

Yours truly, Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Prologue: For Those of Us Who Live at the Shoreline

*For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours.
-from Litany for Survival by Audre Lorde*

This is spiritual and stolen work. We are the dream-children caressing doorways, looking for what breadcrumbs were left here. Teacher-poet-visionaries Audre Lorde and June Jordan did (not) survive their lifetimes. Writer-publisher-renegades Alexis De Veaux and Barbara Smith sacrificed wealth, health, and stability to (almost) leave a legacy in print. I am a dreamchild, crucial but nevermore alone, searching basements, independent under-funded archives, and e-bay for evidence. Lest our dreams reflect the death of theirs. This is for us, at once before and after, seeking another kind of now.

For those of us who live at the shoreline...

This is for those of us who live at the shoreline, and those of us who live on the deadline, hustling to make a living off ever more glamorous analyses of systematic death. Driven by the intellectual marketability of the paradox: Though life is all we can theorize, some lives remain incomprehensible. Though death is the limit of theory, some deaths are so predictable as to seem understandable. We are the purveyors of the horizon, approaches to sensibility that continue to recede, because life escapes us, and death prevails. For those of us who live on the shifting edge of the world, close or brave or stupid enough to sell the details of the line we walk, to guess the conversation between

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sea, sand and air...for those of us who know the truth of erosion and bet against it. This is for us. Critical Black Diaspora Theorists, I’m calling you. Queer Futurists I’m calling you. This is for those of us who live here, at the shoreline.

And though critical scholars of the “Black diaspora” are sometimes adequately queer in their approaches, and though queer theorists are sometimes anti-racist and transnational in their critiques, rarely do we stand together for the same role call, or inhabit the same body of texts. Sometimes we kill each other off into irrelevance for the sake of our own cohesion. Limits appear to provide clarity, even when it means amputating the barely living bodies whose sacrificial status make our inquiry necessary. We are neighbors, if not housemates, if not soulmates sharing organs. (See? We were never meant to survive.)

But we want each other. Drawing on Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic, this dissertation is located at the point of a desired rendezvous, the desire for our differently named and positioned analytics for each other. The excellence, the fullness of our critical practice comes, I think, from our willingness to live in this meeting space. You are an audience that I *want* (to exist).

I wrote this dissertation at home, at the shoreline, a place that I define as a queer place, a diasporic site of knowledge production, theft and sale, a place that helps us learn about survival. Survival, here, is the name for the intervention, the shared need that brings a Black feminist use of critical Black diaspora theory and queer theory together in this dissertation.¹ The structure of the dissertation follows the shape of the shoreline. The chapters examine the edges of Black feminist literary historiography and criticism by

¹ The word “Black” though often repeated is never quite redundant in this essay. The feminist practice of this dissertation is always modified by the word “Black” in honor of the self-identified Black feminist theorists who are featured in this dissertation and who make this work possible. Because of the political tension which remains within and around the discourse of feminism, feminism does not stand alone.

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tracing the implications, the tidal significance, the disappearance and re-emergence of Black feminism as a queer practice dispersed through space and time.

The Shoreline: Critical Black Diaspora Studies

As Brent Hayes Edwards elaborates in his essay “The Uses of Diaspora,” Traditional African Diaspora Study traces “survivals” or ways that pre-transatlantic, pre-colonial Africa “survives” in the cultural practices of new world Africans.² Etymologically loyal, African Diaspora is not necessarily very queer. Diaspora, from the Greek, meaning the scattering of seed or sperm is classically patriarchal, and impossibly patrilineal. Diaspora is the name for an assumption that despite the disruption of a desired linearity, *Africa survives*. The study of the African Diaspora, conceived within a pan-african political movement, is the pursuit of an impossible lineage.³ While the search for Africanisms, or African survivals in diaspora seeks to create a natural Blackness, I would suggest that this is a contradiction. For Africa to survive at all in the Americas is a queer thing.

