

Something Else to Be

*Generations of Black Queer Brilliance and the
Mobile Homecoming Experiential Archive*

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An (Intergenerational) Something Else to Be

THE MOBILE HOMECOMING VISION

This is immersion in legacy. This is a celebration of how boldness survives the moment of its need. This is an intimate embrace with a living herstory that traces pathways between our lungs, called laughter, called stillness, called sigh. This is a dance, a prayer, a baptism in hope. This is how we know who we are. This is how we live forever. —From the Mobile Homecoming website

THE INSPIRATION AND RESOURCES for the Mobile Homecoming, an experiential archive project amplifying generations of black LGBTQ brilliance, spring from a collective desire to witness the lives and loves that are foundational for the survival of participants in a black, LGB, trans, queer, or genderqueer legacy. The form of our journey is poetic and ex-

perimental, and it transforms to open itself up to the resources of those innovative geniuses who have come before us and to collectivize those resources with our contemporary and younger community members, all of whom hold us accountable to this labor of love. We are not the first to challenge form (the form of the archive, the form of the movement, the form of the question) in ways that resonate in black queer communities, and we will not be the last. In each community, context, and time the ceremony must be found to activate the medicine necessary for us each to achieve our destinies.¹ Elsewhere we write about the details of how the Mobile Homecoming ceremony functions on critical ethnographic and social movement terms. This essay looks at founding black feminist moments in queer of color critique to present the Mobile Homecoming experiential archive project as a form of reading and writing community, a literary praxis informed by Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival," key literary moments relevant to an insurgent history of queer black life written across generations.

In 1973, when Toni Morrison published her second novel, *Sula*, she changed black feminist literary criticism forever. Some say that black feminists created black feminist literary criticism to deal with *Sula*, the character and the text. In partnership with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's *Sula* does more than insert nuanced black female characters into an existing literary scene. With these two novels Morrison insists that the very form of the novel must bend and bow and breathe and move to witness the experiences of black women and girls.

Sula arrived well placed in time to become the catalyst that it was and is for black feminist literary criticism. The book was published right when the first black women's lit courses were being taught in newly formed black studies and women's studies programs in colleges in the Northeast. The two foundational works of black feminist literary studies, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialectics, Dialogics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" and Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" both read *Sula* as their primary text and as an instance through which to imagine what black feminist literary criticism could be. Audre Lorde mentions in a 1982 interview with Claudia Tate that she doesn't care that it was *Song of Solomon* that Morrison won the National Book of the Month Club selection for, it is *Sula* that "made me light up inside like a Christmas tree"; she adds, "That book is like one long poem."²

The passages that cause black feminists to canonize *Sula* are the passages about mutual self-invention that occur between Sula and Nel. The most cited passage is the one where the narrator explains the destined friendship of the two girls, noting that “having long ago realized they were neither white nor male . . . they went about creating something else to be.”³ This is a proposition as far reaching as to appear in Afro-Scottish Maud Sulter’s description of an art exhibit she curated in England; as long lasting as to reappear as the “different sort of subject” that Hortense Spillers asks for in her 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”; and as genesis moment for queer of color critique in Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* in 2003. The two other moments of the text that black feminist theorists drew in the sky are Sula’s insistence, when her grandmother, Eva, suggests she should settle down and have some babies, that “I don’t want to make someone else. I want to make myself.”⁴ This challenge to motherhood partially constitutes the critique of heteropatriarchy that allows Barbara Smith to claim *Sula* as a “lesbian” text alongside the book’s final revelation that the loss of a husband is nothing compared with the loss of a girlfriend.

