of southern black womanhood. It is freeing for her to stop living a lie.

This is not a fairytale, though. As the relationship progresses, Donnetta and Girlfriend find that they each have mounting insecurities that negatively affect the stability of their union. With time, Donnetta becomes ambivalent towards Girlfriend and abandons her emotionally. This might stem from her hypermasculine tendency to worship the femme body before all else. Donnetta describes the Girlfriend's body before her personality because that is what attracts her first. The fault is not her appreciation for the beauty of the feminine body; it is with her inability to see beyond that body. Girlfriend's body becomes a metaphorical altar to which Donnetta (just like bull-jean) prays. Taking on some of Bulldagger's characteristics, I argue, she looks to the femme body as a source of security for her identity. It is also interesting that Girlfriend has no proper name; she is named in relation to Donnetta, in the possessive sense (her girlfriend). This signifies that the relationship is out of balance and will not last long. Girlfriend's name (and her needs) are unimportant.

Donnetta's savior complex is also a factor in their lack of communication. Girlfriend is battling serious issues (such as a negative body image and low self worth) that Donnetta thinks she can heal with a kiss or a touch. However, Girlfriend's demons run deeper than the surface of her body. She feels inept as a woman, as a daughter, and as a professional. She, like Donnetta, is coming into her identity.

> GIRLFRIEND: Do you think I am fat? Jesus Christ look at my hips? I have got to lose some weight.
>
> DONNETTA: I kiss her hips and she is suddenly slim again.[271]

Donnetta, ever the problem solver, touches her body and the angst dissipates. (That is, according to her.) This is what she says happens, but her lover's problems resurface. When they do, Donnetta tries another tactic.

> DONNETTA: I kiss her head and her mind eases. I kneel at her feet and look up into her eyes and...oh boy. I can see it. I can see the moment she breaks. [...] It's like the clouds have parted and you get the clearest view of heaven known to mankind. But, a clear view of heaven has never really sat well with me.[272]

Here, Donnetta, acknowledges a flaw in her character. If, as she believes, she has helped her lover to heal, once that healing happens, she no longer has a purpose in the relationship. She cannot rescue a lover that has already been saved. This reflects a general flaw of hypermasculinity—the assumption that the butch must conquer and/or save the femme. This ultimately leads to their breakup.

In the breakup scene, an awkward exchange begins with Donnetta voicing a need for space from her lover. Sensitive to the slightest dismissal, Girlfriend bursts into tears and Donnetta turns to leave. The dialogue indicates that Donnetta wants to end the relationship:

> DONNETTA: I am going out. I am going out! I'm going...away. Look, this isn't working out. Um...you know I'm no big deal. It won't take you anytime to find someone else. You're beautiful and talented and—[273]

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[271] Ibid, 26.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid, 27.

Girlfriend cuts Donnetta off, shocked at what she has heard. In one breath, Donnetta proclaims that she has found heaven in the lover, referring to her partner's body as the cartography of heaven. In the next breath, she says that she has lost interest in a relationship for which she must make small sacrifices.

> GIRLFRIEND: Shut up! Oh my God you were just waiting for this. Anything.
>
> DONNETTA: You can go out, meet new pe—
>
> GIRLFRIEND: You don't get to dictate how I move through this. You don't control that, I do.[274]

Girlfriend observes that Donnetta is controlling (she controls the couple's narrative), which, as I have suggested, is characteristic of a hypermasculine performance. This is an important moment because the femme "reads" (comments on) the butch and because it shows that, although Donnetta means well, her performance of "savior" is disingenuous and denies the femme autonomy in the relationship. Donnetta is playing a role akin to her butch alter ego, a portrayal that does not translate well into her reality with the femme.

Donnetta exits the apartment and time shifts forward. Donnetta is now a few years older. Reflecting on faith, fantasy, and love, she says confesses: "Having faith in what is unseen actually comes a lot easier than standing in judgment of a beating heart you can feel. A mouth you can taste. It isn't being patched through to a higher power through a figment-ed middle-man."[275] Loving a flesh-and-blood person who talks back brings about a different materiality than loving an omniscient God that requires faith alone. Donnetta is still growing and although she has other relationships with women, she has yet to find her footing in love. This aspect of her life is a work in progress. Unlike bull-jean, she does not find home in a lover.

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[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.

As Donnetta comes to terms with her reality, Grays points to a flaw in the butch stereotype—it, like any stereotype, can constrain a body—and by refusing to give her protagonist a happy ending, she maps out an alternative route home for her. The cowboy image Donnetta has always wanted to embody is not only unattainable, but it is stunting her personal growth. By leaving Girlfriend, she chips away at the butch idol and, for the first time, cowboy directly comments on Donnetta (her maker). The cowboy asks, "What does one do when she has told God no thanks? When she has turned away from lovers whose collective love could fill the cosmos?"[276] The cowboy asks a legitimate question about Donnetta's state of limbo. If home is not the lover, God, or the cowboy, then where is it?

This question is answered in the final scene. Donnetta returns to her childhood home in South Carolina. While there, she engages in some of the same activities she participated in as a child, like washing and hanging laundry with her mother. For the first time, she looks at her mother as a woman. Her mother's body is fascinating—the way it looks, what it is capable of, and how all of that relates to her own body. She says:

> I mean, her hips. The way she is a part of the way they sway. There is lightness in it. The arch of her back is deeper than mine. There is a courage that shoots up her spine. Her shoulders, though super duper tense, say "put your head here. Tell me all about it." Her breasts tell of a history of giving. I see scars. I see moles, stretch marks and lines that aren't lines. They are movements and storytellers that invite you to sit for a long while and listen to them. I mean she is...true softness, caring, and a safe place to stay.[277]

[276] Ibid, 28.
[277] Ibid, 29.

Her mother's body is not an object of desire; it is a life-sustaining vessel—a home. From a feminist standpoint, Donnetta looks at her mother in amazement. She stands in awe of all that this body has produced. Finding beauty in the body of the woman who gave birth to her is a radical feminist revelation that inspires, in Donnetta, a more genuine appreciation for the feminine and for another kind of womanness: a maternal one.

By recognizing the labor of the maternal (read feminine) body, Donnetta recognizes that she has neglected the femme, in favor of a keen focus on the butch, and has disregarded the affective and physical labor it takes for women to sustain families. Donnetta can better see the constructedness of her cowboy and realizes that it has consumed too much of her imagination and identity. The empowering embodiment has overpowered the femme/feminine. Suggesting the constructedness of the cowboy persona, she jokes that if the cowboy comes to life—if Donnetta finally completes the image—then she may become bored with the performance altogether.

> And, you know it isn't as though I couldn't just go out and get a cowboy hat it's just...I might actually complete the image, you know.
>
> (Then a crash of thunder and an electric surge. Lights crackle out.)
>
> Sorry guys this is um. Sorry the lights um... *(Flicks the match)*
>
> Don't worry. Don't worry. I got it all under control.[278]

Distancing herself from Bulldagger, Donnetta indicates to the audience that they have witnessed a theatrical production. The action of using the cowboy's prop signifies to the audience that the cowboy is a character that Grays, the playwright, has put front and center in her latest play. It also suggests that Grays has introduced a new kind of butch character—both autobiographical and fictional—who wants to be in control of her image and narrative. It is clear, at the end of the

[278] Ibid, 29-30.

play, that Donnetta wants to start a new production and that she does not need to play the butch role to be powerful.

Conclusion

Sharon Bridgforth's *the bull-jean stories* and Donnetta Lavinia Grays's *the cowboy is dying* are black butch lesbian coming-of-age narratives that share similar characters, tropes, and dramaturgical approaches. Although *cowboy* is inspired by *bull-jean*, they are both distinct works bound together by the butch figure. bull-jean and Donnetta rely on butch alter egos to feel protected and to provide themselves with a sense of place and belonging. Both have experienced spiritual violence—son-man is taken away from bull-jean by her religious community and Donnetta lives in fear of God's rejection. These experiences have led them to rely heavily on their butch personas. They also invest deeply in romantic love as a refuge from their pain. They attempt to disidentify with their southern black communities by hiding behind excessive performances of masculinity that make them feel powerful. Through passionate exchanges with the femmes, it is revealed that motherhood (mothering and being mothered) is significant to their search for love. This revelation allows the femme to have a more active role in their partnership and homemaking. When bull-jean and Donnetta stop performing hypermasculine versions of themselves, they move closer to utopia.

To be clear, butchness is a freeing embodiment for bull-jean and Donnetta, but hypermasculinity complicates their homemaking. They feel most empowered when they are dominating the femme, who is often left mute and without pleasure. The butches are also limited by this performance. They, as black women, are not only confined by society's heterosexist expectations of what they should look like, be, and do, but they are also confined by the

hypermasculine behaviors that they have accepted as characteristic of ideal butch embodiment. These obstacles impede their individual and collective pursuit of home.

Both works also engage with fantasy in interesting ways. bull-jean's and Donnetta's liberation is an embodied black queer outcome spearheaded by butch fantasy. They fantasize about their futures and rely on romantic love as a way forward and beyond society's heterocentrism. Fantasy, therefore, becomes an escape—an alternate reality where they feel a sense of belonging to a community of other queers. bull-jean and Donnetta come to realize, however, that their traumas (the loss of a child, intense fear of rejection) still find a way into their fantasy worlds. This intrusion leads them to address the issues that caused them to create these spaces.

Bridgforth and Grays's narratives address the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and religion. The playwrights push the boundaries of lesbianism, blackness, Christian faith, and womanhood by considering them to be notions that are separate from and a part of their characters' intersectional identities. Initially, Donnetta determines that if she is lesbian, then she is living in sin. But when she denies her romantic and sexual desires, she is not living at all. Therefore, under the constraints of the theology she has been taught and accepted, it is nearly impossible for her to *be* herself in the world. A girl/woman who is most vibrant when she is challenging authority, Donnetta opts to live a more autonomous existence. With the help of the the femme, her relationship to essential notions of Christianity and butchness become unstable, less rigid; she shifts before the audience's eyes. It is only then that she can see home differently.

Home is important in *bull-jean* and *cowboy*. The southern United States is always home for the protagonists, whether they remain there or not. Donnetta, however, does not recognize this until, having defined herself with and against the butch, she returns to South Carolina and to

her mother. Her mother is a constant home—a place to which she can always return. When she does, she begins to value femininity and womanness outside of a romantic context. She, like bull-jean, had only recognized the feminine body as an object of pleasure that made her feel secure in her masculinity. In the presence of her mother, she reconsiders the feminine body as active, powerful, and historical.

bull-jean has a similar awakening, regarding motherhood and home. For most of the novel, she lives in a perpetual state of lovesickness. Her love life is an unending experiment in pleasure and pain. It is my view that when bull-jean's son is taken from her, she is left with an emptiness that she is desperate to fill. She misplaces her love for son-man in women who cannot possibly replace him. When mina comes along—a woman who wants a substantive relationship in which she shares power with her partner—bull-jean cannot distinguish her from the other femmes she has been involved with. These wayward femmes (the ones who do not speak) have allowed bull-jean the freedom to be herself, but they have not held her accountable for her dominant "playboy" antics. With some pressure (mina's ultimatum), bull-jean recognizes mina beyond the femme stereotype and she sheds some of her tough exterior. mina is a voice of reason and a woman with whom bull-jean can create a family. Soon after, son-man returns to give a testimony about his separation from bull-jean, to mo(u)rn their loss, and to heal with her.