As Critical Black Diaspora theorists such as Saidiya Hartman, point out, in order to study the events in the trajectory of the so-called African Diaspora one must inhabit a catalogue of literal and social death.⁴ *Black* diaspora studies as a critical departure from African diaspora studies, notices that something called “Blackness” exists, but every

² On *african survivals*: George Shepperson, “Pan-Africanism and pan-Africanism: Some Historical Notes,” *Phylon* 23 (winter 1962); 346-58 and George Shepperson “The African Abroad or the African Diaspora,” in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. T.O. Ranger. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968. Kamau Braithwaite. *Roots*. Havana: Casa de las Americas Ediciones, 1986. Sterling Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

On African Survivals in Language Practice: Lorenzo Dow Turner. *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949. And Beryl Bailey. *Jamaican Creole Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

³ Brent Edwards “The Uses of Diaspora.” *Social Text* 66, Vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 2001. Edwards is also in conversation with James Clifford. “Diasporas” in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, August, 1994), 302-338.

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Transatlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

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description of Black in this context translates into the opposite of survival.⁵ Like the Jewish diaspora, Black diasporicity is a series of dispossessions, displacements and attempted and successful mass murders. As I understand it, diaspora is the expendability of a people, an unpeopling of a population, an enforced likelihood of not only social, but cultural death.⁶ Critical Black Diaspora Theorists (like feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick and feminist historian Tina Campt) use diaspora as the name of a rival space and time in which (we hope) the imposition of Blackness in a western lexicon as the space and time of death, can be undone.⁷ I interpret Critical Black Diaspora studies as a litany for survival, queerly undoing and redoing the meanings of space and time towards this instant and this triumph.

Centering the lives of Black women and responding to the embodied, economic, violence that is diaspora, the ongoing life of slavery. is not a simple act within the discourse of diaspora theory. Whereas much contemporary critical Black diaspora theory starts from Paul Gilroy's heuristic of the Black Atlantic, which centers a masculine narrative of mobility and modernity, I center the stillness, entrapment and tradition often imposed on the bodies and labor of Black women with the counter-heuristic the Black Feminine Domestic.⁸ Whereas Gilroy emphasizes a fluid geography, over which men and ideas move, it is the actual bodily fluids, blood, sweat and

⁵Sharon Holland. *Raising the Dead: Readings in Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

⁶ Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. See also Alexis Pauline Gumbs. "Dear Ma..Comère: A Blue Airmail Letter" in *Macmère* 8 (2006) 21-34. In order to make this almost sleek can I refer to the definition of diaspora that I set forth in *MaComere* or at least in the later chapter on diasporic reports. I distinguish here between "diaspora" in the Black and Jewish cases and not in the nation vs. transnational (Ghanaian diaspora for example which traces back to a specific place). In this sense...Palestinian and North American populations can be understood to be diasporic to the extent that imposed nationalisms (the State of Israel and the United States of America) have displaced them on their own land masses through the violence of settler colonialism.

⁷ Katherine McKittrick. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Tina Campt. "The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation," in *Radical History Review* Issue 82 (Spring 2002): 94-113.

⁸ See also Alexis Pauline Gumbs. "The Black Feminine Domestic: A Counter-Heuristic Exercise in Falling Apart." in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 13.2, October 2009, 1-26.

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embryonic fluids that ground what I call the discourse of the Black feminine domestic in a violent economy. In fact the messy implications of sexual and reproductive labor mark the limits of Gilroy’s heuristic and his argument in *The Black Atlantic*. In his characterization of slavery, Gilroy chooses to elaborate on the case of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who was jailed for killing her own baby daughter when slave catchers came to return the family to slavery. This is a complicated story, a bloody story, and Garner and her abolitionist supporter Lucy Stone suggest that is the knowledge that under slavery her daughter would inevitably be vulnerable to rape that in part influences her decision to kill her baby girl. Gilroy points out “These stories raise complex questions about the mediating role of gender categories in racial politics and in particular about the psychological structures of identification facilitated by the idea of maternity. It is impossible to explore these important matters here.”⁹ It is telling that it would take Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* to fully explore this historical event because Black women writers, have used fiction as a strategy to represent the missing subject position that inspires my articulation of the Black Feminine Domestic. It is not until *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* that Gilroy explicitly examines the role of gender in the production of the nation, at the point where he intends to transcend not only nation, but also race. “Gender differences become extremely important in nation-building activity because they are a sign of an irresistible natural hierarchy that belongs at the center of civic life,” he explains. And he goes on to assert that “The integrity of a nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity. In fact, it can be a nation only if the correct version of gender hierarchy has been established and

⁹ Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, 68.

