

Finding Home: Black Queer Historical Scholarship in the United States Part I

On April 17, 2017, the *New Yorker Magazine* published a review of Rosalind Rosenberg's biography of Pauli Murray titled *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (2017). Written by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Kathryn Shultz, the review enthusiastically analyzes the exhaustive biography of the Baltimore, Maryland-born Durham, North Carolina-raised woman of African descent's multifaceted life: her career as a lawyer, activist and Episcopal Priest; her organizational work including as a founding member of the National Organization for Women and the Congress of Racial Equality; as well as her intellectual contributions which include critical theorizations of gender and racial discrimination (Rosenberg, 2017). For Schultz however, it is Murray's "private struggles" with gender identity as well as "her public struggles on behalf of women,

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minorities, and the working class” that spurs recent interest her life.

“Historical figures,” she argues “aren’t human flotsam, swirling into public awareness at random intervals. Instead they are almost always born back to us on the current of our own times.” Schutzl’s formulation of history (and historical memory) as linear and progressive underline her assertion that Murray’s “struggles” prove instructive for present-day manifestations of sexism and racism, as well as the greater visibility of transgender and non-binary communities.¹

Such unidirectional currents about gender and sexuality are not the only oceanic formations to appear within considerations of black queer history. In her important essay “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage” literary scholar Omise’eke Natasha

¹ Rosenberg characterizes Murray as someone who- if born in a later period- might embrace a transgender identity and masculine pronouns. Her biographer, however, adopts the various terms Murray used to describe herself over a lifetime, and uses feminine pronouns. Rosenberg writes “to use male pronouns for someone assigned female at birth in a time when that was not culturally possible, or gender-neutral pronouns when, even to this day, no consensus exists on what those pronouns should be, I concluded, would undercut the immensity of the struggle in which Murray was engaged and the significance of her contributions.” (Rosenberg, 2017, xvii).

Tinsley mobilizes “cross-currents” as a way of thinking about the historical relationship between blackness and queerness at the origin of black diasporic experience: the Middle Passage. Using an “unconventional and imaginative archive” of academic theorizing and literature, Tinsley calls for analytical frameworks that allow for the possibility of same-sex intimacies in the holds of the slave ship, albeit not “to clarify, to tell a documentable story of Atlantic, Caribbean, Immigrant or ‘gay’ pasts.” Rather, this shift in vision encourages a recognition of the concurrent historical existence of “brutality and desire, genocide and resistance,” aboard the slave ship as a way “to view hybrid, resistant subjectivities-opaquely, not transparently.” (Tinsley, 2008, 199)

Currents and cross-currents. I begin with these watery movements because they raise a number of questions about scholarly interrogations of blackness and queerness in United States history: what is revealed

when one places histories of black racial formation alongside histories of non-normative sexualities (and same-sex sexualities in particular)? To what extent has a desire to identify queer forbears and consider their lives/labors as models for the present informed scholarly inquiries? What is the transformative potential of centering black queer lives in historical narratives about political, social and cultural movements in the United States? How do scholars navigate the limits of traditional archives while continuing to consult these spaces for “knowledge”? Have scholars adopted particular analytical frameworks for writing about sexual/ gender subjectivities in earlier moments that confound binaries, categorization, “evidentiary” frameworks and even naming?²

² Throughout the essay, I deploy various terms to refer to African American individuals and communities who may have engaged in same-sex sex, intimacies, gender non-conformity and/or identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, same-gender loving or some other category. Most often, I refer to these communities/ persons as “black queer.” Other terms litter this essay including: sexual and/or gender transgressors, sexual and/or gender nonconformity to designate individuals whose private intimacies and/or public presentation (clothing, mannerisms, behavior, etc.) was not perceived to correspond with prevailing societal norms in a given historical moment. I acknowledge that many historical actors may not have used these particular words/ terms/ concepts to describe themselves.

This essay surveys prominent themes, topics and methods of black queer histories. Although varied in scope and method, these works share two broad concerns. First, these works chronicle how people of African descent understood, articulated and expressed various forms of sexual and gender difference, with a particular focus on same-sex intimacies and gender transgression.³ Second, many of these works analyze the intersections of queerness and blackness as concepts of non-normativity (in medical texts, literature/performance, popular culture, political rhetoric, etc.). In this essay, I most often use the term “queer” as a broad term for intimacies, subjectivities and ways of being increasingly associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender constituencies during the second half of the twentieth century. However, the term’s call for the destabilization of categories of identification and exposure of the process

³ These behaviors were associated with homosexuality around the turn of the twentieth century.

