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Jamie Ann Rogers

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Invisible Memories: Black Feminist Literature and Its Affective Flights

Jamie Ann Rogers

When Audre Lorde traveled to Russia in 1976, she met an Eskimo woman from the part of Russia closest to Alaska. The woman, Toni, sang a song during a talk she gave about her people, the Chukwo, of whom only 14,000 were left. “It sent a chill down my spine at the time,” Lorde writes in an essay about the trip, “because although there are 21 million Black Americans, I feel like we’re an endangered species, too, and how sad for our cultures to die” (1984, 32). Lorde recounts how the two met at a dinner put on by the Union of Soviet Writers. They spoke intimately together all evening over their meal. They could not decipher one another’s words without their interpreters, two “blond Russian girls who smirked as they translated” (33). And yet they made love, Lorde says. Through their eyes, then their hands, touching each other’s knees, and soon, their lips, too. Toni made toast after toast to women and strength. She toasted to joy, to sorrow, to hope, and, it seems, to their bodies, which communicated more than their mediated words ever could. Somehow, Lorde wrote, she *felt connected*. She was certain that she and Toni were the only people in the room at that moment who shared the knowledge of being a people under threat.

J. A. Rogers (✉)
Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA

While intensely personal and singular, this story represents the unifying principles of the theories of writing and political organizing that Lorde spent her life's work developing. Her work insists, for example, on a constant and reverential duty to one's body and mind, to an examination of what one feels as much as what one thinks, to the information that relations between self and other hold, as necessary starting points for any struggle against oppression, against genocide, against erasure of the lives and histories of women like her, women like Toni. Such insistence resonates with demands made by other Black feminist writers who were Lorde's contemporaries: The Combahee River Collective, for example, published in 1977 its now well-known declaration for a proto-intersectionality that is committed to the inherent value of Black women. Just a year later, June Jordan issued her plea to define Black feminism as an act of self and communal love ("Where is the Love?"), and in 1983, Alice Walker published her seminal *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, in which she defined womanism—women who love women, women who love themselves, Black women committed to the wholeness of entire people—as apposed (rather than opposed) to feminism. These are among the many examples of Black feminist writings that, in their insistence on the *political* significance of communal and self-love, dismantle the subject-object dualism that acts as the philosophical basis of Western modernity, and as the alibi for its history of dehumanization of gendered and raced subjects. Such arguments prefigure by several decades the "affective turn"—declared by many theorists as a profoundly "new" way to deploy critical thought—which is in many ways committed to similar critiques of dualistic thinking.

In this chapter, I aim to contribute to the development of a genealogy of affect theory that is attentive to these antecedents in Black feminist thought, offering a corrective to the ways in which affect theory typically is situated in intellectual histories as growing primarily out of late 1990s queer theory, on the one hand, and debates around poststructuralism, on the other. I highlight work by Lorde, Jordan, and Toni Morrison as representative examples, arguing that they not only offer compelling commentary on the workings of affect as political labor, but also are themselves powerfully affective, producing "affective flights" that move within and among readers, and become part of the affective circuits or "structures of feeling" that condition the different realities in which we live.¹

The study of rhetoric has long taught us to note that the force of words has the potential to become part of the circulation of cultural memories and histories. The historical continuity of anti-Black racism, however, demands

a pointed examination of writings by and about Blackness and Black women, Black history, and Black erasure that are part of the flow of thought and emotion that exists in constant tension with other affective circuits, including those produced through structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

Contemporary affect theorists, especially those concerned with the intersections of the biological sciences and the human sciences, tend to describe affect as a product of the body's innate biological response to outside stimuli, often removing or de-emphasizing the subject's agency. Brian Massumi, for example, characterizes affect as autonomous "intensities" that, while related to the subject through the body, largely involve the body's *indeterminate* response to stimuli. Queer theorist Sara Ahmed by contrast argues that affect is not necessarily autonomous, but rather a bodily response that corresponds to preexisting and changing relations (economic, political, or cultural, for example) with the affecting object. Her interest in the cultural politics of emotions is more closely aligned with the Black feminist literature I examine here, which insists on the political relevance of intellectual critique of affective responses. Such critique involves taking seriously the examination of emotions, moods, and temperaments that are produced through exterior stimuli—intersubjective relations, encounters with environment, brushes with the historical, for example. Such critique provides "information" about objects of affective stimulation and their socio-historical character (Lorde); exposes under-acknowledged material conditions that affect quality of experience (Jordan); and unveils relationships between historical trauma and contemporary psychic damage (Morrison).