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reproduced.”¹⁰ However the same gender hierarchies, demonstrated by priority and exclusion, characterize Gilroy’s intervention to the extent that his critique depends on his own reproduction of modernity. For example, in *Against Race* Gilroy argues that the rise of the genomic age has made the embodied reproduction of race irrelevant, again moving away from the messy bodily fluids and the relationship between “blood” and race to create an increasingly fluid idea of race (or the lack thereof). This celebration of the genomic as a disembodiment of the race category depends on the elision of the racialized woman as a site of reproduction of both the embodiment and the idea of race. Arguing that because DNA has made the body of Black figures such as Michael Jordan “infinitely penetrable” due to the modern technology of the genome and photoshop race is no longer living in the body, Gilroy forgets that actual racial domination and reproduction already function through the violence of penetration on feminized bodies.¹¹ I would argue that Saartje Baartman, kidnapped and transformed into the Venus Hottentott, whose genitals were examined during and after her short life, during their shelf life in a jar in a French museum, was already “infinitely penetrable” without the aid of genomic and computer-age technology. But Gilroy must obscure this earlier penetration in order to make an argument that is “new.” And I characterize my analysis as following Gilroy, and embracing Gilroy because even Gilroy sees the limits of the construct of the Black Atlantic and what he can do within it. The work of examining maternity, and gender dynamics is “impossible to do here” which may be a statement of geographic failure, or may be the hailing of a different type of critical subject. Even Brent Edwards, in his critique of the gendered limitations of the construction of diaspora studies admits:

¹⁰ Paul Gilroy. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, 127.

¹¹ Ibid, 23.

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Unfortunately, even in scholarship whose specific goal is to sketch a “Black Atlantic” imaginary, there is little attempt to consider not just the way Black women travel, but more important, the ways the ideological uses and abuses of gender always undergird any articulation of diaspora—the ways evocations of Black populations elsewhere are always shaped by the representation of reproduction.

Brent Edwards leaves the examination he marks as an unreachable edge, the receding unstable the shoreline.¹² An extended elsewhere. But I say, this is a place to stand. This dissertation’s examination of the implications of Black mothering as authority operate in this rival landscape, the deep dark Black feminine domestic required by a nightmare Atlantic.

The Shoreline: Queer Futurism

Queer Theory, like Critical Black Diaspora studies is increasingly anti-identitarian. But whereas diaspora becomes more the study of an ontology condition than a geographic framework, queerness, Elizabeth Povinelli and Judith Halberstam insist, is anti-ontological.¹³ My demarcation of Queer Futurism as a shoreline is in part provoked by Lee Edelman’s argument that the appropriate queer stance is one in which there is “No Future.” Essentially Edelman encourages us to acquiesce to the “cover story” that equates queer behavior with death and destruction in much the same ways that the “cover stories” we will investigate in Chapter 1: The Danger of Black Maternity equate Black maternity with death and destruction. My intention is to discover whether there might be an intergenerationality that interrupts the naturalization of both procreative and social reproduction. Queer theorists of color such as Jose Munoz argue

¹² Brent Edwards. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 133.

¹³ cite the public talk by halberstam and Povinelli

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against Edelman that queer politics must be radically futurist because of the dire unacceptability of the present political situation, especially for queer people of color. But even these queer utopianists (or anti-anti-utopianists as Judith Halberstam says) shy away from the complexities of birth and the presumed heteronormativity of intergenerationality.¹⁴ I am interested in looking at two rhetorically impossible claims “Black maternity” and “queer intergenerationality” together because they offer a rival model of production, interrupting a development timeline with the possibility for a radically transformed society that their respective “cover stories” would beg us forget.