of normalization that marks some bodies/behaviors as normal and others as deviant animates much of the cited scholarship. These works employ a wide range of methods and move between/ within various (inter)disciplinary “homes” - including history, literary studies, sociology, cultural studies, black queer studies, performance studies, critical race theory, and black feminist theory.ⁱ

Essay 1 of this survey considers various “origin points” of black queer histories. These “origins points” include: intellectual and political genealogies, challenges and responses to the creation of black queer histories (including erasure, (re) constitution of evidence and methods), considerations of “visibility” as a frameworks for “finding” black queer subjects, and two early temporal intersections of blackness and queerness: the sexual economies of American slavery and turn of the Twentieth Century discourses and urban spaces. Essay II charts the

(largely) scholarly landscape, identifying four topical areas: Black “Lesbian” Histories, Histories of Gender Transgression, Black Class Status and Histories of Belonging, and Communal/ Political Formations. Space, time and the increasing volume of work do not permit me to cite or discuss every work that addresses various historical intersections of blackness. I offer this essay, rather, as a point of entry into this growing area of inquiry.

Genealogies, Method, and the Desire for Recovery.

“Nature,” author Jewell Gomez notes “abhors a vacuum and there is a distinct gap in the picture where the Black Lesbian should be.”

Although written in 1983, Gomez’s characterization of black lesbian invisibility applied to scholarly, artistic and popular representations of black LGBTQ communities. (Gomez, 1983, 122). Such an absence prompted Gomez and other black lesbian/gay culture workers of the

1970s, 1980s and 1990s to lovingly (re)construct histories and narratives that would - to quote Gomez again- “create a...record that is placed in a historical perspective so that we, who have been lost in the shadows of the past, can be revealed and appreciated for the powerful legacy we bear.” (Gomez, 1983, 122) Memoirs like Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, literary analyses by Akasha (Gloria) Hull, fiction like *Loving Her* by Ann Allen Shockley, and cinematic works like Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* stand as critical cultural forms of documenting and imagining a black queer history.⁴

The gap- although diminishing- persists. There continues to be, as Robert Reid-Pharr notes, “many places at which it is difficult if not

⁴ The importance of history in black gay and lesbian cultural production is an important antecedent for black queer historical scholarship. For a few important analyses about historical memory and black gay/lesbian cultural production see: Matt Richardson. (2013). *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press. Eric Darnell Pritchard. (2017). *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

impossible to answer basic questions about history and ideology, practice and attitude.” (Reid-Pharr, 2005, 1) Homophobia and racism (past and present) fuel the exclusion of black queer perspectives from archival holdings and finding aids. Too, the possibility that- to quote historian Michele Mitchell- “certain subjects are avoided [by scholars] because they have been deemed either dangerous or damaging” by African Americanists lingers. (Mitchell, 1999, p. 434) Assumptions of black heterosexuality, equations between queerness and whiteness, and the belief in the ubiquity of homophobia within black communities engenders scholarly myopia.

Many black queer histories act as distributaries of U.S. LGBT History and African American History Fields, departing and disrupting prominent narratives and assumptions. The presumed whiteness of LGBTQ subjectivities/ communities and politics is one critical intervention.

As Allan Bérubé notes, the racial homogeneity of many gay political institutions in the post-World War II period, notes - “created a powerful camouflage of the presence of race woven from a web of unquestioned beliefs- that gay whiteness is unmarked and unremarkable, universal and representative, powerful and protective, a cohesive bond” (Bérubé, 2001, p. 206). This “unmarked”-ness and the profound underrepresentation of people of color in archival collections marked as LGBTQ facilitates the failure of taking up issues of race (including a sustained analysis of whiteness) into account. Such underrepresentation may reflect both racism within gay/lesbian institutions as well as other ways of black queer social organization that de-centered “coming out” as a central strategy. As Marlon Ross suggests, a “continuum of knowing” with black communities about gender and sexual transgression along with other factors may have “culturally variant” forms of identification. This

provocation will continue to inspire studies of black queer life that centers both a politics of recognition and other ways of being (Ross, 2005, p. 181).

Black queer histories also challenge assumptions of black heterosexuality and archival silences about particular intimate matters. The latter has multiple origin points, including the assumed ubiquity of two theoretical frameworks within African American historiography. As Mitchell notes, the politics of respectability – with its emphasis on contemporary propriety as a form of resistance to white supremacist narratives of black sexual depravity (Higginbotham, 1993) – and the culture of dissemblance – in which black women in particular kept their intimate lives (especially experiences of sexual violence) from public scrutiny (Hine, 1989) – are crucial forms of resistance to racial terrorism and discrimination. Creators of black queer histories not only challenge

the assumed prevalence of these strategies but have nuanced scholarly understandings about the operation and deployment of these particular strategies in the past.