Both works present complex stories of black lesbian life as told via nontraditional playmaking approaches. In *cowboy*, Grays blends elements of Bridgforth's jazz aesthetic (such as music and poetry) with elements of realism and magic. This blend of aesthetics, along with comedy, brings some levity to the serious issues that Donnetta encounters in her development. In *bull-jean*, the theatrical jazz aesthetic is an approach that helps Bridgforth interpret the musicality and theatricality of southern black queerness. The black quare world she creates in

bull-jean is culturally specific. Essentially, the novel is an African American story that validates black lesbian identity, experience, and homemaking. According to Adewunmi R. Oké, the theatrical jazz aesthetic "disrupts the boundaries between Western practices and diasporic performance."[279] The audience is allowed in. They become a part of the all-knowing community that traces bull-jean's "woman trouble" to what she "done-done" in her last life.

Bridgforth illustrates that black lesbian homemaking can be represented in ways that situate black lesbian bodies within spaces from which they have been prohibited from living fully. Her work makes room for Grays's contemporary utopian narrative, which centers on the butch image and idea. Anderson asserts that by including characters that are identifiable as butch or femme, works like *bull-jean* and *cowboy*, "give voice to members of the black community who are visible but invisible, who are considered marginal but are central to so many lives and stories."[280] The queer characters in both performance works are inspiring because women like these characters did exist and contributed significantly to their communities, although their names and stories have rarely been documented. *the bull-jean stories* is a foundational BLFP performance text that artists, like Grays with *the cowboy is dying*, have adapted and revised to reflect their black lesbian identities and experiences in new and challenging ways—a continuing project that enriches the genre.

[279] Adewunmi R. Oké, "Queering Identity in the African Diaspora: The Performance Dramas of Sharon Bridgforth and Trey Anthony" (masters thesis, University of Massachusetts, 2015), 46.
[280] Ibid, 101.

CHAPTER 4

INTERSECTIONS:

THE BLACK LESBIAN FEMINIST POETRY OF STACEYANN CHIN AND LENELLE MOÏSE

> Intersectionality just means that you have more than one thing dat concern you. Like, you're black and you're lesbian and you're poor. And you're—y'know, like the more shit you have wrong with you, the more intersectionality is *you*. Basically, when all those things kind of converged in my identity and my way of seeing the world, I knew I needed to find something to do. I needed to speak out and [performance] was my way.[281]
>
> —Staceyann Chin

> So there were many of those kind [sic] of women around. But it wasn't broadcast. I remembered them. Not as lesbians or sodomites or man royals, but as women that I liked. Women who I admired. Strong women, some colourful, some quiet.[282]
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> —Makeda Silvera

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[281] Staceyann Chin, "2nd Annual Student Research Day," York College of Undergraduate Research at City University of New York, YouTube, http://youtu.be/ztYcVeGziog.com (filmed April 14, 2011, accessed November 25, 2012). No longer accessible online.

[282] Makeda Silvera, "Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians," in *does your mama know? – An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories,* (Washington: RedBone Press, 2009), 233. Further, a "man royal" is vernacular for a butch/masculine woman in Jamaica.

Introduction

In the epigraph above, poet and performance artist Staceyann Chin (b. 1972) defines what it means to assume an intersectional identity. In much of her poetry and prose, she observes—as oppressed persons seeking liberation often do—that bodies of authority (such as family, friends, teachers, and employers) have imposed expectations of acceptable performances of racial, gender, and sexual identity upon her. Based on the excerpt, she takes a black lesbian-feminist view that identity is a process of self-defining. With an irony unique to her direct personality, bold assertions, and physical performance style, Chin identifies her race (black), sexuality (lesbian), and class upbringing (poor, or working class) as "problems" that hold significant meaning in society. Despite her reference to identity as "shit you have wrong with you," these so-called problems (blackness, queerness, and low economic status) are not *her* "problems." They are society's "problems" *with her*. Society's problems with her self-definition as a black lesbian artist have directly impacted the ways in which she is and is not embraced in the Jamaican culture in which she was reared and in the American culture in which she lives.

José Esteban Muñoz asserts that dominant cultures (read white, male, middle class, heterosexual) have difficulty "account[ing] for the specificity of black and queer lives or any collision of two or more minority designations."[283] In other words, those who exist comfortably within the dominant culture have trouble comprehending and legitimating the lives of persons, like Chin and Lenelle Moïse (b. 1980), who are Afro-Caribbean American, lesbian-feminist performance artists whose slam poetry illustrates the complexities and tensions of living at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and religion. As I seek to understand and unpack such collisions, several questions arise: What is the significance of living at the intersections of identity for Afro-Caribbean women? How does displacement from one's birth

[283] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 166.

country affect one's concept of home and homemaking? How does intersectional identity impact the artists' perception of the world around them, personally and politically? How, through performance, do they interpret (through performance) their respective communities' perception of them?

Chin and Moïse position their bodies and autobiographical narratives at the center of the poems and prose featured in this chapter. Chin's "Cross-Fire" (2007) and Moïse's "Madivinez" (2009) are performance poems—poems meant to be embodied and spoken aloud—that exemplify the precarious nature of home for Afro-Caribbean lesbians coming out, coming of-age, and making space for themselves in societies that challenge, reject, and embrace their identifications in contradictory ways. I am interested in how Chin and Moïse find and create home in the face of such disorienting contradictions.

"Coming Out to the Caribbean"[284]

The *closet* is featured prominently in black lesbian feminist performance and it can be a safe space for black lesbian artists to perform identity outside of society's anti-queer gaze. It can also protect them from policies and regulations that might disenfranchise them because of their sexualities. According to theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

> The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is still not a shaping presence.[285]

[284] This subheading is taken from Staceyann Chin's essay, "Coming Out to the Caribbean," in *does your mama know?*, 115-19.

[285] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California, CA, 1990), 68.

In black lesbian feminist performance poetry, I observe, artists do not invoke the closet in this way. By coming out in their work, they break the closet door down and slam the very idea that they (as individuals) must hide from the public.

Lynette Goddard writes: "Coming out is a way to counter assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality and state lesbian difference from the heterosexual norm. Not surprisingly then, coming out stories have formed a significant section of lesbian literary outputs and oral histories."[286] That said, coming out in the Caribbean can be a difficult process for LGBTQ people as the threat of violence and death are serious concerns. Derek Chadee writes:

> Another Caribbean island well-known for violent and discriminatory acts against homosexuals is Jamaica. Williams (2000, 106) noted that 'Jamaica is perceived to be the most homophobic Caribbean territory. It is also a badly kept secret that Jamaica has a perceptibly vibrant gay population.' [...] Conservative Christian religious beliefs prevalent in Caribbean society have been cited as the primary reason for the prohibitive legal codes in the region.[287]

While LGBTQ citizens living in the Caribbean, may have support systems, generally they cannot be openly queer without resistance.[288]

Although there has been a global move toward LGBTQ equality (such as anti-discrimination legislation and marriage equality), there is still a lot of progress to be made in the Caribbean, in terms of queer livability. For example, there are still active sodomy (or "buggary")

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[286] Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms*, 114.

[287] Derek Chadee, et al., "Religiosity, and Attitudes Towards Homosexuals in a Caribbean Environment," *Social and Economic Studies* 62, no. 1 (2013): 4-5., citing L. Williams's "Homophobia and (Gay Rights) Activism in Jamaica," *Small Axe* 4, no. 7 (2000): 106.

[288] Chadee and his fellow researchers conducted a study that "revealed that people with an intrinsic religious orientation [that is, one who 'internalises religious teachings, lives his religion and regards religiosity as an internal, natural experience' (Ibid, 7)] displayed more negative attitudes towards homosexuality than those with an extrinsic religious orientation" (16).

laws in many countries, such as Jamaica. It has also been reported that, even in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, anti-LGBTQ factions, under the guise of Christian fundamentalism, have prevented queer-themed films from being shown at festivals hosted by nationally-recognized organizations, such as La Fondation Connaissance et Liberté (known as FOKAL)—"a place that attracts young people and where values of openness, tolerance, justice, learning and responsibility are being taught."[289] In 2016, this organization had to close for a short period due to the threat of violence. If a cultural entity like FOKAL, which is not a queer organization, can receive such backlash for volunteering to hold a film viewing in their space, then not only are LGBTQ people at risk but so are their allies.

The risks are physical, emotional, and mental injury. In the documentary, "The Abominable Crime" (2013)—a film about lesbians and gays in Jamaica and the homophobia they encounter, activist Maurice Tomlinson describes having to leave the country after being publicly "outed" on the front page of a major Montego Bay newspaper. Metaphorically dragged out of the closet, a photograph of Tomlinson marrying his husband in Canada was featured in an

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[289] Jhon Byron Picard and David Bouchon, FOKAL, in an insert featured in the CSA (Caribbean Studies Association) News E-letter (unpublished, 2016), report:

> This year we were approached to be one of 4 places to host film projections and discussion on social issues pertaining to the lives and struggles of LGBTI. The group organizing this film festival is a local LGBT rights organization named Kouraj (Courage in Creole). We agreed to one afternoon in September and announced the event on our newsletter. This unleashed a hate campaign focalized primarily on FOKAL, the violence of which we have never experienced. It was said that FOKAL was organizing a campaign to 'promote homosexuality'. The death threats were anonymous (if loud and vicious) but the hate wave was being spurned by Christian fundamentalists and politicians affiliated with them (1).

Further, they write:

> Like the rest of Haitian civil society, we have not been vigilant enough about the work of Christian fundamentalist sects since the 2010 earthquake. Indeed these sects have ben indexing and attacking Vodou religion; women's rights activists; homosexuals. Their rhetoric is indeed heinous and frightening and often so grotesque that many people thought it ridiculous and not worth paying attention to" (Ibid).

Considering the seriousness of these attacks, the staff was forced to close FOKAL for a short period to protect the youth and staff.

attempt to embarrass him to halt his gay rights activism in Jamaica. This kind of public outing is meant to shame and silence queer people into assimilating to heteronormativity or going back into the closet.

Religiosity—strong religious faith—as Chadee and others find in their study, plays a significant role in the negative *national feeling* about LGBTQ people in the Caribbean. They determine that religiosity and homophobia are enmeshed in the culture, the result of which is "an exclusive in-group" mentality that relegates homosexuals (and other queer folk) to outsider status.[290] Further, they find, the idea that homosexuality is against biblical law and will cause the demise of the human race is supported by many Caribbean officials. Homophobia is also a feature of some popular entertainment.[291] With no legal protections against physical violence and hate speech, many LGBTQ citizens are forced to flee the Caribbean. For example, after being sexually assaulted for being an out lesbian and feminist, Staceyann Chin left Montego Bay for the United States. Her poetry and prose reflect her experience living as a gender and sexual minority in Jamaica, and as a racial, gender, and sexual minority in the United States.

In performance, Chin and Moïse position their bodies at the forefront of personal narratives through which they articulate particular black lesbian feminist identities and document

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[290] Chadee, et al., 16. The researchers claim:

> Traditionally, religion has been portrayed as a unifying force which promotes non-discrimination and acceptance, symbolically representing a metaphorical hand extended to all, including those considered to be 'sinners', such as homosexual persons. However, such inclusive tenets seem to be violated by members not being able to distinguish between the non-accepted behavior and the person. This has resulted in religion transitioning from an institution which offers solace to all, including homosexuals, to an exclusive in-group which ostracises and denies membership to groups such as homosexuals. This type of censure tends to translate itself into negative attitudes towards homosexuals, with the disconnect being whether religious values endorse the condemnation of sinful persons or just sinful behavior (Ibid).