As queer black feminist researchers and artists seeking a way to amplify black feminist practices in the black LGBTQ community across generations, with a specific focus on those visionaries who, like Nel and Sula, have faced the dilemma of being seen as nonwhite and nonmale (even if they, in fact, are trans men), we decided to look closely at how people in different communities across decades had sustained the practice of being something else both literally and in the vernacular sense that is used in the black community to mark nonconformist behavior and performance (that is, “Now Alexis and Julia are driving around in that Winnebago looking for black queer rituals? They are truly something else.”). We have found that even engaging this inquiry requires a queerness in our approach to research, something else to do and something else to be while doing it. Our specific other ways of being are implicated in a theory of survival, what it means for us to survive while doing experiential archive work grounded in the U.S. Southeast, what it means to do this work sustainably and centrally and not as a side project, what it means for the legacy of our elders and ancestors to move through us, and what it means to “[seek] a now that can breed [queer] futures.”⁵

Safety, Security, Sustainability, and Survival: Lordeian Routes and Strategic Approaches

“A Litany for Survival,” one of Lorde’s best-known poems, has fulfilled its own prophecy. It is literally the vehicle through which Audre Lorde’s poetry survives. The poem itself has survived much more visibly than other poems in her body of work. In 1988 a radio profile created by Jennifer Abod in honor of Audre Lorde’s work began with the sound of drums and Lorde herself reading “A Litany for Survival.” The title of the groundbreaking biographical film about Audre Lorde’s life by Ada Gay Griffin and Michele Parkerson is entitled *A Litany for Survival*. “A Litany for Survival” is available as a podcast on the Internet. At a rally mourning Amadou Diallo, entitled “A Litany for Survival,” Patricia Spear Jones read the poem aloud. One of the sections in *Colonize This!*, one of the landmark texts of contemporary young radical women of color, is entitled “Family and Community: A Litany for Survival.” Kara Keeling’s *The Witch’s Flight* explains its stakes with an essay entitled, “Another Litany for Survival.” This poem has indeed survived in many forms and is the major poem for the continuation of Lorde’s presence in contemporary discourse. However, the actual life of the word “survival” in Audre Lorde’s poetry is undertheorized and often overshadowed by the celebratory resonance of “survival,” despite the haunting refrain of the poem itself, which insists, “We were never meant to survive.” At the same time, some people have taken the word “survival” to mean subsistence or “mere” survival and opted to counter it with the rhyming word “thrive.” For us, the significance of retaining the use of the word “survival” has to do not only with its legacy in black feminist poetics and practice but also with the imperative to remember our existence always in the context of our guardian dead, those ancestors that survive through us and our community, which has suffered differential unjust death because of capitalism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Alexis takes this issue on in depth in her dissertation, “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism.” This concept of survival also informed both of us as we insisted on honoring the survivors in our communities before they become ancestors. We engage in this issue as we navigate moving through the United States as young, queer, black, female, and genderqueer bodied people accountable to our histories and the tangible desire for queer black futures. How do we both survive the journey and sustain our (black queer) lives and accountability along the way?

HOW WE ROLL: A LITANY FOR SUSTAINABILITY

For those of us . . .

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

— *Audre Lorde*, “A Litany for Survival”

“Who love in doorways coming and going in the hours between dawns . . .” We are black and queer, so our histories of travel are not only voluntary but also compelled and circumscribed by violence, hate, and inequality. We hold the legacies of people on the run. We come from travelers who did not choose their journey to this continent. We come from travelers who dare not run out of gas because segregation and racial hatred in the South meant they could not stop without risking their lives. We come from travelers who were pushed off their land with the threat of lynching and the sanction of law. We come from travelers whose neighborhoods got trampled by new highway plans. We come from travelers who were kicked out of their homes for daring to love across boundaries.

The legacy of violence, hate, and inequality for black people and queer people was and is so pervasive that publications were necessary to guide travelers across the country. The *Negro Motorist Green Book*, published from 1936 to 1966, provided contacts and information for black travelers in the unsafe territory of the United States. “Contact Dykes,” a section in the *Lesbian Connection* magazine founded in 1974, continues to this day to provide contacts and information for lesbian travelers. Those who took to their cars during Jim Crow were not exempt from segregation and violence, though driving was a means of escaping those conditions on public transportation. The literary and filmic history of this country also tells the tale—from Nel’s formative experience of traveling south on the segregated train with her mother to the legacy of the Freedom Rides in the 1960s in a film by the same name. Is there an era in the history of this land since “discovery” and colonization that has not been dangerous for those nonwhite, nonmale, or nonheterosexual in this country?