The Black feminist literary practitioners that inspire this project were at once included in, excluded from and amputated by Black cultural nationalist and white feminist movements because their deviant sexual positionality was not useful for a Black nation or a multi-cultural liberal sisterhood, because of their inability or refusal to reproduce properly. These particular literary producers were not committed to recuperating the patronymic patriarchal family structure that Black nationalism invested in, nor were they properly invested in the category of “woman” as a universal property on which the feminism of the time relied. Because of their inability or refusal to reproduce properly (to reproduce the properties of race and gender), these Black feminist literary producers engaged in a critical revision of family, a radical anti-imperialism and a socialist experimentalism. And as Cathy Cohen has argued in the context of the neoliberal dismantling of welfare the position of the pathologized Black mother must be seen as a queer positionality:

As we stand on the verge of watching those in power dismantle the welfare system through a process of demonizing the poor and young—primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom have existed for their entire lives outside the white, middle-class heterosexual norm—we have to ask if these

¹⁴ José Muñoz. “Crusing the Toilet: Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity.” GLQ 13:2-3, 353-368.

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women do not fit into society’s categories of marginal, deviant, and “queer.”¹⁵

I want to add that this position in critical tension with capitalist ideas of family is also a position out of time with the clock of development that used the same progress narrative deploy welfare reform domestically and structural adjustment policies internationally. For all of these reasons these Black feminist literary producers inhabited the queer threat of the pathologized Black mother. She who refuses to reproduce *property* reveals a dangerous desire for something different. She who refuses to reproduce *properly* bears the mark of the alternative, the mark of the criminal, the mark of the terrorist. She who refuses to reproduce property must be busy teaching us something else. She who refuses to reproduce the status quo threatens to produce a radically different world.

The Black feminist literary figures that led and epitomized this practice were lesbian and bisexual radicals such as Audre Lorde and June Jordan who are now historicized as queer ancestors.¹⁶ Cherrie Moraga, for example, recently proclaimed that Black lesbian feminists such as Lorde, Pat Parker and June Jordan, gave lesbians like her, “a body, a queer body in the original dangerous, unambivalent sense of the word, a dyke body that could not be domesticized by middle class american aspirations.”¹⁷ In the language provided by Moraga as well as Jose Munoz, Judith Halberstam and Carla Freccero, I am proposing that the invocation of Black maternity as an alternative to genocide in the period between 1968-1996 required the production of a queer time and

¹⁵ Cathy Cohen. “Bulldaggers, Punks and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly Vol. 3 Issue 4 1997.

¹⁶ See, for example, the Audre Lorde Project, a center for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit people of color organizing in New York City (www.alp.org) or Zami an organization of “lesbians of African descent” in Atlanta or National Black Justice Coalition (an organization committed to the legal rights of Black non-heterosexual people) feature of June Jordan on Day 1 of their Black history campaign.

¹⁷ Cherrie Moraga at “Sister Comrade” a celebration of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker at the First Congregational Church in Oakland, California on November 3rd. 2007.

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space within which Black women and young people could operate as co-producers in a future radically different from their present.¹⁸

Like Muñoz, in order to queer temporality, I look to the work of Judith Halberstam, as I examine the queer times and spaces of the queer Black mothering in Black feminist literary practice. According to Halberstam in her 2005 *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, queer time is what happens outside of the reproductive capitalist form of time organized through the inheritance of property and the assumption of patriarchal reproduction, and physical longevity.¹⁹ Focusing on the literary work of Black lesbian and bisexual feminist literary actors who had no access to inherited property or stable jobs, raised children outside of patriarchal structures, and faced terminal illnesses which banished their assumption of their own longevity, this dissertation needs a queer understanding of time, measuring the lives of the remains of these actors past their biological death and the other forms of death (out of print books, lost initiatives) that would place them out of time. Halberstam goes on to argue that queer temporality brings queer spatiality with it, pointing out that one can see the existence of queer time in queer spaces. Queer spaces are produced by queer practices and the existence of queer subcultures and alternative publics.²⁰ I argue that the classrooms, publishing initiatives and texts of these Black feminist literary practitioners were queer spaces that they created in order to project their energy, views and concerns past their “here and now” despite the fact that neither they nor their literary projects had direct access to longevity. Their behavior in these spaces was diasporic, built on a concept that transcended the concepts of nationalism and embracing the scattered

¹⁸ See Judith Halberstam in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York: NYU Press, 2005) and Jose Munoz “Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism” b(forthcoming).

