

# FEMINIST ARCHIVES

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

by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

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

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

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

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

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

One thing we know as Black feminists is how important it is for us to recognize our own lives as herstory. Also as Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will *ever* be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There

is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now.<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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

In a time when the planet is preparing to stop tolerating our collectively destructive capitalist relationship to life, resources, and the future, the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind project (see [black-feministmind.wordpress.com](http://black-feministmind.wordpress.com)), based in Durham, North Carolina, is a specific example of how to orchestrate an intimate, profound, and living feminist praxis. Eternal Summer is an in-between season, queer to the academic time of production and symbolic of the heat and imagined freedom of the season between harvest and planting. This multimedia-enabled educational

movement is an example of an ecological approach as a necessary alternative to an economic approach to the planet that reifies capitalism as a resource model and disrespects the vitality of other resources, especially spiritual and emotional resources and the wisdom of oppressed people.<sup>2</sup>

Through night schools, potlucks, podcasts, Internet videos, a public-access-channel TV program, an Internet TV station, an ongoing interview process, travelling workshops, blogs, and zine publications, the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind makes published, out-of-print, archived, and previously undocumented Black feminist strategies, poems, essays, newsletters, and practices accessible to a diverse community of parents, teachers, workers, organizers, and writers.

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

### **“Dry My Words”: Preservation Toward Presence**

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

### **“Seek the Roots”: An Intellectual Imperative**

The availability of information about the writing, teaching, correspondence, and activism of Black feminist literary figures that forms the core of the Eternal Summer canon is thanks to the queer (and by queer I mean unlikely, magical, etc.) practice of archiving the work of some specifically recognized and broadly published Black women, despite the predictions of the Smith sisters. In particular, the Dionne Brand Papers in the National Archives of Canada, in Ottawa; the Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara Papers at the Spelman College Archives in Atlanta, Georgia; the Lucille Clifton, Thulani Davis and Broadside Press, and Alice Walker Papers at the Emory University Manuscript and Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia; the Cheryl Clarke Papers at the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives at the Schomburg Center at the New York Public Library; the Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and African Ancestral Papers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York; and the June Jordan Papers at the Schlesing-

er Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have been crucial to my own access to unpublished and historical information.

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

### “Where They Grow”: Beyond Survival

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

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

The roots grow through the examples of immersive Black feminist archival work online, which include the documentary work of Black feminist scholars to chart their under-represented research topics even while they are researching their dissertations, such as **mississip-**

**piappendectomy.wordpress.com**, an online archive where Serena Sebring, a Ph.D. student in sociology at Duke University, compiles information about women of color and coercive sterilization in the United States as she finds it.

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

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

Although several of the bloggers who coordinate and generate content for the above sites have connections to academic institutions, the activity of these blogs speaks to the rejection of an academic timeline for the distribution of information that has been too long repressed, covered over, and ignored, and which the authors of these blogs find urgently valuable for the ongoing organizing and daily lives of the communities

to which they are accountable. For these reasons, some of the most productive and active new media archivists online are Black feminists who know firsthand about the ugliest faces of oppression in our times. We are INS raid survivors, single mothers, navigators of poverty and ableism, and survivors of sexual violence, and we are warriors.

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

New media forms of Black feminist archival practice are now being engaged by multiple generations of Black feminist scholars and activists, such as public intellectuals Melissa Harris-Lacewell (**princetonprofs.blogspot.com**) and Duchess Harris (**sisterscholar.com**) and, by the time this article is published, **The Feminist Wire (www.thefeministwire.com)**, a collaborative project featuring a diverse team of writers coordinated by the intergenerational Black feminist and

womanist duo Hortense Spillers and Tamura Lomax, and even on Twitter by Black feminist historian Treva Lindsey, who tweets at @divafeminist.

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

#### Notes

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

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