On our Mobile Homecoming journey we faced the reality of this legacy when we were stopped and detained for seeming “odd” to Mississippi Highway Patrol, then separated and questioned while officers called for

backup and refused to believe the preposterously true story that we were on the road to document black feminist queer visionaries. We confronted the continued urgency of our work to create intergenerational resources for black queer survival as we met elders with unstable housing who were close to being out on the street with their priceless black queer movement artifacts. For example, Lenn Keller, key photographer and archivist of the lesbian of color presence in the Bay Area, housed us in a space that was serving as a temporary home for her and her decades of photographs and ephemera. When we interviewed her, she didn't know where she would be living next. Ironically, the existence of archives of letters between black feminists is evidence of this same loving between doorways during times when long-distance phone calls were prohibitively expensive for most and isolation as black feminist lesbian, bisexual, gay male, and queer visionaries in far-flung contexts required reaching out. Our journey was tracked through a network of people who have stayed in touch across decades without depending on Facebook or any other digital medium.

The coming and going that we enacted as we journeyed from home to home across the United States is a performance of the space that the visionaries we met have made for each other in their lives as they assisted each other with forced relocations owing to family violence and economic struggles. It was our first cross-country ritual tour with the project that clarified the fact that the need for housing among black LGBTQ organizers, artists, and activists of all ages is urgent and unresolved. This is an issue we face perpetually in our local community and across the country. Currently, Washington, D.C.-based Mobile Homecoming interviewee Imani Woody, who has designed the *Living Life Like It's Golden* six-part series for LGBTQ elders and is currently creating *Mary's House*, a residential center for LGBTQ elders, is tackling the expanding need for housing for elders, who, as our listening process on the tour has confirmed, have less financial, familial, and pension-based resources than their age-mates. We are confronted with the need to make new doorways to love each other in and to face the continued reality of homelessness in the black LGBTQ community at every stage of our lives.

Looking inward and outward . . .

On the Mobile Homecoming journey we recognize that our history of travel is not all recreational but that we come from travelers nonetheless, people who needed to be both mobile and at home and who often had to

choose between the two.⁶ So for us, the “R” in RV stands for Revolutionary, for Resource, for Road-less-traveled, for Respect, for Re-imagining, for Reality. We want our journey to be healing for us and to provide a healing example for others about what movement can mean, where love can live, how home can survive.

The stories our elders have shared redefine and shape what it means to be at home. Imani Rashid, one of the butch-identified elders who inspired us to create the project, shares in our film *No Legacy Let Go* how she experienced the contradictory experiences of enjoying the feminine ritual of watching her mother get dressed, at the same time as she resisted the constriction of her mother’s insistence that she attend charm school and ballet classes to become ladylike herself. Imani, along with other comrades in the Salsa Soul Sisters, a lesbian of color organization founded in 1974 in New York, created a new version of home with their child-inclusive events, especially lesbian and gay Kwanzaa, which Imani talks about in our Mobile Homecoming PSA on queer Kwanzaa, a decades-long practice we learned about in New York City and Detroit, Michigan, and have begun to practice annually as an intergenerational community in Durham, North Carolina.

In addition to the organizational homespaces that we have witnessed and learned about, we have also seen that our visionary interviewees have developed what we call spiritual superpowers both as a result of being excluded from dominant religions and as a creative survival practice to create positive energy, community, and strength in a dehumanizing society. From creating safe spaces for queer and trans practitioners of traditional African religions, such as Ifa, to radically inclusive black church practices to astral projection, charging crystals, and the Science of the Mind, we have found that almost every person we have interviewed has deep spiritual grounding. They are grounded even if it is to say, as the late Vera Martin, cofounder of Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC) said to us in her modular home in a lesbian RV park in Arizona, “I believe in me.”

At once before and after . . .