[291] For example, dancehall artist Buju Bantan's popular song "Boom Boom Bye Bye" explicitly promotes the murder of gay men (referred as the slang term, "batty men"). For an in-depth analysis of homophobia in reggae and dancehall music, see Constanze Köhn's "All Batty Bwoy Haffi Die'—Homophobia in Jamaican Reggae and Dancehall Muisic," *Sexuologie: Zeitschrift Für Sexualmedizin, Sexualtherapie Und Sexualwissenschaft* 22, no. 1-2 (2015).

their processes of becoming visible, autonomous, and woman-centered. If black lesbian women in most cultures, today, are considered outliers who threaten to disrupt hegemonic patriarchy, then the act of performing black lesbian womanhood in public space is inherently political. By positioning their bodies and autobiographical narratives "front and center," Chin and Moïse claim space, if only for a short time.

Conceptually, I argue, Chin and Moïse enact *utopian mo(u)rnings*—performances of homemaking—by reckoning with the past. This reconciliation process can be both nostalgic and painful, and it is often presented as a process of 1) loss, 2) mo(u)rning, 3) inspiration, and 4) creativity. Throughout this chapter, I refer to primary and secondary resources as varied as videotaped performances of "Cross–Fire" and "Madivinez," personal essays, articles, and related published poetry. I compare these media and literary resources to illustrate that both artists do significant socio-political work though their autobiographical solo performances.

Emphasizing themes of freedom and homemaking, Chin and Moïse's mo(u)rning performances speak to the challenge racist, sexist, and homophobic notions prevalent in the United States and the Caribbean. In "Madivinez," Moïse performs the mo(u)rning as a search for a Haitian kreyol word that encompasses her Haitian-American, lesbian, and spiritual identifications. In "Cross–Fire" Chin performs the mo(u)rning as a thought experiment about the cultural politics of identity discourse. In essays, articles, and other prose, Chin and Moïse write about the physical and emotional violence that Afro-Caribbean lesbian and gay citizens risk when they openly reveal their sexual orientation.[292] As immigrants essentially displaced from the Caribbean, both artists avoid the likelihood of physical injury for being openly lesbian; yet, they

[292] Some examples include Chin's "Coming Out to the Caribbean," in *does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories* (Washington: RedBone Press, 2009) and *The Other Side of Paradise: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009). Also, see Moïse's "Protégée," in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken word Revolution* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2009) and "letter to my father (in english)," in *Haiti Glass* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014).

still confront racism, homophobia, classism, and anti-immigrant attitudes that threaten their ability to fully find refuge in the United States.

In terms of homemaking, their performance poetry directly reflects U.S. black lesbians' struggle to create home and maintain livable lives with limited emotional, legal, and financial support. In "Jumping the Broom: Why Black Gay and Transgender Americans Need More than Marriage Equality," Aisha C. Moodie-Mills persuasively reports that the issue of marriage equality is not the most significant civil issue for queers of color. Moodie-Mills calls for policy changes that not only address black queer citizens' desire to marry legally, but also their need for educational, health, and financial resources. She finds that "families headed by black same-sex couples are more likely to raise their children in poverty, black lesbians are more likely to suffer from chronic disease, and black gay and transgender youth are more likely to end up homeless and living on the streets."[293] These material propensities clearly affect the quality of black lesbian life and indicate that these women's voices are less prominent in U.S. society. Similarly, in the Caribbean, black lesbians often make themselves less visible so that they can live with some comfort in a space that, though wrought with tension, is still home for them.

The Origins of the Slam and the Spoken Word

The poetry slam—a competitive form of performance—can be a home away from home for marginalized people. Slam poetry combines the literary and performing arts, and it relies on text, the body, time, and space to convey meaning. The poetry slam is a subcultural venue, a style of poetry, and a sport that provides a competitive and nurturing space for poets to articulate identity, politics, and culture. As with any public performance, there are risks for the poets. A

[293] Aisha C. Moodie-Mills, "Jumping Beyond the Broom: Why Black Gay and Transgender American Need More than Marriage Equality," *Center for American Progress* (January 2011), 1.

poet might being ignored, misunderstood, or dismissed by the crowd. Despite the risks, many poets feel called to express themselves through "slamming."[294]

The poetry slam—credited as having been created by Marc Smith at the Green Mill Tavern, in Chicago, in 1987—has been lauded as a diverse performance art form for nontraditional voices. By celebrating the voices of people of color, queer people, women, and other minorities, the slam counters heterosexual, white, Western, elite notions of poetry. A white American male, Smith sought to create an accessible art form that combined music, poetry, and performance. His effort was a response to what he considered the restrictive environment of poetry in academia that left him, as a nontraditional poet, on the margins of the field. In a 2013 TED Talk, Smith describes his concept for the poetry slam as "the remarriage of the art of writing poetry with the art of performing it. Putting the two back together where they belong."[295] This "remarriage" of the text and performance was an unusual approach to poetry, according to academicians that understood poetry as limited to the written word.

Though Smith invented the poetry slam—a poetry competition scored by judges on a scale of one to ten—it is my position that this form is indebted to Africanist cultural traditions. Scott Woods writes that Smith "decided to craft a show that demanded audience interaction and that any person with a poem could participate."[296] That is, the performer and the audience have an intimate connection during a slam competition, which may be held in a small coffee shop or in a spacious theater. Woods further asserts that Smith's intention was to "giv[e] the audience a

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[294] See Staceyann Chin's "Poet for the People," in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, ed. Alix Olson (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007). Chin says that she first performed her poetry in 1997 during an open mic night at the Nuyorican Poets Café, in New York City, to "[feel] powerful, and heard, and *seen*" (362).

[295] Marc Smith, "Slam Poetry Movement: Marc Smith at TEDxLUC," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOpsS9H5dgQ (Accessed September 18, 2014).

[296] Scott Woods, "Poetry Slams: The Ultimate Democracy of Art," *World Literature Today* 82, no. 1 (January 2008), 18.

voice, letting the audience say if they liked a poem." This element of audience participation is clearly, in my view, influenced by the "call-and-response" of Africanist storytelling.

Michèle Foster's definition of call and response is as follows: "a type of interaction between speaker and listener(s) in which the statements ("calls") are emphasized by expressions ("responses") from the listener(s), in which responses can be solicited or spontaneous, and in which either the calls or responses can be expressed linguistically, musically, verbally, nonverbally, or through dance."[297] Historically, this Africanist storytelling element—call and response—has been used to uplift and organize marginalized people. It served as a tool of resistance to the oppressive system of slavery. The emancipatory use of call and response, therefore, can be understood as "slamming" traditional notions of freedom.

For Smith, the poetry slam was a response to the exclusionary politics of poetry in academia that confined poetry to the page. In his reading of Smith's development of the slam, Woods writes: "poetry [meaning slam poetry] is not an art form," but rather "a device, a trick to convince people that poetry is cooler than they've been led to believe by wearisome English classes and dusty anthologies and that they should engage themselves with it every once in a while."[298] Although I agree with the intent of Woods's analysis of the poetry slam as an alternative to academic poetry, I disagree with his reduction of the poetry slam to a "trick" or "device." This understanding dismisses the African cultural roots of the art form, its influence on popular culture, and its social function. While Smith is considered the mastermind behind the slam, African descendants certainly share in the work he has done; they, I argue, inspired the function, style, and rhythm of the form.

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[297] Michèle Foster, "Using Call-and-Response to Facilitate Language Mastery and Literary Acquisition Among African American Students," *Eric Digest* (July 2002). http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/0204foster.pdf (Accessed May 31, 2014).

[298] Woods, "Poetry Slams: The Ultimate Democracy of Art," 18.

Scholars, such as Michael Eric Dyson and R. Scott Heath, trace Rap and Hip Hop music back to 1970s Brooklyn.[299] At that time, rap was a performance practice as well as a nonviolent approach for rivaling gangs. Young black and brown males "battled" not with fists but with words. The rapper that "out-rhymed" his competitor was declared the "Head Emcee" and held this moniker in the neighborhood until the next battle.[300] Unlike slam competitions, the title of Head Emcee was not determined by scores, but by communal agreement as to which rapper made the most of polyrhythms, irony, humor, allusions, textures, and call and response. The commercialization of rap allowed the performance practice to become mainstream in U.S. culture, inspiring the contempory Hip-Hop inspired poetry slam.

Slam historian and poet Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz historicizes the New York City slam movement, in *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (2008).[301]Aptowicz explores New York City's slam history in "waves." She identifies the first wave era as 1990-1996, the second wave as 1996-2001, and the third wave as 2001-2007. During the second and third waves of slam poetry, Staceyann Chin and Lenelle Moïse began their performance careers in slam poetry and spoken word venues.

In the late 1990s, Chin left Jamaica for New York City, where she became a part of the local movement, performing at such venues as Café LaMama and Nuyorican Poets Café. Moïse

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[299] See Michael Eric Dyson's *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007) and R. Scott Heath's "Hip_Hop Now: An Introduction," in *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006). In my research on Slam and Hip Hop culture, I found that spoken word precedes Rap, which precedes slam poetry, which precedes Hip Hop. Spoken word poetry can be traced back to the 1960s Black Arts Movement when poets such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Assata Shakur, June Jordan, and others shared their works in public spaces amongst likeminded artists.

[300] The labels I use here are taken from Kamilah Forbes's play, *Rhyme Deferred*, in *The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21st Century*, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Robert Alexander (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004). For more on Hip Hop Theater, see Daniel Banks's *Say Word! Voices from Hip Hop Theater: An Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

[301] See Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz's *Word in Your Face: A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008). For more on the Los Angeles poetry slam, see Jovan Johnson's "Manning Up: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Los Angeles' Slam and Spoken Word Poetry Communities," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2010).

became a part of the movement at the Oak, an open mic venue in Ithaca, New York that she frequented as a student at Ithaca College.[302] When she was ten years old, Moïse and her family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Growing up in the northern United States, cultural differences led to misunderstandings between Moïse and her immediate family members. She became a feminist and began voicing her political positions at home, but her family—like Chin's college friends and fellow students at the University of the West Indies—found it difficult to tolerate such outspokenness from a woman on social issues that seemed radical and taboo in Caribbean culture.[303]

For both artists, slam poetry served as an outlet for feelings of displacement from their communities of origin, and became a safe space where they could develop and perform identity for diverse audiences. Jill Dolan has called slam poetry a site of "utopia in performance," which she defines as "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense."[304] Chin and Moïse's performance poetry is evidence of how solo performances of intersectionality can influence social awareness, instill hope, and encourage social change among audiences.

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[302] See Lenelle Moïse, "Protégée," in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, ed. Alix Olson (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007). Moïse writes, "I thrived at the Oak...Between the acting, writing, dance, and sociology courses I took at Ithaca College and my regular spot at the Oak, I developed my artistic voice and a highly physical performance style" (32).