¹⁹ Judith Halberstan. *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press, 2005, 6.

²⁰ Ibid.

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ontologies of their lives and their political concerns. Therefore these figures also engaged in the queer practice of articulating Black feminist diasporic solidarity at an untimely moment of US imperialism and in unlikely spaces like *Essence*, a mainstream Black women’s fashion magazine. The factors of space and time are therefore crucial to the queer practice of this dissertation, requiring the invocation of Lorde’s “shoreline” a queer time and place which gathers and hails those who “cannot afford the passing dreams of choice.”

The Shoreline: Is Not an Intersection

The shoreline is an organizing metaphor in this dissertation which describes the spatial and temporal position of the subject matter as well as the approach I will use to engage the topic of Black feminist literary historiography. The shoreline is a queer place, more than marginal, the shoreline erodes, it is the contested limit of the nation-state, the place where the refugee stands, where the land erodes, where elements live, where the wind howls the loudest. The shoreline also reveals a queer and repetitive time, lunar and recurring with difference and cycles, but no clear progression. The shoreline, useful as a metaphor that signifies the shifting ground of identification and political practice, is useful to contemporary activists who address multiple issues. I choose to follow Lorde’s invocation of the shoreline, instead of the spatial categories of the margin or the intersection because of the queer diasporic beckoning of the shore, the Caribbeanist motivation of my study of Jordan and Lorde in particular and because using the shoreline as a heuristic allows me to think critically about the legacies and limitations of the categories of intersection and margin that have been so instructive in anti-oppressive theoretical work.

Sebastian Margaret, a genderqueer disability activist who organizes around access and power, critiques the way that intersectionality is usually framed as some

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collection of “Tupperware boxes” and instead argues for an understanding of multiplicity that resembles the tide, particular issues move to the foreground and others move to the background depending on the particular facet of oppression a multiply oppressed person is experiencing or responding to proactively.²¹ In other words, the ground that we stand on shifts, which is also a diasporic concern, highlighting the way that displacement, the violence of dispersal and queer relationships to the hegemony of the nation make the boundaries of political units and identities unstable.

I argue that here, at the shoreline, where space and time are stolen, we are in need of a robust and transformative redefinition of survival. This dissertation inhabits the dead, live and haunting remains of Black lesbian and bisexual feminists Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alexis DeVeaux and Barbara Smith for all of us, this instant, and this triumph.

For those of us who are practicing a different kind of mothering, in childcare collectives and non-patriarchal families, as radical doulas and midwives, the period of experimentation between 1968-1996 by anti-capitalist anti-imperialist Black feminists offers alternative theories of home through the anthology *HomeGirls*, and June Jordan’s anti-imperialist collections of poetry *Living Room*; alternative theories of domesticated labor through June Jordan and Alexis DeVeaux’s elaboration of “poetry as housework,” in *Essence*; alternative ideas of family through Audre Lorde’s articles on “lesbian parenting” and “mothering ourselves” and each other, especially relevant in a time period of economic shift when, similar to the Reagan era, funding for community services like housing, welfare, healthcare and education are declared bankrupt while massive amounts of state money goes towards military invasions and private sector bailouts.

²¹ Sebastian Margaret at “Intertwined” a workshop sponsored by Southerners on New Ground, April 22, 2009, Durham, North Carolina.