Our RV does not only travel through space, it travels through time, sitting in the untimely place where this anomaly, this miracle, queer black initiates, media makers, adventurers transmitting history and reframing the future in a mobile home, is possible. We see the RV itself as surrounded

in two-way windows, as we take in the lessons that the land and the people have to offer and transmit the insights of our journey out to the world. We moved through the world guided by a GPS system donated by Yashna Padamsee from Domestic Workers United, protected by both an amethyst crystal donated by interviewee and former Salsa Soul Sisters member Ed Swan, an AAA membership donated by drum circle member Summer Mason and blessed by prayer flags donated by Queer Black New Orleans based healer Geryll Robinson (aka Dr. Gee Love.) Uncannily, multiple generations of black queer social organizing and community building seem to overlay each place we move through like a palimpsest. As soon as we shared our vision for the project we learned about Lisa Moore's midnineties thesis film of interviews with black lesbian elders, which is now expanding and developing in partnership with Tiona McClodden and Harriet's Gun Media. We learned about countless photo and documentary projects including one conducted by an elder in Alexis's family who previously had not shared about LGBTQ identity, but was excited to recount a college road trip documenting women's communities in the United States.

We found echoes among the participants and we became echoes the more we participated. Shani Angela, founder of Mixit Tallahassee, explained her community's use of softball as a community building practice among lesbian parents and even a method for doing outreach in local prisons in terms that reminded us of Pat Parker and other Oakland-based lesbians of color using softball as an alternative to the bar scene in response to the discrimination they faced in the 1970s. In Durham, North Carolina, which is our primary home base, Jay, founder of Cedar Chest, a literary and social organization that existed in Durham in the 1990s, pointed out that two of the locations that we used for our 2011 intergenerational retreat Indigo Days (including the duplex we lived in at the time) had previously been sites of black lesbian workshops or parties in decades past. The same elders who founded the Salsa Soul Sisters who used drums to affirm outlaw marriages and to create sacred ritual space host a drum circle every Thursday in Durham and bring a truck full of drums to our local Mobile Homecoming events. We attended retreats for black lesbians in their inaugural year, such as the Shades Retreat in Georgia, and retreats that were in the twenty-fifth year, like Sistafest/BLU in southern California. In the practice of the experiential archive, it is impossible to imagine that history moves in one direction or ends, and at the same time, history often feels too present to get nostalgic about it.

*For those of us who live at the shoreline/
standing upon the constant edges of decision/
crucial and alone . . .*

There are times on the road and in our own community that even the choice of the safest bathroom to use or whether to use the bathroom at all is a game time decision. Even whether to be out as our full selves in so-called queer communities is a decision that we do not want our folks to ever have to make. We intend and know as Harriet Tubman knew, “My people are free.”⁷ Any contrary manifestation is an illusion to be eradicated.

The only choice we consider is the choice of unstoppable love. A large part of our work, particularly with the Mobile Homecoming retreats we are now hosting, is creating safe space for intergenerational groups of queer black folks. Sometimes this means that folks within our community with more privilege have to transform. It also means we, as hosts and facilitators, have to transform and acknowledge our own privileges and ignorance too. The process and prayer to create a space that, as June Jordan wrote in the guidelines for her “Poetry for the People” classes, is “safe enough” for the most oppressed within our oppressed community to be and to be cherished alongside those of us in transformation, is constant.⁸

For example, since its founding, transgender men and women have participated at every level of the project (interviewees, collaborators, donors, and supporters), but it has been a challenge for the Mobile Homecoming project to navigate visibility as a trans-inclusive project while honoring the decisions of many of our elders who experience antitrans violence and exclusion in gay, lesbian, women’s, and feminist spaces not to disclose publicly in some spaces that they are trans. It is important for us to acknowledge that some of the organizations that we lift up from feminist lesbian history, like the Salsa Soul Sisters and some current crucial community-building spaces such as the women of color tent at the Michigan Womyn’s Festival, actively practiced/practice gender policing and exclusion that has traumatized and continues to traumatize members of our community.