[303] See Staceyann Chin, *The Other Side of Paradise: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

[304] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

"Madivinez"

Lenelle Moïse is a Haitian-American lesbian poet, essayist, singer-songwriter, and playwright. She competed on the 2000 and 2001 National Poetry Slam with Team Ithaca, NY and was the 2003 New WORLD Theater Poetry Slam Champion.[305] She is also a member of a spoken word collective known as Sister Spit. Moïse has been awarded numerous honors including the 2009-2010 Astraea Lesbian Writers Award for Poetry, as well as fellowships at the University of Texas at Austin, Columbia College in Chicago, and Northwestern University. Moïse has called herself a creator of "jazz-infused, hip-hop bred, politicized texts about Haitian-American identity, creative resistance and the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, memory and spirit."[306] She has toured the United States facilitating writing and performance workshops to groups interested in using performance for social change and communal healing. Such workshop titles include: Spoken Word, Self-Naming & Resistance, Alone Together: Creating a One Person Show, and Radical Voice & Movement. The titles of these workshops reflect a feminist aesthetic that values self-definition, resistance to oppressive systems, coalition building, and creating alliances between diverse communities.

Moïse's performance style, as I see it, is contained. Her performances are often delivered in soft, low tones, and her body—long and lithe—requires only the smallest movements to color the spoken word. Her physical approach to poetry is controlled and deliberate. Her voice is a smoky contralto and her oratorical skills, on par with Maya Angelou. She delivers poetry in a neutral American dialect. Peppered with precise diction and crisp enunciation, Moïse caresses each word in her mouth. Moïse also infuses her poetry with wit, informed social commentary, and energy that, at times, is so softly deliver that it requires attentive listening.

[305] Lenelle Moïse, Artist Website, http://www.lenellemoise.com/meet.html (Accessed May 1, 2012). All information about Moïse's credentials, honors, and workshops are from the artist's website.
[306] Ibid.

Moïse uses traditional Africanist storytelling methods such as call-and-response to "[break] down the fourth wall of the theater" and "to create a casual ceremony with the audience."[307] Journalist Beth Greenfield reports that "Mose [sic] will often call 'Krik!,' to get the response, 'Krak!'—a Creole tradition without exact translation, which is basically the storyteller getting permission from her listeners."[308] Moïse's call of "Krik" signifies a connection to the cultural traditions of her birth country, Haiti. Her connection to Haiti and its traditions remains present in her daily life and ultimately finds its way into her performances.

Moïse's "Protégée" is an in which she recalls the influence of her uncle, Sergo, on her desire to write poetry. Sergo, she remembers, was an amateur poet who performed in church on Sundays. His ability to incite rousing responses from the Haitian-American church congregation inspired her performance style, along with his philosophy about Haitian folk language. "Sergo was a sanctified slam poet," she writes, describing his performances in the church setting as moving, explosive, and "ceremonious."[309] Sergo also wrote in Kreyol, rather than in French. About the "classist, colonized thinking" leftover from France's colonization of Haiti, Moïse writes: "In old school Haiti, French was the language of business, politics, and literature while Kreyol—the language of the people, the *languelakay* or 'hometongue'—was dismissed as common patois." To Moïse, Sergo's poetry spoke to a Haitian folk culture that he fought to retain and with which he fundamentally identified.

Moïse became her uncle's student, one day, when he told her to write a poem for him. She wrote one and let him read it. He then told her to rewrite it and give it back to him. When

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[307] Beth Greenfield, "The Word is Out: Lenelle Mose [sic] gives voice to her Haitian-lesbian identity with some powerful poetry," *Time Out New York* (July 4, 2007). http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/the-word-is-out (Accessed November 19, 2012).

[308] Ibid.

[309] Moïse, "Protégée," in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, ed. Alix Olson (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007), 30.

she gave him the second draft, he told her to read the poem aloud. This exercise in "sharing"—literally speaking the words she chose in her own voice—revealed to her that "(1) you should write about things you feel passionate about […], (2) Serious writing requires meticulous editing, and (3) A poem is not finished until you share it."[310] Therefore, based on my reading of this exchange, three basic elements of performance poetry emerge in Moïse's process: 1) passion, 2) revision, and 3) sharing. With these in mind, the performance poem can change to suit the needs of the poet and the audience.

Moïse's relationship with her uncle changed, however, when she came out as a lesbian. She writes that he "disowned" her—"he lost his eloquence and called [her] a *madivinez sol*, 'dirty dyke' in Haitian Kreyol."[311] In the essay, Moïse cites Sergo's positive influence on her poetry because his mentorship meant more to her, in retrospect, than his disavowal of her. It seems that poetry allows the space for her sexuality and Haitianness to coexist; in poetry, there is room for all of her identifications. Sergo was the first to notice her potential and though her resistance to homophobia might be seen as resistance to him or to Haiti, Moïse believes that, even now, her uncle would be proud of her for speaking her truth. Here, she is disidentifying with her uncle and with Haiti. Together, "Madivinez" and "Protegée" become a subtle performance of utopian mo(u)rning wherein Moïse celebrates her uncle's contribution to her life and resists his objection to her lesbian identity. She does not fall victim to his negative view of her sexuality. If calling her a dirty dyke is meant to make her feel bad and conform to heterosexuality, she does not buy into it. Instead, she disidentifies and seeks acceptance elsewhere.

[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid, 34.

"Madivinez" is a poem that speaks directly to and with "Protégée." This is a poem about her "coming out" process and search for a Kreyol word definitive of her lesbian *and* Haitian identities. Notably, Moïse reclaims the word "Madivinez" as a term of dignity and pride—"something [she wants] to be."[312] Her appropriation of the term moves her from outsider to insider within traditional heteronormative Haitian culture. The audience watches as she searches for a word that reminds her of "home," a single word to encapsulate her sexual and national orientations; she is neither *only* lesbian nor *only* Haitian. The text subtly indicates that, if she finds the Kreyol word for lesbian, she will further validate her relationship with "the woman [she] love[s]."[313] A relationship steeped in creative energy, art is a central part of their union. The couple has a "bright yellow bookcase" that they "[use] as an arts altar" upon which they "shelve crayons, watercolors, ink, paper and glue for collages."[314] This altar is where Moïse "[keeps her] haitian kreyol-english dictionary," which signifies that Haiti is as much a part of her spiritual practice as art is.

Performing "Madivinez," Moïse uses her arms and hands sparingly (see Appendix, figures 7-9). Her embodiment suggests that she is in need of something: a word. Many writers believe that words have power, and Moïse feels that a word that can define her identity can enrich her life. Moïse stands erect in a 2006 performance of the poem. She wears a long red blouse with a pink scarf around her neck. Her hands are together, fingers lightly touching, in a state of readiness.[315] As she recites the poem from memory, her hands occasionally part in a

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[312] Moïse, "Madivinez," in *does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories*, ed. Lisa C. Moore (Washington: Red Bone Press, 2009), 223. The following quotations on this page are extracted from this publication.

[313] Ibid, 222.

[314] Ibid.

[315] Lenelle Moïse, "Madivinez," on YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmefqtixGeM (Accessed October 10, 2012). This url links to a video of Lenelle Moïse performing her poem

gesture that propels the words of the poem forward. Her long, dark brown dreadlocks fall softly on her shoulders, as she thumbs through her imaginary dictionary:

> i tried
>
> to look up 'lesbian'
>
> but the little red book denied
>
> my existence.[316]

Moïse stops miming her perusal of the imaginary book and she brings her right hand up to her ear, cupping her hand as if talking on the telephone. She is calling her mother to ask for the Kreyol translation of the word lesbian:

> mommi. how do you
>
> say lesbian in kreyol?
>
> *oh*, you said, *you say madivinez*.
>
> *but it's not a positive word.*
>
> *it's vulgar.*
>
> *no one wants to be*
>
> *called madivinez*
>
> it's like saying dyke.[317]

Listening to her mother's explanation that the word is an insult—an ugly word that she should not use—Moïse thinks aloud:

> but how can cruelty sound
>
> so beautiful? *madivinez.*

"Madivinez" for an audience. Filmed by Kate Geis, and uploaded by lenellemoise on April 19, 2006, the page does not contain information about the event time or venue.

[316] Lenelle Moïse, "Madivinez," in *does your mama know?,* 222.

[317] Ibid, 223.

sounds so glamorous. something i want

to be.[318]

With humorous effect, Moïse strikes a starlit pose on the word "glamorous"—right arm extended above her head, left arm following along the curve of her hip. The audience laughs and there is a beat, a moment of quiet. Moïse thanks her mother for her "vulgar gift word" then claps her hands together to indicating that she has hung the phone up. She handwrites "[madivinez] into the dictionary, next to *ke*, kreyol / for heart."[319] Satisfied with her new word, Moïse grins.

Her identities as a Haitian-American and a lesbian intersect to create a flavorful roux. The audience gets a taste of a specific transnational black lesbian experience of self-definition and self-actualization. Watching her utopian mo(u)rning performance, the audience experiences a depth of feeling as they watch her go through a process of decolonization—defining herself on her terms. Moïse's storytelling encapsulates the utopian possibilities of speaking with, against, and within heteronormativity. It bears repeating that Moïse often employs the Caribbean oratorical call-and-response prompt "Krik (storyteller)…Krak (listeners/audience)" during her performances. She does this to ensure that the listeners are paying close attention, given the complex nature of intersectionality. Attentive listening is necessary to comprehend the messages that she integrates in "Madivinez", but Moïse understands the potential of the effort: "If you imagine being outside in the dark…*Krik* is like the lighting of the match, and *krak* is the flame catching."[320] If Moïse, the storyteller, lights the match with her poem, then the messages therein ignite a flame in the audience.

[318] Ibid.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Greenfield, "The Word is Out," 1.

"Cross–Fire"

A Jamaican-American, lesbian, feminist, performance artist and activist, Staceyann Chin has been featured on HBO's Def Poetry Jam and the Tony-award winning *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*.[321] Chin's performances can be passionate, energetic, humorous, and explicit, reading more like survival guides than entertainment.

Performing "Cross–Fire" Chin stands in front of a microphone wearing army green cargo pants, an orange spaghetti-strap tank top, and a few pieces of jewelry (see Appendix, figures 10-12).[322] She wears no makeup and has an Afro hairdo with a part in the middle.[323] At 5 feet 110 pounds, she holds no emotion back. With grand physical movements and gestures, Chin forces energy out through all of her limbs (and, yes, even her hair). When she makes an error in the text, it goes unnoticed as she physically pushes through with flat palms parallel to the stage floor. She forces her words out verbally and physically to do more than recall the text. She becomes one with it. The more intense her words of protest, the more her arms flail with passionate intention about each social issue that she is for or against.

"Cross–Fire" exemplifies Chin's dexterity at writing about identity in intersectional terms in only a few pages. She holds her spectator's attention with the frenetic pace of her thought process, along with the speed and precision of her delivery. The poem begins with a student

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[321] Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam ran on Broadway from 2002 to 2003 at the Longacre Theater in New York City. For clarification, "Def" is a slang term used in the hip-hop community. Originating in the late 1980s–early 1990s, Def is short for definitely. Def is an adjective that describes a person, place, or thing that is acceptable, authentic. For more on the Broadway adaptation of Def Poetry Jam, see Jill Dolan's "Def Poetry Jam: Performance as Public Practice," in *Utopia in Performance* (2009).