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For those of us who are organizing to end violence against women of color in the face of mass media vilification of survivors, the forgotten strategies of these Black feminists, who organized against police brutality, rape, domestic violence and womanslaughter are important to remember as we too stand on the constant edges of decision built by legal practices designed to criminalize self-defense by oppressed people while downplaying the severity of crimes that draw on the logics of racial violence like noose-hangings, gang rapes, truck draggings and the kidnapping and torture of women of color.²²

For those of us determined to teach the world open, to instigate the unlearning of oppression and nurture the growth of livable, loving logics, the pedagogical experimentation and faith of these Black feminist professors, and community workshop facilitators can impact what, how and if we teach in university classrooms and in our communities in the age of what radical feminists of color are now calling the Academic Industrial Complex.²³

For those of us who write, read and live the poetic as a radical practice of collaborative creation²⁴, these Black feminist poets offer an intergenerational archive

²² On the Jena Six case when Black children were charged with attempted murder in a schoolyard fight instigated by the hanging of nooses from a tree on public school property: <http://colorofchange.org/jena/message.html> accessed January 25, 2010. On the New Jersey 4 case when young Black lesbians were charged with attempted murder after defending themselves from a racist and homophobic attacker: http://www.racewire.org/archives/2007/06/black_lesbians_in_nyc_get_11_y_1.html accessed January 25, 2010. On the Megan Williams case where a young Black woman was held captive and tortured for weeks by 6 white assailants: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/09/11/woman.tortured/index.html> accessed January, 25th 2010. On the 1998 Texas truck dragging lynching: <http://www.cnn.com/US/9807/06/dragging.death.02/index.html> accessed January 25, 2010 and a similar more recent lynching in Paris, Texas in 2008: <http://jessemuhammad.blogs.finalcall.com/2008/10/jasper-style-lynching-reporting-on.html> accessed January, 25th, 2010.

²³ For example see the language of the Campus Lockdown: Women of Color and the Academic Industrial Complex Conference at University of Michigan. (woclockdown.org—site expired, referenced at <http://greaterdetroit.wordpress.com/2008/02/29/campus-lockdown-tenure-for-andrea-smith/> viewed January 25th 2010)

²⁴ Here I depend on Sylvia Wynter’s definition of the poetic as that which creates new relationships between human beings, each other and their environment by seeking (and failing) to describe what those relationships

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with which to engage as readers and practitioners of poetry, generating a definition of poetry that turns the (re)production of language into life itself and an intervention into the practice of form that offers alternative forms of sociality and possibility for all of us.

For those of us who hold out foolish hope that our borrowed time in universities need neither kill our spirits nor tame our vision, I offer this critical literary work itself as a model of intergenerational practice, a method of engagement and survival full of faith, love and poetic falling apart as an intervention into what we mean by scholarship and where that ship should take us. This is spiritual work, an offering made of love. For all of us.

Which means this is critical in more ways than one.

(We were never meant to survive.)

*And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in morning.
-from Litany for Survival*

And for this reason (we were never meant to survive) this critical work of love is also filled with fear. Fear is the primary text. Fear is the instigator of this archive. Every word examined here was born in a context of fear. Fear that the violence would never stop, fear that the resistance would be forgotten, fear that words would never be enough. But they decided it was better to speak. And to write.

Fear is legible in the starts, spaces and premature endings all over this document. Fear wakes me up, puts me to sleep and tugs at my typing fingers. There must be more emails to check. There must be something else to do right now. I am afraid to write this,

could be, beyond objectification, in a manner that is disruptive of the product to product relationship of capitalism in “Ethno or Socio Peetic” in *Alcheringa...*

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to right this wrong. I am afraid to be this intimate with the death that surrounds me, afraid to be accountable to the sacrifices that enable me to live a life that includes a project and a process like this. I am afraid of the uses and co-optations these words will undergo once turned over to an academic industrial complex that has killed and dispossessed so many of my loved ones already. Fear is readable, a shadow document present with every word. And the writer is haunted.