Sometimes creating the safe space for those who feel alone even within LGBT spaces means saying no to our loved ones with more privilege. Sometimes it means being very candid. Always it means we love our queer selves so much that we will let nothing come between us safely being together. The transformation takes place here. At our first official Mobile Homecoming retreat, Indigo Days, during a discussion on gender that Julia overheard from the kitchen while doing dishes, some folks did

not fully understand this commitment. Alexis participated in the conversation with many other brilliant black queer folks and black lesbians articulating the relevant history, love, and legacies. Julia came in from the kitchen and made the crucial point: We love and affirm you all as whoever you understand yourself to be and celebrate that knowledge. All of us here are committed to transforming in the ways necessary, including learning to use the preferred pronouns and to the patience necessary when we believe that the transformation is in process but not complete. Anyone not willing to be on board can leave. This is not a negative thing but an ecstatic moment, a healing moment, because now you know we will go to any length to make sure we are all affirmed as who we are.

When the foundation is laid and the crucial point is made, we do not always have to be alone. Our elders can heal from the trauma that has said they can be only a certain type of lesbian or express masculinity only as a butch in a narrow way.

At a retreat on sexuality and the black lesbian community hosted by Imani Rashid Productions in Brooklyn, Imani asked us to specifically address transphobia. Several elders in the community who were butch-identified at the time expressed fear of exploring their masculinity for fear that they would be expelled from the lesbian community and that their partners would leave them if they identified as other than “woman.” During the day, as we attended the conference, many people openly expressed that they were nervous and apprehensive about the segment on gender identity and masculinity that we were facilitating at the end of the day. But when we actually facilitated a discussion and panel after a screening of Kortney Zeigler and Awilda Rodriguez’s film *Still Black*, we created a context of profound love and reminded our beloved community how long and hard we have all worked to be affirmed and loved on our own terms.

By creating transformative and inclusive space at our retreats and the spaces we attend, we have seen a conversation across age about gender identity in black LGBTQ community that we believe is light years beyond where that conversation is in other communities. Queen Hollins, founder of the Earthlodge in Southern California expressed difficulty and challenges using gender-inclusive “they” at our retreats after a lifetime of womb-affirming, woman-centered healing work and now leads sacred rituals to support transgender people preparing for physical transition at her Earthlodge center.

This is not a safety that we always have on the road. This is not even a safety we have in our families of origin or chosen queer communities

where we live. However, it is a safety that we can create intentionally with those that are willing; and by creating the space in more places the gap between one home and the next will become smaller and smaller. By modeling the possibilities we can create the world we want to have and start the evolutionary progression. This is the potential of mobility.

Seeking a now that can breed futures like bread in our children's mouths so their dreams will not reflect the death of ours . . .

We are currently transitioning from our relatively fuel-efficient oil-crisis-era gas-powered Winnebago to a Revolutionary Vehicle that is more fully sustainable. We are accountable to a set of people making a way out of no way, using every resource they had access to toward survival and divine participation in the process through which the universe and the planet affirm and re-create themselves through us. The way we see it, life is already contradictory and experimental. If the content of this journey is about passing on the legacies of black queer visionaries to generate and affirm new life, the *form* of the journey is an experiment in how it is possible to live sustainably and fully on the move, in honor of our ancestors, and in a manner that affirms our children, pointing the way toward a more efficient, loving, responsible relationship with the environment.

We see this approach in the elders by whom we have been inspired on our journey, including Lenn Keller, whose 30 years of documentary photography she has traveled with in order to share the resources of what has happened with those who might yet organize; Queen Hollins and the Earthlodge, which is a center for creating what she calls “Nu Legacy” beyond cycles of trauma; Rose Pulliam and Priscilla Hale, directors at allgo, which is a cultural arts, health, and advocacy programming for queer people of color, who are teaching us about not working all the time (even when we love our work) and the delicate, delightful balance of being organizational collaborators and romantic partners.

