

Monique Todd

What past does our future need?
On *The Watermelon Woman*
and re-doing inheritance

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By the end of *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl (the character) has a romance cut short and a friendship on edge. There's no explanation beyond an abrupt, brief announcement. Those relationships mattered until they didn't, it seems. At this juncture, the memory of Faye – a black lesbian actress who Cheryl spends the film unearthing – finally arrives repaired. Discovery eclipses loss, a connection bridging past and present strengthens in place of two others. Did Faye facilitate the removal, or did Cheryl leave her relationships on the cutting room floor? That Faye's life is faked through DIY archival ephemera (photos and film meticulously achieved by Dunye and artist Zoe Leonard¹) marks a plot twist in the film and queer historicisation. Cheryl's counterfeit ancestor doesn't exist to plug an archival hole. Instead she stretches out her hand and Cheryl reaches back, clasping over time and reality, creating each other and others in the process.

"Black feminist futurity is about another kind of temporality, because it is concurrently the past and the future, but layered in through a kind of commitment to a different ethical now, a different kind of space of an ethical sociality now.' Gail Lewis reflects in the Silver Press panel discussion *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House: Abolitionist Feminist Futures*². 'The past gives us that: the past is the stars through which we navigate our steerage towards the future, it seems to me ... and that past is multiple, of course."

This steerage can often shift, retract and even revise it's assumed path. Cheryl's route to Faye is for the most part obedient to the found artefacts and oral histories she sources first hand, but as her own relationship with Faye grows, so does her insistence that her legacy be shaped for and by her own desires. "I know she meant the world to you, but she also meant the world to me, and those worlds are different," she says, in response to Faye's ex-partner June Walker – who protests any retelling of Faye's relationship with white film director Martha Page. There are echoes of an earlier scene here, when an archivist (played by Sarah Schulman) describes a recently acquired collection at the 'Center for Lesbian Information and Technology' (C.L.I.T). Intended for use exclusively by Black lesbians by the so-called 'Hysteria Foundation', Schulman tells Cheryl that "if we have any photos in there that have white people, then we just cross them out." In both cases (but for markedly different reasons) Black archival presence is conceptualised by white absence. Walker's version of Faye deserves honour and preservation, as does Cheryl's – their versions and many others should and can exist together. Though how we hold them (and how institutions often disastrously keep them, if and when they decide to) is so frequently dictated by assumed neutral regimens of order. 'Queer things cannot have straight histories' write Daniel Marshall, Kevin Murphy and Zeb Tortorici in the introduction to *Queering Archives: Historical Unraveling*³. Queer things should also not be straightened in their naming and preservation.

In 2017, Netflix released *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*, directed by David France. It's now widely recognised that the documentary leeches the archival efforts of activist, archivist, filmmaker and writer Tourmaline, to which our collective knowledge of Johnson owes an immense debt. 'Historical erasure of black trans life means so many of us are disconnected from the legacies of trans women before us, denied access to stories about ourselves, in our own voices' writes Tourmaline in a record-straightening piece for *Teen Vogue*⁴. 'So it became increasingly important for me to not just find out more about Marsha P. Johnson but to share every bit of what I learned through my blog, writing and community organizing work.' Tourmaline's decades-long archival enquiry isn't reducible to the dissemination of ephemera, although France's casual looting might suggest as much.

Tourmaline is part of Johnson's multiple past, like Cheryl is to Faye. Both did more than 'retell', they co-opted the archive as a gestational site. Our ancestors might have come before us, but we mother them too.