[322] Staceyann Chin, "Staceyann Chin: Feminist or Womanist," YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9GiZZ4W5h0 (Accessed October 10, 2012). This url links to a video of Staceyann Chin performing "Cross–Fire" for an audience. Uploaded by ShEvoDEvolution on November 14, 2010, the page does not contain information about the event time or venue. Only the text of the poem is included in the description box below the video.

[323] An unoccupied drum set is visible behind Chin, which indicates that the performance event allows for music and spoken word as Marc Smith's early Chicago slams.

(whom Chin interprets) questioning the poet's sexual and feminist identifications: "Am I a feminist / or a womanist / the student needs to know / if I do men occasionally / and primarily am I a lesbian."[324] The student, here, is representative of a culture that uncritically relies on binarisms. The question raised by "the student," as Chin reads it, pertains primarily to Chin's sexuality. The student "needs to know" the label Chin prefers so that she (the student) can identify (read categorize) the poet as lesbian or heterosexual. If the student can compartmentalize Chin's identity, then the poet will not seem as intimidating or radical.

Chin has difficulty being forthright with the student because of her intersectional approach to thinking, writing, and speaking about political and personal issues. For example, in her direct and reactionary poem, "Poet for the People," Chin writes that she not only advocates feminism and womanism, she advocates LGBTQ activism. She is also concerned about the livelihoods of people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States and abroad; with violence against and between black youth in urban spaces; with women's reproductive rights; and with people's ability to access health care and affordable health insurance.[325] Thus, she cares about a host of issues simultaneously; her sexual identity is only one.

Chin's intersectional epistemology is important to her, and she is dogmatic about performing that knowledge in non-hierarchical terms, an approach that requires audiences to pay close attention to the many thematic shifts throughout her poetry. These shifts are intentional. They are strategic. They are meant to disturb the spectator, to shake up their perceptions of race, gender, sexuality, religion, nation and other identificatory categories. Therefore, when she responds to the student by turning lesbianism—what she perceives is the student's root

[324] Staceyann Chin, "Cross–Fire," in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, ed. Alix Olson (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007), 366.
[325] Chin, "Poet for the People," in *Word Warriors*, 370-71.

question—on its head, she does so by illustrating the extent to which identity can be "messy" (read complicated), especially when blackness, queerness, and womanness intersect.

Tongue tied up to my cheek
I attempt to respond with some honesty—

This business of dykes and dykery I tell her
is often messy
with social tensions as they are
you never quite know what you're getting
—girls who are only straight at night
—hardcore butches who sport dresses
between nine and six during the day
    sometimes she is an endangered chameleon
trapped by the limitations of our imagination[326]

Considering these last lines, it is obvious why Chin is not being candid, here, about her sexual identity. Perhaps she does not trust the student to see her beyond "the limitations of [her] imagination." Perhaps, by not saying outright that she is a lesbian, she is exercising caution, protecting herself from potential backlash. In "Poet for the People" Chin admits that, like the women she describes in the excerpt above, she is sometimes fearful of self-identifying as lesbian, even in accepting spaces.[327] She writes:

[326] Chin, "Cross–Fire," 366.

[327] The focus of Chin's critique, here, is an amalgam of activist groups whose participants purportedly advocate for civil rights and equality but, due to ideological assumptions and biases, exclude people from their movement work. She is responding to those supposed activists and allies whom, she observes, cannot or do not want to understand the plight of other marginalized people akin to their own. She suggests that an intersectional framework is nonnegotiable in activism.

I become more and more afraid to say

black

or lesbian

or woman—every day

under the pretense of unity

I swallow something I should have said [328]

Her fear is warranted. She reveals, here, that even in seemingly safe spaces, she is careful about how and with whom she identifies. That is, she does not always "talk back" to authority. Her fear of rejection sometimes leaves her disidentifying with groups that align with parts of her identity but not all of them.

In a similarly disidentificatory move, Chin replies to the student by referring to sexual assault against women, a problem that concerns Chin and should, arguably, concern the student:

primarily I tell her

I am concerned about young women

who are raped on college campuses

in cars

after poetry readings like this one

in bars[329]

People tend to gravitate toward sensational topics such as sexuality as opposed to immediate life concerns such as rape; therefore, Chin strategically redirects the conversation from the student's personal "need to know" to political issues that affect the larger society. Chin continues describing the victimization that assaulted women experience:

[328] Chin, "Poet for the People," 370.
[329] Chin, "Cross–Fire," 366.

bruised lip and broken heart

you will forgive her if she does not come

forward with the truth immediately

for when she does it is she who will stand trial

as damaged goods[330]

Chin observes, here, that assaulted women are often distrusted and their experience questioned when and if they report sexual and physical assault.

The theme of the poem abruptly shifts to religion to illustrate the power of "cultural assumptions" about identity. Chin speaks the words of "the boy in the double-X hooded sweatshirt"[331]—one of the youth she is presumably speaking to/being questioned by in the poem. The boy gives a subversive reading of Jesus' identity:

that blond haired blue eyed Jesus in the Vatican ain't right

that motherfucker was Jewish, not white

Christ was a Middle Eastern Rastaman

who ate grapes in the company of prostitutes

and drank wine more than he drank water[332]

Transitioning to her own voice, Chin writes:

born of the spirit the disciples also loved him in the flesh

but the discourse is on people who clearly identify as gay

or lesbian or straight

the State needs us to be a clear left or right

those in the middle get caught in the cross–fire away at the other side[333]

[330] Ibid.
[331] Chin, "Cross–Fire," 367.
[332] Ibid, 367-68.

Chin holds the attention of the students by inserting polemical critiques of religious history into the piece. She recites this passage in the boy's voice, which softens her slam of religiosity and government. Religion becomes as an intermediary—a placeholder—to maintain her audience's focus, while discussing two or more issues she is invested in changing.

Chin's rant is essentially a comment on partisanship. She is critiquing people's tendency to make assumptions without taking into account the precarity of history and knowledge. If there are limits to what we can know about the past, then perhaps we should question what we think we know, as opposed to endowing those assumptions as Truth. The boy's interpretation of the actions and intentions of Jesus and his disciples is not necessarily the Truth either. However, by considering the traditional interpretation of the story of Jesus and his disciples and the boy's revisionist narrative, the story expands, changes, and is limited. It is useful, I believe, to question established norms.

This scene illustrates that faith, an investment in the unseen, can be an unstable concept. There is no straight answer to the student's primary question and this question sparks a series of other questions that may or may not have concrete answers. This complex engagement with disparate thoughts reflects Chin's constant state of flux, in terms of identity and faith. "God," for Chin, "is that place between belief and what you name it," and that liminal space between faith and religion is where she is most comfortable as an artist, activist, and human. She writes:

> never one thing or the other—
> I am everything I fear
> tears and sorrows
> black windows and muffled screams
> in the morning I am all I ever wanted to be

[333] Ibid, 368.

[…]

always without breath or definition—I claim every single dawn

for yesterday is simply what I was

and tomorrow

even that will be gone.[334]

Chin paints a picture with words of the emotional complexities of identity that often go unchecked in art and life. She is saying that she is always changing and that not even her chosen identifiers (blackness, queerness, womanness) are stable.

Of identity, E. Patrick Johnson writes, "when we 'fix' and confine our identity as monolithic, we inhibit our road both to recovery from the diseases that plague our communities and to discovering our humanity."[335] If these diseases are, say, colorism, homophobia, and classism, for example, then the remedy might just be intersectional identification. Chin resists the pressure to assume a single identity as that would not accurately capture her sense of self and life experience. Addressing people's assumptions about her race/ethnicity and religious affiliation, she writes:

and while we're on the subject of diversity

Asia is not one big race

and there is no such country called the *Islands*

and no—I am not from there

[…]

Most people are surprised my father is Chinese—like

there's some kind of preconditioned look for the half-Chinese lesbian poet

[334] Ibid.

[335] Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 18.

who used to be Catholic but now believes in dreams[336]

Chin is constantly negotiating identity in her life and work. Her brown body is perceived as black, most of the time, and her Asianness is often unrecognized. Her mixed racial/ethnic identity has meaning for her, although she was raised culturally black. It also has meaning beyond identification, as her Chinese father was not present during her childhood although he lived in the same city.[337] Chin's tendency to consider multiple aspects of a situation at once, specifically the complexities of her own life, is a skill that paid off for her in the local NYC slam and on the commercial stage.

Commercialism in Slam

In this section, I explore the industry of slam poetry and the impact of commercialism, popularity and authenticity on its artists. I focus on Chin and her resistance to commercialism in the slam in the early 2000s, how that reflects her black lesbian feminist politics, and how that resistance is depicted in her art. In a 2004 essay, "Almost Famous," Staceyann Chin recalls her experience as a "Def Poet" on the HBO series Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam and the subsequent Broadway production. Chin reports that aspects of her lifestyle changed with the commercial success of the Broadway show: she had a reliable source of income and she was more visible. Conversely, she also recalls the stress, guilt, and all-consuming nature of performing eight shows a week. During the run, she actually became concerned about maintaining her artistic sensibility and signature performance style, while working within a commercial machine that, in the early 2000s, was turning the slam into a popular art form.

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[336] Chin, "Cross–Fire," 367.

[337] In *The Other Side of Paradise* (2009), Chin recalls searching for her father:

> I slip into the narrow booth. I search for the number in the big yellow phone book. I trace my finger down the long list of Chins. There are four Junior Chins listed right after Joan Chin. I draw courage from the memory of Summer [a character in a romance novel] demanding answers from her estranged father and dial the number with an address on Leader Avenue. I jump when someone answers on the first ring (133-34).

The commercialization of any cultural product in a capitalist economy requires that the product be profitable, that consumers buy (into) it, which can result in a diluted product and can potentially overshadow its artistic intent. Another result is the appropriation of the cultural product (for example, the appropriation of black culture, queer culture, and others) by those who fetishize the culture and its producers. While commercial attention can draw more audiences to performance poetry and put the spotlight on minorities who use the form to communicate their concerns, the cost can be the raw quality of the performance and the liberatory intent of the message. Judith Butler rightly asserts:

> Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value.[338]

Again, the paradox, here, is that commercialism can offer slam and spoken word artists financial stability. The need for financial security, and (at times) public recognition, often requires that said artists compromise their value systems and performance approaches to survive as artists.

According to Chin, commercialism makes slam poetry a more "palatable" experience for "diverse" (read white and/or middle-class audiences.) In her prose about her choice to leave the slam, she does not express regret in performing in the popular Broadway adaptation of the Def Poetry Jam HBO show, but she rightly observes that commercialized performance tends to transform what she suggests is the people's poetry.[339] It becomes similar to what Peggy Phelan

[338] Judith Butler, "1999 Preface," in *Gender Trouble*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[339] See Chin's "Poet for the People," in *Word Warriors* (2007).

might call "something other than performance."[340] Phelan's view of performance as ontological is useful here. She defines performance as having a "life [that is only] in the present":

> Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being…becomes itself through disappearance.

Here, Phelan suggests that performance suffers as a product of the commercial machine and loses its "realness"—its freshness, its immediacy to attract, inform, and affect spectators. In my view, this is a serious problem for cultural art forms created in marginalized communities. Chin was concerned that her poetry would be compromised by what I also see as the increasing commodification of African Diasporic art forms in the digital age.[341]

Chin does not suggest that the "media"—television, film, radio, or the commercial stage—dilutes the explicit content, direct message, and immediacy of spoken word poetry. She suggests, I argue, that when spoken word is extracted from its original communal context (the local poetry slam), an element of redundancy sets in to the form. Slam can become formulaic in order to please audiences. As a result, poets might believe that their art, creativity, and identity are being compromising for the sake of mainstream theatrical aesthetics. For a Broadway audience, the premise and presentation of the local poetry slam is re-formulated into a spectacle of itself that audiences pay large sums of money to see. In fact, these audiences expect the same entertainment night after night (and year after year). Chin writes:

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[340] Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

[341] Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 146.