*For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line at the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
-from Litany for Survival*

If fear can be “imprinted” on our bodies, marking our danger and our deviance in languages of race, queerness and terror, there must be such a thing as embodied writing. In this project I revise a tendency in African American literary theory and the spoken word poetry movement to reconnect abject bodies to the potential of the word through a reclamation of orality I argue that the body is not only spoken. It is also written. This project has been nurtured and fed by conversations, interviews and spoken advice and invokes poems, speeches and lesson-plans that were sometimes written to be spoken. Further, I have read almost every text discussed here out-loud passionately to or with someone. However, this project also depends on texts that only survive in out-of-print books, notes for projects that no one remembers, and letters written by dead speakers who couldn't afford their telephone bills while they were alive.²⁵ I insist in this project

²⁵ June Jordan Manuscript Archives. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University: Box 85 Folder 1, Dec 15th 1977 letter from *Chrysalis* about not being able to reach Jordan by phone. Box 85, Folder 2 August 2nd 1978 letter from Alexis De Veaux about not being able to reach Jordan by phone. Box 86, Folder 7, February 7th 1975 letter from New York Telephone about reconnecting her phone which was disconnected for failure of payment.

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that the words left and found that make up the archive of this project are bodily remains even if they lived only in the pressure of hands on pens and typewriters, even if they never inhabited a mouth.

The danger of the words studied here is that they are bodily, they live, produce and disrupt. One danger of these words is that they might be spoken, shaking the lies that silence them in the moment, but the further danger of these words is that they might *survive*, they might remember and be remembered. They might become intergenerational. The further danger is that I might have access to those words and use them now. We were never meant to survive. Memory is the last(ing) danger. And when these dangerous words survive, they survive in writing. These four Black feminists and many more, under attack, wrote to survive.

A Black feminist reading of *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida’s theory of writing, shows us that writing is the specter of deviance in language. Derrida examines Sassure’s privileging of the spoken word as the true language, superior to the written word and attributes Sassure’s evaluation to a desire for autoproduktivity and complete authority. If language is divine it must be pure, in the air. Pure language must be free from the danger of materiality. Writing, the bodily, formed, dark reflection of the spoken word, for Sassure, must always be derivative. Just like Thomas Jefferson’s belief that Phillis Wheatley cannot be a poet, only a parrot, Sassure believes that writing can only mimic the purity of spoken language.²⁶ To be clear, I am not attributing Sassure’s anxiety about the purity of language to a racialized panic, but I am developing a Black feminist theory of writing in which, as Hortense Spillers explains, oppression is inscribed

²⁶ See Jefferson’s famous declaration in his 1781 text *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “religion could produce a Phillis Wheatley but it could not produce a poet.”

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and engendered on the flesh of enslaved Africans in America.²⁷ If the body itself becomes an inscription, writing, in its dangerous materiality, can be imagined to be linked to that most dangerous of bodies in the American lexicon, the deviant Black(ened) feminized/masculinized body, imagined to produce further Blackness that must be tamed and cannot be.

One could say that Saussure, in his theory of pure language, wants the word to have a dependable father, a stable lineage, towards the dream of one author, who could be pointed to as the owner of his speech. Writing is dangerous because it is Black, deviant, bodily, unpredictable, diasporic. Who knows what will happen with those words once they materialize, when they can travel so far from the father-speaker. They could mean anything. Black feminist anti-capitalist anti-imperialist writing is a further danger in Saussure’s proto-dream of extreme intellectual property, because Black women are not supposed to have authority to begin with.²⁸ Derrida’s definition of writing insists that language is not stable, neither in production nor in circulation, but is unpredictably (re)produced in play, coproduced in social use, surviving and remaking itself through the necessary tension of difference. In the hands of these diasporic Black feminist theorists of difference, intergenerationality and futurity, Saussure’s desire for pure language is as impossible and useless as Moynihan’s desire for a Black patriarchal imitation. Mama’s baby, Papa’s maybe. In their work as writers, teachers and anti-capitalist publishers Lorde, Jordan, DeVaux and Smith show us that language is not owned, it is not even inheritable, though the desire of power will continue to pretend that it is, and will continue to buy and sell it. So dark. So deviant. Write it down: Language is co-mothered, shaped and reshaped in community, a constant reminder that the transition

²⁷ See Hortense Spillers. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in Winson Napier ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

²⁸ See chapter 2 on Black Maternity and Authority for an extended historicization of racial and gendered meanings of authority and maternity from 1666 to 1970.