Archivists, activists and scholars adopt a range of approaches to address the very tangible dearth of archival evidence. Method is one important response. Creative analytical methods include read primary sources for the voices/ perspectives of the most marginal, incorporate literary and cultural analysis, and seek sexual/gender transgression in prominent/obscure archival collections. The creation of black LGBT/Queer archives is another crucial response to silence. Archival/oral history initiatives include but are not limited to: the In the Life Archive (curated by Stephen G. Fullwood, Schomburg Center for Research on Black Life), the Black Queer Mobile Homecoming Project (collected by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Julia Roxanne Wallace), the community- directed Queer

History Newark project, and the African American AIDS Activism Oral History Project (collected by historian Dan Royles). These (and forthcoming) collections are rich foam from which various historically-minded projects about black queer subjectivities will surely emerge.

In addition to addressing archival silence(s), a few scholars identify black queer legibility as an important theoretical consideration. By black queer legibility, I refer both to the ways in which individuals engaged in same-sex intimacies and gender transgression articulated/ understood their identities (based upon race, class, gender, sexuality, region and space) and how other constituencies discern those identities. Engaging with Marlon Ross' suggestion of "culturally variant" ways of being within black queer communities, this (il)legibility appears in multiple realms – the archive, popular memory and even black queer communal politics. Remembering his childhood in Manchester, Georgia in the 1970s,

sociologist Roderick Ferguson argues that black rural “sissies” in his small community “ceased to be peculiar men” to their neighbors during the late 1970s and 1980s, instead becoming “pariahs who had to be identified and excluded.” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 192). Reverberations of the “civil rights [movement], the Christian Right and modern homosexuality,” he asserts, required racial, ideological and behavioral uniformity that marginalized “black rural sissies” who adopted diverse presentations and articulations of self. In an overlapping time but different place, historian Kwame Holmes argues that the material conditions for identity-based political visibility (including access to public and private space to preserve archival material) which were not as readily available for black queer residents of post-World War II Washington D.C shaped the development of black gay politics/memory in that city. He calls on scholars to consider the role of “gossip” and “rumor” as critical forms of contemporary political

community and a potential archive (Holmes, 2016). Performance studies scholar Jeffrey McCune theorizes that a historical practice of “sexual discretion” which allows some black folk to “negotiate between the acceptable and unacceptable, the respectable and disrespectable,” to exert “agency under the constraints of surveillance” should shape how we understand varied articulations of black sexual subjectivities past and present (McCune, 2014, p. 8). Importantly, Kevin Mumford offers a somewhat different understanding of black queer legibility. In *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis*, Kevin Mumford argues that during the 1970s and 1980s, black gay men increasingly embraced a “politics of recognition” in which they “chose to speak up against injustice and [articulate] why they needed to come out to remake black gay history,” (Mumford, 2016, p. 6). The question of black queer legibility – its implications of political organizing,

community building, subjectivities and more – is an important one that future work should continue to interrogate.

Origin Stories

“Black culture and history,” scholar Matt Richardson notes, “are already always imbued with queerness,” (Richardson, 2013, p. 6).

“Already always” because sexual non-normativity constitutes the construction of blackness as different and deviant. “Already always” because blackness (with its connotation of sexual non-normativity) emerged as a point of reference for discursive and material conceptualizations of homosexuality. As Tinsley’s essay suggests, some scholars identify chattel slavery in the United States as an origin point of black queer histories. There are relatively few studies of this type (which document same-sex intimacies/ gender transgression or analyze how the “peculiar institution” informed emerging categories of homosexuality). A

potential dearth of archival evidence is one challenge to creating such studies. A desire to undermine stereotypes about black individual and familial pathology is another. The latter, stated most prominently in the 1965 report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” by Assistant Secretary of the Department of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, prompted a generation of scholarship devoted to confirm the ubiquity of two-headed male-female households and normative black familial formations. Crucially, historian of slavery Brenda Stevenson’s documents a diverse number of familial formations among enslaved and free black communities in Virginia in *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (Stevenson, 1996). Three more recent works indicate the promise of interdisciplinary analyses of gender transgression and/or same-sex intimacies during (and after) the era of slavery. In *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of*

Race, Aliyyah Abdul- Rahman considers how African American literary works from slavery to the present feature sexual and gender non-normativity, arguing that such anti-normativity act as ways of understanding freedom. In the monograph's first chapter, Rahman argues that the representation "of sexual perversity under conditions of enslavement" crucially informed concepts and consequences associated with sexual difference (including homosexuality) around the turn of the twentieth century (Rahman, 2012, p. 26).