> To be fair, poetry hit its stride before Russell Simmons wrapped his name and his money around it, but the media hadn't gotten a hold of it yet. Popular spoken word was still primarily the slam created by Marc Smith and a bunch of bohemian types parading from city to city, carrying three-minute poems about "the revolution," and "the man," and the merits of dying…Then came the cameras, and unseasoned poems were quickly seasoned or laid to rest. Funny ones were fished out, and "the revolution" was made more palatable with comedy and recognizable diversity.[342]

She makes the point that revolutionary rhetoric in slam poetry has been appropriated for capitalistic gain. She suggests that the "talk" of revolution (as opposed to the action) desensitizes audiences to the very "real" social issues put forth by slam poets. Spectators do not leave the commercial "slam theatre" mobilized to act in response to the social issues presented as problems in the performance; they simply leave.

In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry – Race, Identity, and Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), scholar and poet Susan B.A. Somers-Willett is interested in "how and why marginalized voices—and in particular African American voices—are received as more authentic or real than other voices at poetry slams."[343] This question is founded on the author's resistance to privileging any particular voice—minority or otherwise—simply because the voice is coming from a particular body. She writes:

> I think it can be dangerous, however, when an audience is going to poetry slams just to promote those [liberal] political ideals; when they want to reward black voices, or queer voices, or women's voices because they are black voices or queer

[342] Staceyann Chin, "Almost Famous," *Black Issues Book Review* 6, no. 2 (March 2004).
[343] Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry – Race, Identity, and Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 8.

> voices or women's voices. That involves a certain fetishism of the other, of those communities that I think can be a little dangerous because you're taking the voice for what it represents instead of what it says.[344]

Somers-Willett rightly identifies the pitfalls of popularity for a cultural artform.

Slam, like Hip Hop/Rap, has become associated with the black body and cultural voice, which is not only limiting to the art form but to black artists. She writes:

> The identities expressed by slam poets are performative—that is, they are performed consciously or unconsciously for audiences to certain ends. Because identity is an effect of performance in the world, just as it is at a poetry slam, what is authentic about identity is not the realness or truth it is often used to connote but the repetition and reception of certain behaviors and characteristics over time. That is, what is often deemed authentic by an audience is actually *a norm of tried identity behavior*... Slams prove cultural stages where poets perform identities and their audiences confirm or deny them as 'authentic' via scoring.[345]

Somers-Willett's understanding of how authenticity plays out in the slam environment highlights the likelihood that audiences might essentialize the ideal slammer. The "successful" slammer becomes the one who fits most neatly into a particular body, such as the urban black male or female. A resistant, rhythmic, smart narrative (a la Rap/Hip Hop music) becomes the expected norm from these bodies, which can be stifling for creative artists who slam politics—even the politics of the slam competition. For example, Somers-Willett notes Chin's resistance to the essentialization of the slam poet in "I Don't Want to Slam"—a performance of disidentification with slam poetry.

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[344] Ibid, 344.
[345] Ibid, 8 (emphasis added).

A slammer on the 1999 and 2000 New York National Poetry Slam (NPS) louderArts team, Chin's featured poem identifies the constraints of having to perform her poetry as if it were a commercial product. In "I Don't Want to Slam"—a poem written for the final round of the 2000 NPS—Chin struggles with identity and authenticity in the increasingly commercial environment of the poetry slam. Somers-Willett reads "I Don't Want to Slam" as a cry of resistance to the industry of slam poetry and the formulaic patterns that Chin finds herself and other slam poets falling into in the sport. Instead, Chin wants to write,

> poems that don't care
>
> about the meter or the rhyme
>
> poems that really couldn't give
>
> a flying fuck about the time[346]

She wants to write,

> I left my lover and
>
> now I want her back poems
>
> I miss Jamaica
>
> but I'm never going back poems
>
> I know it's not a ten
>
> but it sends shivers down MY back poems
>
> [...]
>
> real poems
>
> poems that are so honest
>
> they slam[347]

[346] Staceyann Chin, "I Don't Want to Slam," in *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*, ed. Gary Max Glazner (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2000), 208.

Here, she critiques the institution of the slam and inserts the rules she wants to abide by in her work. It is clear that she is done with the slam. First, the poem is longer than the three minute time limit. Second, the poem lacks her usual power, rhyming skills and radical themes. Third, she is overtly critical of the politics of the slam in this poem.

Chin intentionally disrupts the slam from the inside, using the rules of the slam competition as a weapon. NPS competitions allow individual slammers only three minutes to perform a poem. If the slammer goes over time, they are disqualified. Therefore, during the final round of the 2000 NPS, Chin intentionally went over her time with this poem, which is consistent with her desire to write poems that don't "give a flyin' fuck about the time." For Chin, words have power and can potentially bypass the temporal and spatial constraints of a poetry competition, as well as narrow expectations of the slammer. In this poem, Chin expresses themes of freedom, nonlinearity, mobility, eroticism, and resistance to essentialist notions of identity at the risk of isolating herself within slam circles.

The complexities of identity and perception are an everyday concern for those who cannot or choose not to identify as one thing or another. Chin intentionally resists the very notion of authenticity by emphasizing the complexities of everyday existence. Johnson rightly argues that the benefit of identity "performed and experienced as real" is that "it constitutes a legitimate way through which subjects maintain control over their lives and their image."[348] Chin's work demonstrates a constant reformatting of self to avoid both the negative implications of proclaiming an intersectional identity—illegibility—as well as society's assumptions about the meanings of that identification. To be understood more clearly, Chin's and Moïse's

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[347] Ibid, 209.
[348] Johnson, 18.

performances have to be deconstructed, analyzed, and reassembled. For those who do not understand intersectionality, Chin and Moïse's experiences with identity will be lost on them.

Conclusion

Staceyann Chin's "Cross–Fire" and Lenelle Moïse's "Madivinez" are solo performances that feature utopian mo(u)rnings—performative acts of queer pain and hope that enable them to find and create safe spaces in hostile surroundings. Chin and Moïse testify to audiences that witness their embodiment and interpretation of key moments in their lives where they have been rejected by family and community. However, Chin and Moïse do not settle into a position of victimhood nor do they internalize this rejection. Instead, they embark upon journeys to establish surrogate families and communities that accept them as they are. Chin's and Moïse's narratives of displacement and homemaking have the potential to bring awareness to the material, emotional, and physical conditions that impact black lesbians, especially when they come out in racist, sexist, and homophobic environments.

It is important to recognize that these artists began their arts activism on regional poetry slam stages. Relying on the stage as a space of refuge and performance poetry to communicate their ways of knowing, Chin and Moïse have performed joyous and painful memories, and they have resisted the shaming tactics of others through those performances. As a result, their poetry has impacted not only black lesbians but also other women and queer-identified people. As I have argued, the local slam poetry and spoken-word venues have been safe spaces for marginalized people to act out identity.

Lenelle Moïse and Staceyann Chin have opted to remain true to their slam roots no matter the genre or form of performance they use. Moïse and Chin not only devise theatre plays, but they also work as arts activists at colleges and universities that offer residencies and

fellowships for those doing significant work to dismantle oppression and represent the marginalized. Furthermore, Chin is a single mother who has created a family of her own. Her example of black lesbian motherhood shows that a queer woman of color can create and sustain a comfortable home without compromising her identity and beliefs. With her community of feminist and queer friends in Brooklyn and her young daughter, Zuri, Chin is still active artist who uses, among other outlets, a relatively-new medium—YouTube—to teach her daughter to be socially conscious and vocal in her support of equality.

Moïse and Chin continue to stand alone on bare stages—flatfooted in their truths—telling tales of transnational black lesbian womahood.[349] Their bodies dark and their voices loud, they bravely resist their own fears and those of the outside world. As Muñoz observes, of contemporary solo queer performance:

> There is a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics. Solo performance speaks to the reality of being queer at this particular moment.[350]

In the face of oppressive systems that deem them other, unintelligible, incomprehensible, and even invaluable, Chin and Moïse claim space for their bodies and narratives in performance. Through performative acts of mo(u)rning and hope they find and feel home where the Caribbean and the United States meet.

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[349] I am invoking Patricia Bell-Scott and Juanita Johnson-Bailey's text *Flat-footed Truths: Telling Black Women's Lives* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).

[350] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Identity and identification are taken seriously in black lesbian feminist performance—a genre where the personal and political meet, where the body is used to make and remake meanings of blackness, womanness, and queerness, and where the stage becomes a blank space for black lesbian representations. BLFP artists push the boundaries of what identity can be and do for their characters by imagining queerer, more expansive identities and by telling stories of how these bodies "act up" in radical ways. These artists rely on Africanist, feminist/womanist, and queer aesthetics to help them construct more accurate black lesbian characters and to ensure that the stereotypes associated with this identity are addressed, along with the oppressive systems responsible for reproducing them.

As articulated by the Combahee River Collective, in their 1977 statement, identity is important to black women who experience "racial-sexual oppression."[351] They assert: "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."[352] To be clear, to focus on one's identity does not negate the significance of another person's identity; it is an act of self-care and self-preservation. It is a response to the poor condition in which black lesbian women are often left. It is an opportunity to recast one's self as one chooses and to find and make families that embrace and sustain that identity.

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[351] Combahee River Collective, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 234.

[352] Ibid.

Racism, sexism, and homophobia are three major obstacles to black lesbian homemaking, in the works I have analyzed. Black lesbian protagonists are in the process of searching for fulfillment in their lives after experiencing tremendous losses. If homemaking is a process in which one creates, inhabits, and/or maintains safe physical, mental, and emotional space, then home, as I understand it, is not only a physical dwelling outside of the self, it is also in the body. The body is important in BLFP, as the black lesbian protagonists are often marginalized figures whose racial, gender, and sexual oppression relates directly to their bodies being black and female.

When they cannot find solice in their skin—as a result of physical trauma and societal restrictions on their bodily agency (often related to religion)—it becomes difficult to make a home outside of themselves. However, other women's bodies can become sites of homemaking. Through sexual and/or maternal intimacy, these characters manage to reconnect with their own bodies and become empowered by them. As the performers reclaim their bodies, audiences, over the course of the performance, begin to identify with the universal themes of love and family in the plays and performances. By focusing on the body so explicitly, BLFP artists encourage audiences to understand black lesbians with and against stereotypes.

Interestingly, the characters live for extended periods of time in predominately black communities. They are proud to be black and they participate in black cultural institutions and traditions (for example, the Black church). It is also apparent that, in these institutions, racism (colorism), sexism, and homophobia converge in ways that negatively impact these characters' lives and make them less comfortable in these spaces. This sleight of hand—being at once within and without a community—compromises, and in some cases, stalls black lesbian homemaking.

BLFP artists use their work to engage in intersectional discourses on race, gender, and sexuality that have not taken place on a large scale in black communities. They illustrate how minorities within minority groups experience and navigate marginalization. These performances reflect how, even in minority communities, oppressive systems have a way of metaphorically pushing black lesbians down, putting them in their so-called place, and demanding they remain there. The result—disempowerment—comes from the stigmatization and isolation that the black characters have experienced in their pasts.