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from the maternal to the material, from person into property is never fully successful, and assimilation is not achievable. Writing is visible, Black waves against white context. Language is necessary only because difference persists and writing is the reminder, here, at the shoreline.

And that is the scary thing. I did not inherit, cannot own, cannot master the archive over which I am expected to demonstrate mastery in this dissertation. To pretend to do so is a lie, complicit with the narrative of power and destructive of the poetic definition of survival Lorde, Jordan, DeVaux and Smith demand. Who is this Black mother and how does she survive? Where is she waiting in the fears reproduced and imposed on my body? *Learning to be afraid with our mother's milk*. What are her demands on me? What is the fate of my desire towards her? This archive is not a possession. It is a jealous and demanding mother, queer goddess. And I am possessed. This work is for those of us who reject self-mastery and risk the radical dispossession that is possession.²⁹

The material I am working with here is a maternal trace (not an inherited property) that scares me to death. And has made me obsessed with the deaths of people like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Claudia Jones, Barbara Christian, Nellie McKay, Elizabeth Amelia Hadley, Octavia Butler, Gloria Anzaldua and more. The relationship between the maternal and the material here is more complex than the fact that my period of study centers the year of my birth or that I have found my birth mother hidden where I wasn't looking for her in the first generation of Black Women's Studies courses on college campuses and on the staff of *Essence Magazine*. The relationship between the maternal and the material for me is a question about why and how everything that Black women create is criminalized, even by white feminists, even by Black nationalists, even

²⁹ This recasting of “possession” depends on M. Jacqui Alexander's work in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, discussed in detail at the end of this essay.

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by mainstream Black media outlets and an answer that says everything Black women create is intentionally and unintentionally queer. The relationship between the maternal and the material for me is a question about how and why I was produced, by a series of given and chosen mothers and by a society that refuses my existence anyway. I am that thing, made by and of and as Black woman that was never meant to survive. Black feminist literary, scholarly and social production is a doomed materialism. The materials that make this study possible are literally barely salvaged from trashcans, archived by herculean efforts that almost didn't happen. The materialism of this project is intimate with death, not merely because half of the figures featured here died early, but more importantly because the dominant narratives of the publishing industry, the academic machine and the neoliberal state are designed to kill their products and erase the possibility of the rival mode of production that mothered this work. This project takes the myth of the crack baby as a literary question and examines how, when and if it is possible to be produced as an incompatible subject, incapable of survival, and what memory of that melancholic production remains. A deadly maternal trace. Thus the fear and the urgency and hyperbole of this project. This project takes seriously the ability of a powerful fictional narrative to compel belief despite contradiction. In the contemporary moment a government that claims to not have enough money to respond to natural disasters or fund education programs produces 700 billion dollars to bail out private banks. The neoliberal state is a fiction that compels our belief, because capitalism is the primary social teacher for how to understand the contemporary world. Instead of a counternarrative, this project seeks to produce a poetic and pedagogical intervention. What happens when the object(ified) lesson, the queer(ed)Black mother, becomes the teacher? What happens if we inhabit the questions and experiments of these maligned and dangerous teachers? What can we learn about the social reproduction of racism and

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capitalism through the excluded, or tokenized work of those troublemaking teachers, poets and interdependent publishers who sought to produce something else? This dissertation asserts that dominant narratives reproduce our social world everyday, but we will remake it by remembering, and enacting the queer survival of a poetic difference in our reading.

This project is haunted. There is birth somewhere here. There is ink and blood and halted breathing all up in here waiting. There is a history to be invented and time to be stolen. There are ghosts reading this over my shoulder. There is death somewhere, here. I hope the reader is a little bit afraid right now to even be in this queer diasporic unwieldy audience of people who may or may not buy books but who certainly steal breaths that none of us have been promised.

We were never meant to survive.

Welcome home.