



# Looking Forward to the Past: Black Women and Sexual Agency in `Neo' Cultural Productions

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Abstract

This dissertation combines critical black feminisms, cultural studies, performance studies, and queer theory with readings of African-American cultural productions in order to consider how black women can and have reconfigured their non-heteronormative sexualities outside of the language given to us by white-dominated GLBT scholarship. The emphasis on "neo" cultural productions, that is projects that look toward the past to re-imagine a new future, speaks to Laura Alexandra Harris's assertion that a queer black feminist methodology necessitates reclamation of one's history and an affirmation of desire as a form of resistance to shame. This dissertation reads black female bodies as subversive. In embracing their bodies as pleasurable, these unruly women resist racist and heterosexist hegemonic discourses which silence or pathologize black female sexuality and negate black women's agency. Chapter One looks toward Barbara Smith's 1977 publication, "Toward a Black Feminist

Criticism”, as an inaugural point for thinking about black female sexuality outside of normative and pathologizing paradigms. It argues for a reading of *Sula* as a queer black femme novel, and from there develops a (neo) theory of black femme-inism which is indebted to and departs from Smith. Chapter Two reads Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Octavia Butler's *Fledging* as neo-slave narratives which also narrate a queer politic. The black female vampires in these novels constitute a necessary departure from realism, which does not adequately narrate the complexity of black women's sexuality. The third chapter reads Cheryl Dunye's film, *The Watermelon Woman*, arguing that the film proposes a new methodology for reading lesbian sexuality in its historical and contemporary contexts. Chapter Four analyzes Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* and neo-burlesque performances by black women in order to suggest how black female performances, through the remaking of the black female body from spectacle to spectacular, can interrupt the historical and contemporary pathologization of black women. In all of these chapters I look toward neo-narratives as sites which connect the historical realities of black female subjugation with the contemporary moment in ways which usher in alternative possibilities for black female agency.

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