Characters like Flora, Biddie, bull-jean, and Donnetta, and poets like Staceyann and Lenelle, perform stories that avow how black lesbians have been made to feel ashamed of who they love, how they love, and how they appear in public. One might imagine that, in response, they would avoid being *out* at all. They would no longer represent the queerness that, I believe, is always already a part of black community. The more black lesbians are silenced and encouraged to be unrecognizable as queers, the more difficult it is for them to disrupt the power structures that keep them invisible. Patricia Hill Collins likens oppressive systems to a "matrix of domination"—

> refer[ring] to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized and overlap to disempower and disenfranchise black women. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression.[353]

That is, all oppression is connected and those who are invested in oppressive systems seek a similar outcome: to silence the outsider.

[353] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 201.

Black lesbian feminist performance artists, however, actively deconstruct matrices of domination by reimagining black lesbian identity and life as an existence full of possibility, even in the most oppressive conditions. To that end, BLFP accomplishes the following:

1. Positions black lesbians center stage in theater and performance.
2. Focuses explicitly and unapologetically on black lesbian narratives.
3. Depicts black women self-defining in intersectional terms.
4. Depicts black women loving other women, romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually.
5. Reconfigures stereotypes of black womanhood.
6. Exposes the overlapping systems of oppression that impact black lesbians.
7. Explores constructions of gender in black lesbian communities.
8. Transmits knowledge across generations of BLFP artists.
9. Addresses intraracial issues, focusing in depth on hierarchies within African diaspora communities.
10. Emphasizes the importance of storytelling (testimony and witness) in black lesbian homemaking.

In this dissertation, I have explored the works of five theatre and performance artists whose black lesbian lead characters are not stereotypes, but multidimensional, complicated, and flawed figures. These artists most effectively challenge stereotypes of black womanhood and black butch womanhood, while paying some attention to the black femme and the black man. As artists who identify/have identified as black lesbians, the writers come to blank pages with creative images and voices that reflect their own intersectional identities and experiences of pain and joy. They also conceptualize an imaginary home for their characters, in which the lives of

black lesbians are livable and their intersectional identities are accepted. This home, as evidenced in the *cowboy is dying*, can be a model for a new generation of playwrights who, like Bridgforth, Holmes, Grays, Chin, and Moïse, ruminate about black women's bodies, reconfigure black womanhood, and revise history to reflect the lives of black lesbians to more accurately present their stories on stage.

The playwrights have created memorable black queer characters in contexts in which they do not succumb to physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual assault. Instead, they thrive. They are survivors who reconfigure their pained bodies and bruised psyches to boldly claim residence in heteronormative space—and claim it with joy. Furthermore, the narratives around these characters disrupt rigid stereotypes of black lesbian womanhood, such as the *myth of the strong black woman*—that black women are inherently tough, resilient, and unbothered by oppression, that they are used to and can tolerate being overwhelmed by outside pressures and circumstances.

As I have observed, these characters are strong but they are not *essentially* strong. There is nothing inherent to blackness, womanness, or queerness that make these characters better equipped to handle painful macro and micro aggressions. If they are strong, they derive their strength from women like them—a radical act that is powerful in and of itself considering patriarchy's reliance on women's animosity toward each other to keep its gendered hierarchy in place. If these black lesbian characters are strong, it is not because they can withstand extreme amounts of pain, loss, and grief. They are strong because they share their traumas with like bodies. Strength, I argue, is a byproduct of their pain, a performance that has kept them alive. There are no extended scenes of black women's anguish in these plays, but there are moments

where the characters recount the sources of their pain, as if they are reliving it in real time. This (re)membering tears down old pain and builds something more resistant in its place.

Utopian Mo(u)rnings

José Esteban Muñoz has identified home as a contested space for queers of color. He observes that "[they] and other minoritarians have been denied a world. Yet, these citizen subjects are not without resources—they have never been."[354] He assures that they make worlds for themselves through disidentification, a performance that he describes as "a point of departure, a process, a building."[355] He writes, further, "[t]his building takes place *in the future and in the present*, which is to say that disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present."[356] If disidentification is a process that queers of color use to erect new spaces of comfort with established materials and ideas—what Audre Lorde called "the master's tools[357]"—then black lesbian feminist performance artists continue the effort of "contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking."[358]

BLFP artists create viable homes and worlds for their characters through *utopian mo(u)rnings*—performative acts where joy *and* pain come together to lead black lesbian characters closer to home. Each artist depicts homemaking in the following ways: 1) They reclaim spaces that have historically been unwelcoming to those who appear and identify as black, woman, and/or lesbian; 2) they revise history by inserting black lesbian narratives where they have been absent; and 3) they deconstruct negative stereotypes associated with black lesbian

[354] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Ibid.
[357] See Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider* (1979; repr., Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007).
[358] Muñoz, 200.

womanhood. Although the artists depict different aspects of homemaking, each presents or represents black lesbian characters in a homemaking process that not only allows them to develop their own identities, but also permits diverse audiences to witness their acts of grief and hope—performances that evince the material, emotional, and physical conditions of black lesbian life.

During utopian mo(u)rnings, black lesbian characters recall (or share) memories of past traumas they have experienced because of their identities. They divulge these stories to a receptive witness (usually another black lesbian) and/or a larger group of witnesses (an audience, likely diverse in its composition). For example, Miss Flora, who bares visible scars of oppression, talks through her pain of having been raped by her stepfather, humiliated by her mother, and physical abused by her ex-husband. With scars and stretch marks as reminders of her trauma, she acts as storyteller with Biddie as her witness. By telling the stories of her deepest traumas, Flora works through her anger and shame. Then, Biddie reciprocates by revealing that she also has scars, visible and nonvisible. By sharing these stories, the characters move forward together and build the family that they have dreamed of. They also share these traumas with an audience of spectators who take the information they have learned about black lesbian identity and experience with them as they exit the theater. The spectators leave more familiar with the quotidian and spectacular possibilities of black lesbian embodiment and homemaking. They also should recognize that these narratives of love, loss, pain, and joy are similar to their own.

Utopian mo(u)rnings are embodied acts. They can be brief moments of seemingly inconsequential dialogue or grand emotional outpourings of hurt. These testimonies are often visceral, with the characters describing how it feels in their bodies to be rebuked for aspects of themselves that they cannot change. These testimonies reveal something of what it means, how it

looks, and how it feels to be black, woman, and lesbian in a society that does not readily value or comprehend that particular intersection. The exchange between characters, or character and audience, propels the story forward, leading the protagonist(s) toward a space and/or body where they feel safe.

In BLFP, storytelling is a key way in which knowledge is transferred from person-to-person and generation-to-generation. The testimonies I have analyzed are reminiscent of the Africanist storytelling tradition in which a storyteller recalls narratives from memory and relays them to an audience of active listeners. In realistic plays, like *A Lady and a Woman* and *Remember What I Say!*, the audience is a distant witness to the mo(u)rning. That is, two or more characters engage in an exchange of grief and hope, while the audience eavesdrops. The testifier receives immediate feedback from the primary witness, often in the form of a reciprocated testimony. In nontraditional works, like *the bull-jean stories*, *the cowboy is dying*, "cross–fire", and "Madivinez," the audience is the primary witness. The feedback can range from silence to clapping to verbal affirmations, depending on the culture of the performance space.

Audiences at nontraditional BLFP performances generally expect the passion, radical ideas, and collaborative elements of the genre. They gather to experience the tension and catharsis of these personal and political works and testimonials that reflect the ups and downs of black lesbian homemaking, especially the struggle to inhabit and create spaces where black lesbian epistemologies and ontologies are acknowledged and supported. Of course, audiences witness in a variety of ways: some talk back to the artists and support statements or ideas that arouse positive feelings in them; some sit, reserved, processing the intersections of the bodies and narratives before them; and some resist when the character/artist claims space. To resist, here, might be an action as small as leaving the theatre before the performance ends, or talking

back in rejection of the character's/artist's embodied testimonial. There are risks to identity-based performances, especially for queer women-of-color who, even on stage, are expected to perform self in ways that others deem appropriate.

Butch–Femme

Common identities in BLFP are butch and femme—lesbian gender identities based on notions of masculinity and femininity. Many of the characters identify as butch and engage in butch–femme encounters. In chapter two, I focused on Holmes's depictions of butch–femme and butch-butch relationships. Depicting the depths of love between women, she pays close attention to how they communicate with one another. Phyllis and Squirrel, who identify as butch, learn to speak across a multi-generational divide and form a family together. Flora and Biddie, too, struggle, at first, to talk with one another across the heterosexual–homosexual divide, and the butch–femme divide.

It is clear that when butch–femme is the primary coupling, butch characters and their stories are often the most central and the most developed, with the femme playing a supporting, though necessary, role. Often an object of desire, the femme is mostly silent. The butch story is the master narrative. The femme's voice is somewhat silenced. Of "femme invisibility," scholar Judith (Jack) Halberstam asserts:

> Concerns about femme invisibility must be taken very seriously and charges of butch sexism are definitely worth investigating. Indeed the best way to begin the work of bringing [the] femme to visibility is to engage in projects which record this specific lesbian gender and its specific desires.[359]

[359] Judith Halberstam, "Between Butches," in *butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (London: Cassell, 1998), 60.

It is important to recognize that, when a butch character speaks about and for a *femme*, the former's perceptions should be questioned. Femmes are regularly commented on in relation to the butch, but their own stories and voices are latent within the performance texts. I am interested in uncovering the hidden femme's side of the story, and comparing that perspective with the butch's more evident perception of her. She, too—being black and lesbian—subverts traditional expectations of black womanhood in her embodiment of femininity and lesbian desire. There is something theatrical in that identity that remains to be captured in an explicit way on the stage.

In BLFP, the femme often hides in plain sight; the masculine narrative is privileged over and against the feminine one. In recent works, however, the femme is gaining traction. Although *the cowboy is dying* does not revolve around the femme, it interrogates the mask of masculinity that the butch often hides behind. Presenting *butchness* as performance, *cowboy* shows that the butch stereotype—body, costuming, and attitude—can be constructed and deconstructed. The solo performance also shows that butchness, as a quality of masculinity, does not necessarily equal power for the butch. This deconstruction, I believe, is a small step toward femme visibility in performance. Given Grays's fluid interpretation of butch performance, and Moïse and Chin's lack of engagement with the types altogether, I anticipate that future BLFP works will expand to include other spectacular lesbian identities, such as bois, tomboys, and agender lesbians.

Despite the importance of butch–femme in BLFP, it is becoming a less rigid binary for newer generations of queer people, many of whom are not bound by respectability politics (heteronormative or homonormative) that require they align themselves with strict gender and sexual ideals. According to Lisa M. Anderson, most black queer women, today, "enjoy the freedom from the meanings and negative significations of 'butch,' 'dyke,' or 'lesbian'."[360] As is evident in contemporary BLFP, black lesbians are reconstructing existing models of lesbian

[360] Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 105.

gender and sexuality. Still, there are artists who are invested in the butch-femme binary, even though they may disidentify with it or use alternate terminology (such as, a lady, a woman, wo'mn, and bulldagger) in their works.