Re-doing inheritance is re-evaluating who gets to make whom, and the conditions of that making. It's advocating for infinite re-doing and never-ending malleability. It's recognising we are never not in relation to our forebears and so we should find, experiment and indulge in these relationships, start new friendships and romances... even if it means improvising them, even if it's just for ourselves. Re-doing inheritance troubles the project of fantasising only 'ahead', with its conceptual detachment and distance. It demands much more of the present and from what we are capable of now, through movement, momentum and yearning. It's a dialogue that is multiple and a-temporal. 'The something-to-be-done is almost always responding to an emergency—a situation that requires immediate attention. Nonetheless, it must be approached with an urgency that's autonomous and self-directed towards ends and aims not wholly given and certainly not given permission by the system's logics or crises but rather invented elsewhere and otherwise' reflects Avery F. Gordon in *Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity*⁵. 'I take it as axiomatic that we are not merely reactive subjects but that we are, to use Kodwo Eshun's word, 'inaugurating' ones, and therefore do not need permission from higher authorities to replace them!' Our ancestors can join us in forgetting those authorities too.

1 Leonard and Dunye also published these photographs as a photobook in 1996, and Leonard's eighty-two prints were included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial as *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*.

2 The podcast is available to listen on NTS, last accessed 17/08/2020. A transcript is also available on the Silver Press blog. <https://www.nts.live/shows/revolution-is-not-a-one-time-event/episodes/the-masters-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-masters-house-3rd-august-2020>
<https://www.silverpress.org/new-blog/masters-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-masters-house>

3 *Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings*, Duke University Press, 2014
https://www.academia.edu/8924780/Queering_Archives_Historical_Unravelings

4 Tourmaline speaks to *Teen Vogue* on Transgender Storytelling, David France, and the Netflix Marsha P. Johnson Documentary
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/reina-gossett-marsha-p-johnson-op-ed>

5 *Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity* was published in *borderlands* e-journal Volume 10 Number 2, 2011
http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol10no2_2011/gordon_thoughts.htm

Pleasure Principles Syllabus



**PLEASURE
PRINCIPLES**

Pleasure Principles Syllabus

The Black Lesbian Archives

Founded by Krü Maekdo
2017-present

Harder Than Ever Before

On artist Aya Brown
2019

True Romance, Etc.

Featuring Isiaka Amodu,
Juliet Gray, Terry Govier
1982

Ajamu interviewing Helen Deane and Savi Hensman about the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre by Ashlee Christoffersen (Pg. 58)

2012

Black Trans Archive

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley
2020

The Shakedown

Directors Commentary¹
Directed by Leilah Weinraub
2018

Zine: Black Lesbians in the 70s and Before - An At Home Tour At The Lesbian Herstory Archives

Created by Shawn(ta) Smith
2010

Pur:suit

Created by Naima Green
2018

Dyke TV & Lesbian Representation

Created by Ana Maria Simo, Linda
Chapman and Mary Patierno
Date unknown

Black Lesbians – We Are the Revolution!

Published by Sinister Wisdom
2018

Beyond 'There's always a black issue Dear'

Directed by Claire Lawrie
2018

Information Activism: Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies (introduction)

By Cait Mckinney
2020

Love and Lubrication in the Archives, or rukus!: A Black Queer Archive for the United Kingdom

Interview by Mary Stevens
2010

Happy Birthday Marsha!

Directed by Tourmaline and
Sasha Wortzel
2018

1 To access the documentary, a subscription to DIS is required. You can watch the documentary without commentary for free [here](#).

Pleasure Principles Syllabus

Blood Sisters: Leather Dykes and Sadomasochism

Shorts by Max Disgrace and Lina Bembe. Interviews with Venus, Michelle Handelman, Lina Bembe and Max Disgrace.
Programmed in 2020

A Conversation Supporting the Black Trans Community

Khaleb Brooks & Naeem Davis
2020

Revolution is not a one-time event
Silver Press
2020

Reimagining Lost Black Histories in
Queer Club Culture
Chardine Taylor-Stone
2020

Monique Todd is a writer and researcher. She works on Pleasure Principles, an independent multi-medium platform tracking formations of desire and connection through spaces and geographies. Pleasure Principles has appeared at Strange Perfume (SLG), LESBIANNALE (ICA) and Class Acts (Mimosa House). Pleasure Principle's debut release was *Black Sex in the Archives* (2019) – a foldout A3 zine map locating sites and projects in London that centred black desire, intimacy, sexual health and connection.