We hope that by witnessing and participating in our journey, people who never thought that certain forms of movement were possible or desirable will see how moving life really can be. We hope they discover the possibilities—leave home and make home at the same time, leave a job and practice their own craft primarily, launch their own local community-accountable project, or get on the road themselves.

Safety versus Security: A Queer Black Abolitionist Vision

“For those of us who cannot afford the passing dreams of choice . . . this instant, and this triumph. We were never meant to survive.”

We don’t look like we’re from around here.

What then does it mean for us to be safe on the road? Because we know the limits of the state, and because we **CHOOSE** to create something different and better for ourselves, we must remember the difference between safety and security.

“Security,” to us, means having the upper hand in an unsafe situation. Security, to many, means having access to the violent means that the state uses to defend itself, the police, the national guard, the private security forces that companies use to protect their wealth. For those of us, black, queer, young, radical, and grassroots, who are not often seen as part of the state’s project to reproduce itself (except when we are targeted as consumers), those sources of security are not dependable. As far as we can tell, security comes from weapons. And it only works if you have more, faster, bigger weapons than whoever makes you insecure. Our intention is for our journey to be **SAFE**.

Safety, to us, means being able to be comfortable in our skin, having the freedom to move, being able to sleep restfully and wake renewed and excited about the journey. Safety comes from knowing that we are held by a community that has our backs. Safety comes from knowing that all along the road there are home spaces with comrades who will welcome us and who will answer if we call on them. Safety comes from relationships and people.

And safety comes from having a plan. Our safety plan for this journey involves everyone in our community. Instead of hoping for security in the random parking lots/campsites on which we could accidentally happen along the road, we have decided to plan for safety. We plan never to drive when we should be sleeping, which means stopping often. To stop in safety, we contact loved ones and comrades all over the country so they will know when we are near. We may park in the driveways of loved ones, we may park at campsites nearby, and we let comrades know where we are and that we might call on them if we need any form of help.

Our safety plan is inspired by the legacies of ancestors and elders who navigated road trips through dangerous places and involves a network of comrades and kindred who are aligned with the vision of the project and who affirm our queerness, our genderqueerness, our proud blackness, our youth. Their love and respect are what allow us to feel and be safe.

Our understanding of safety has grown and shifted through our journey and is reflected in our evolving strategy. For example, in every city we visit, we cohost an intergenerational social gathering called “Where Have You Been All My Life,” for which the designation of safe space changes based on the local co-organizers in the cities and their definition of safe space based on the history of that community. In some cases it is a black-only gathering; in some cases it is a people of color gathering; in some cases allies (across race or sexuality) are invited; in some cases they are not. Most important, we have shifted our primary focus from documentation to experience, putting the majority of our effort into hosting transformative retreats (three a year!) where queer black intergenerational community happens as a lived experience. We made this shift based on our experiences in some of the many U.S. states where LGBTQ people can be legally evicted from housing and fired from their jobs. In some cities, elders who were happy to attend intergenerational events and share life-changing stories would ask us to “memorize” their words because they did not feel safe being recorded.

This network of kindred draws on and contributes to an ongoing process through which progressive kindred can connect to one another. We share stories, hear stories, make friends, discover commonalities, fall in love, meet our elders’ and comrades’ children, exchange recipes. We know that our need for one another is mutual and much bigger than the logistical need for places to refuel and rest. We have experienced and continue to hope that as we connect with our national Mobile Homecoming family and allies, and connect them to one another, future travelers will be able to know where there are safe couches to sleep on, people to call if they need help, or folks to connect with if they move to a new town. The world that we want to live in is a community, where needs are shared and met, where difference is affirmed, where people stand up for each other and open themselves up to love and the possibility of life. We invite you to join us in being something else.

NOTES

1. Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 19.
2. Audre Lorde, “Audre Lorde,” in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983), 107.
3. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1982), 52.

4. Morrison, *Sula*, 92.
5. Audre Lorde. "A Litany for Survival," in *The Collected Poetry of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 255.
6. Headings come from Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," 255.
7. Jean Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 383.
8. *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*, edited by Lauren Muller and the Blueprint Collective (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16.