The Future of Black Lesbian Feminist Performance

Playwrights and performers often come to black lesbian feminist performance because of its liberatory potential. This speaks to me personally. In 2004, I graduated from an undergraduate theatre program and was accepted into the Actors Studio Drama School in New York City. I was in my early-20s and coming into my queer identity. The city was a perfect place to do that, with its diverse population and array of artistic opportunities. I remember that a friend—a self-identified Jewish lesbian from New Jersey—introduced me to Staceyann Chin's work, a gift that I will never be able to thank her enough for. I connected with Chin's poetry and performance style almost immediately. I recognized her message, delivery, passion, and refusal to apologize for who she was. My connection to her work was not simply because we had similar intersectional identities, it was because she was *real*—she was an honest performer who, with each performance, put her body on the line. I will never forget how I felt when I first saw her perform on Def Poetry Jam. Her freedom on the stage to use art to voice her political concerns was something that I wanted (and needed). I wanted to be the kind of artist who could make a home in my own body, who could stand center stage in the theatre, and who could bring an audience into my world. Chin has this ability every time she steps on stage. Her performances show how the theatre is a space where, through embodied resistance, utopias can be made.

In BLFP, black lesbian existence is possible. It is a genre where lesbian/queer-identified artists-of-color conceptualize a home in the theatre—a space where they explore issues related to racial, gender, and sexual oppression (such as physical, emotional, and mental abuse) that impact

black queer women. They engage with assumptions and stereotypes of black lesbian womanhood, ever conscious of the potential for social change that performance can incite. They are aware that performance can encourage marginalized people to resist oppression, to speak up, and to speak out in their everyday lives. BLFP artists who claim intersectional identities and embrace them have written and performed works of individual and collective freedom.

Black lesbian feminist performance is, essentially, *intersectional artistry.* It is art that allows multiply situated persons to articulate the specificities of their lives with and against existing identitarian terms and ideas. BLFP artists tell audiences how it feels, in their body, to not be one thing or the other. They tell them about the weight of social pressures to fit into reductive categories that do not adequately reflect who they are. They say that black, woman, and lesbian are not mutually exclusive categories for them or their characters. They define themselves for themselves, resisting widely accepted terms to describe their race, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. And they adopt and adapt terms that satisfy them.

When intersectional bodies stand on stage—alone or with like bodies—their complex identities become more visible and their narratives more comprehensible. They are living, breathing representations of tension in motion. Their bodies hold meaning and are perceived as meaningful. When a black woman stands on a stage, dressed in masculine attire, spectators rely on her body, first, to determine who she is, how she has come to be, how they feel about her, and whether or not she deserves to be there. When a black lesbian-identified woman stands on a stage, dressed in masculine or feminine attire, and tells an audience that she is so in love with another woman that her heart might break, they rely on her voice to tell a truth they have rarely heard. When black lesbians tell their stories, they direct their audiences to read them in particular ways. They talk about racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia. They talk about being

raised in black communities, with rich histories and cultures, which have nurtured them and neglected them. They talk about home—how they left, how they returned, how they found another home in themselves and in the bodies of other women.

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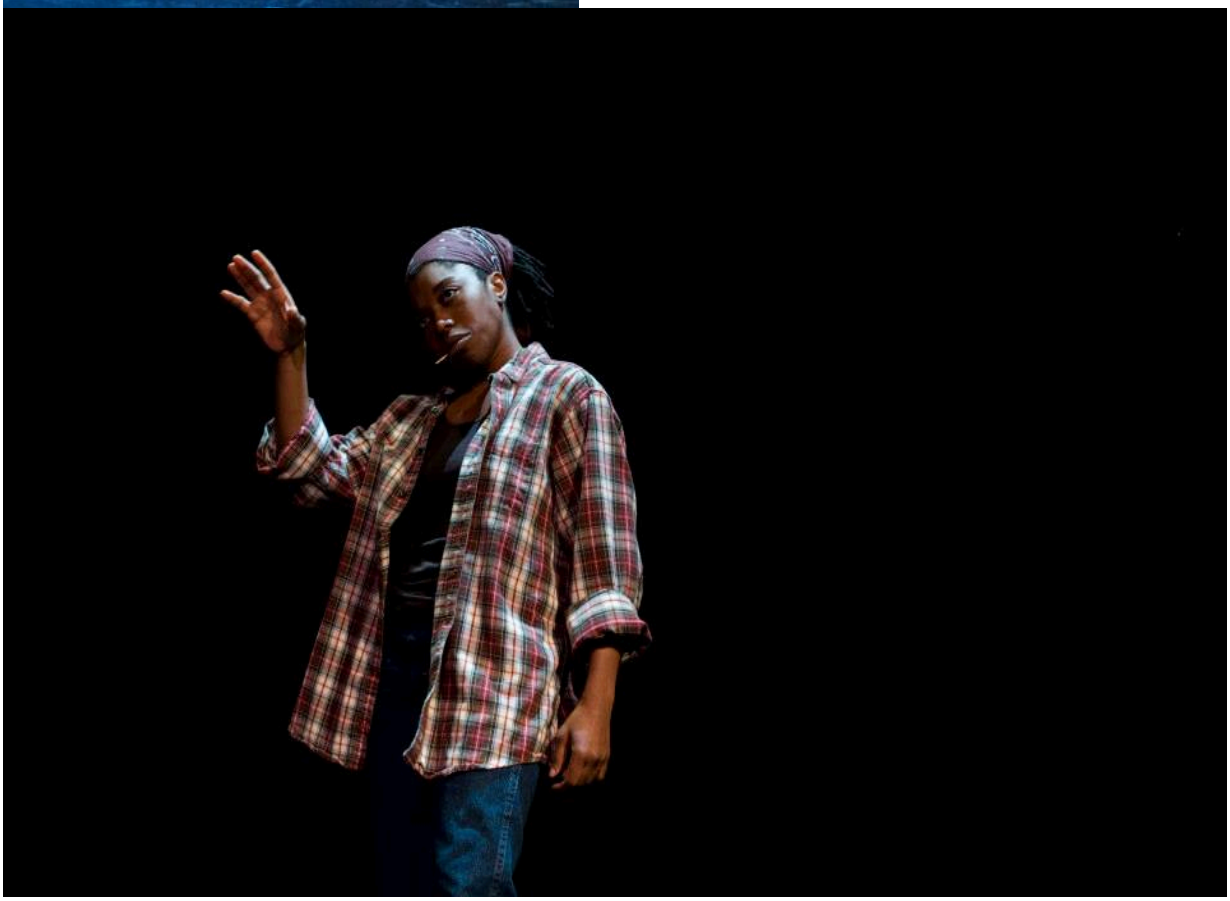
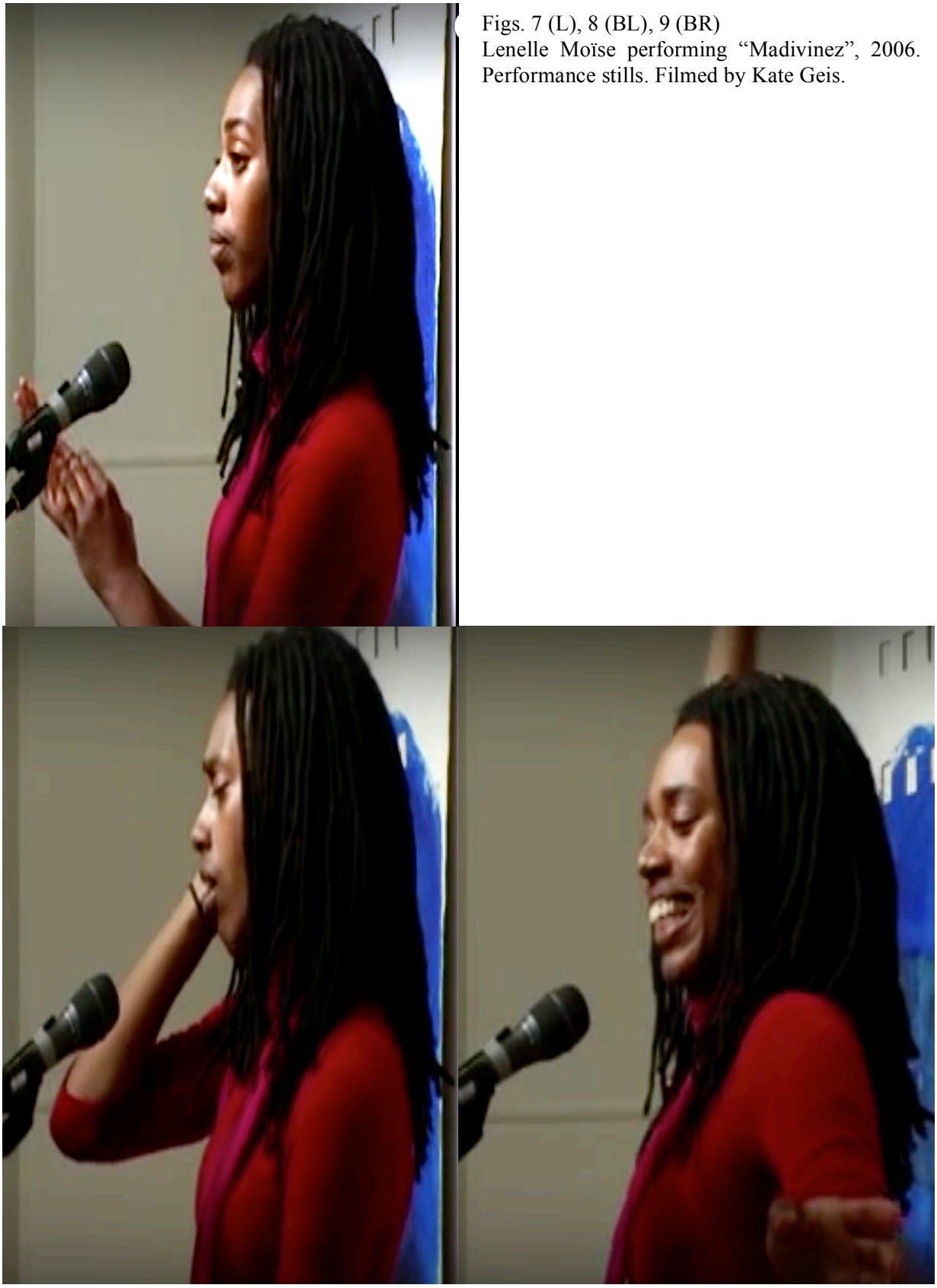
Figs.1 (L), 2 (B)
Velina Brown as Miss Flora and Dawn L. Troupe as Biddie in *A Lady and a Woman*, Theatre Rhinoceros, Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, 2013. Photo by David Wilson.

Figs. 3 (L), 4 (B)
Q-Roc Ragsdale as bull-jean in *The Bull-Jean Stories: A Multimedia Installation*, Dallas Arts Center, 2013.

Figs. 5 (L), 6 (B)
Donnetta Lavinia Grays as Donnetta/Bulldagger in *the cowboy is dying*, Coyote REP Theatre Company, 2008. Photos by Diedre Schoo.





Figs. 7 (L), 8 (BL), 9 (BR)
Lenelle Moïse performing "Madivinez", 2006. Performance stills. Filmed by Kate Geis.

Figs. 10 (L), 11 (BL), 12 (BR)
Staceyann Chin performing “Cross–Fire”, 2007.
Performance stills.