In *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*, Vincent Woodard explores recurring narratives of the digestion and consumption of enslaved black flesh in a dizzying array of archival sources and controversial moments. In doing so, this work is deeply interested in the ways that homoeroticism undergirded interracial intimacies under slavery while also excavating an archival

record of homosex/desire. (Woodard, 2014) Finally, Thomas Foster's article "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men Under Slavery" documents the presence (and prevalence) of interracial, intra-gender sexual violence alongside other forms of coercive sexual relations under slavery. (Foster, 2011) Forthcoming work on queerness and slavery- as represented by the Queering Slavery Working Group founded by Jessica Marie Johnson and Vanessa Holden- promises rich and innovative work that will place slavery at the center of this area of inquiry.

Scholarship analyzing communities and events during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century is more robust. This is due (in part) to the temporal emergence of 1). medical, juridical and popular understandings of heterosexuality and homosexuality as distinct identities and behaviors 2). the emergence of visible queer subcultures, subjectivities and often-hostile responses to them. Both developments

precipitated a larger cadre of documentation- including but not limited to police records, newspaper reports, novels and poems, blues songs and photography. This source base provides glimpses of the various ways that sexual and gender transgressors found intimacy and forged community in the streets, public parks, bars and clubs. Others pursued careers as entertainers, dancers, and drag performers in the city's popular clubs and cabarets, black and tans or speakeasies as well as the privacy of buffet flats and house parties. Works that analyze this vibrant world include Eric Garber's essay "A Spectacle in Color" (1991), George Chauncey's epic *Gay New York: Making of the Modern Gay World* (1994) and Marlon Ross' *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Ear of Jim Crow* (2004).

An overlapping group of studies interrogate imbrications of blackness and queerness during the late nineteenth and first half of the

twentieth century, moving between the social and textual. In the foundational text *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*, Kevin Mumford argues broadly that interracial sexual intimacies are an important phenomena in the development of American modernity (Mumford, 1997). A crucial sub-argument of the book reveals and interrogates the manner in which blackness - as understood discursively and spatially- shaped responses to and developments of queer subcultures. Interracial spaces like speakeasies, city streets and other public spaces were crucial, he argues, to the delineation of homosexual identities. Mumford's work demonstrates the interconnected nature of black urbanization and LGBT/Queer community development in ways that continue to inspire forthcoming work (Mumford, 1997). Lisa Duggan's *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity* shifts the realm of imbricated blackness and

queerness to widely circulating narrative of the lesbian love triangle murder trial (specifically the 1892 trial of Alice Mitchell in Memphis Tennessee) and commonplace lynchings of black men nationwide. Duggan considers the “shared logics” of both accounts, arguing that “narrative technologies of sex and violence” stigmatized black and queer populations around the turn of the twentieth century (Duggan, 2000).

Jennifer Terry’s *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine and Homosexuality in Modern Society* and Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* analyze scientific/medical authorities’ mobilized understandings of race to advance theorizations about the origins and articulations of same-sex desire and/or gender non-conformity (Terry, 1999; Somerville, 2000). Terry analyzes the preoccupation of physicians, scientists and cultural critics with homosexuality, arguing that such engagements acted as a crucial

avenue to set the boundaries of acceptable forms of behavior- with racial science acting as a crucial reference point. Somerville analyzes sexologist literature and popular representations of same-sex intimacies created by whites and blacks, casting both as crucial origin points for an intertwined history of blackness and homosexuality. She argues that black writers and intellectuals “were able to resist, contest, and appropriate these dominant cultural discourses. At the same time, they often re-inscribed them.”

Chad Heap’s *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* and Shane Vogel’s *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* analyze the emergence of a racialized sexual binary -in which blackness and queerness were spatially linked and overlapping- within urban social spaces (dancehalls and cabarets for example) and discourses about these particular spaces during the first

half of the twentieth century. Heap argues that the process of slumming- in which white Americans socialized in urban entertainment spaces that traversed ethnic, racial and class lines - reinforced a black/white binary of American race relations and helped concretize a homosexual/heterosexual binary (Heap, 2009). Vogel's interdisciplinary study- firmly rooted in literary and performance studies methods- argues that a particular set of Harlem Renaissance writers, artists and intellectuals mobilized the cabaret space to "critique the racial and sexual normativity of uplift ideology and to imagine alternative narratives of sexual and racial selfhood." (Vogel, 2009, p. 3). Part II of this essay continues to survey black queer historical scholarship, with particular attention to the themes of gender, class and political life.

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