This chapter serves, in part, as an exposition of such intellectual labor, offering readings of literature (both fictional and non-fictional) produced through Black feminists' investigations of their own affective responses to structures of what bell hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (1981).² At the same time, the chapter argues that those very structures of domination contribute to the conspicuous under-citing of Black feminists' intellectual, political, and philosophical contributions within the narrative of the genealogy of affect theory. (Jennifer C. Nash's 2011 essay "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," and the more recent article by Claudia Garcia-Rojas, "(Un)Disciplined Futures: Women of Color Feminism as a Disruptive to White Affect Studies," are two notable exceptions.) This despite clear evidence of the influence such work has had on affect theorists.

There is, of course, a cluster of scholars, especially scholars of color, whose work focuses on interrogating racial formations and has become a part of the dominant archive of affect theory, including Ahmed, Tavia Nyong'o, Jasbir Puar, and José Muñoz. Additionally, Ann Cvetkovich devotes a chapter of her latest book to a discussion of depression in relation to racism, colonialism, slavery, and genocide, and has acknowledged Morrison and Black legal scholar Patricia Williams' work as foundational to her own methodologies (2012). Lauren Berlant focuses on juridical citizenship and normative modes of belonging, which necessitates attention to racial assemblages. And before interest in affect could be said to have built enough to constitute a "turn," Avery Gordon's compelling work on the sociology of haunting locates a literary theory of affect within Black feminist literature. In his discussion Gordon cites a talk given in 1989 by Wahneema Lubiano, who also develops a theory of affect in her discussion of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Lubiano observes:

It seems to me that it is useful to consider engagement in the sentimental as the excessive, the surplus corrective, to an imposed stoicism on Afro-Americans.... Given the dearth of attention ... to the emotional well-being of marginalized others, such whole-hearted engagement with emotion is a way of asserting a previously denied right to feel. (Qtd. in Gordon, 1997, 220)

However, despite the work being done on race by affect theorists, *genealogies* of affect theory usually neglect this history, tracing its roots either to a biological theory of innate affects put forth by psychologist Silvan Tomkins, which gained renewed interest in the early 1990s; or to related queer theory, which began emerging at the same time, and tends to focus on theories of affect related to emotions, embodiment, and everyday life; or to a Deleuzian framework of biological and relational sensory phenomena, which entered into the lexicon of contemporary affect theory in the early 2000s. More recently, studies of affect have developed within the neurosciences, as evidenced by emergent subfields such as neuropolitics, neuroaesthetics, and neurohistory. While the latter two strains are most strongly influenced by discourses of their respective disciplinary contexts, be they in humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences, they also frequently share an association with the work of Gilles Deleuze's translator, Brian Massumi. Massumi follows Deleuze and Félix Guattari's description of affect as "forces" or "intensities" that pass from body to body (human and non-human alike), and that are "autonomous" in the sense that intentionality has little to do with the ways in which affect works on the body or on perception (1987). Affect can be

thought of as the circulation of these forces or intensities between bodies, to which bodies then respond, remaining in a constant state of becoming through their encounters and interactions. For Massumi, affect is distinct from emotion in that emotion is contextual, and affect is situational—it is “the connecting thread of experience,” or that which is in excess of a particular body, escaping it, and coming into relation with (affecting) other bodies (2002, 217). Emotion is the personalized context of affect—the perception or naming that comes *after* an encounter charged with affect, too late for the subject to attribute meaning to the affect itself. The political dimension of this description of affect is of key interest here. As Massumi’s *Politics of Affect* makes clear, affect is a political force, even if a “proto-political” one that must be “brought out” and contextualized beyond its autonomy (2015, ix). I would argue that it is precisely this “bringing out” that is imperative to earlier Black feminist theorists.

The theorists of affect typically associated with queer theory do not necessarily disagree with Massumi’s theorizing of affect as autonomous and lacking intentionality, and certainly not its political function, but rather are more concerned with understanding the relationship of affect to the emotive process, and the ways in which that process is linked to history, normative disciplinarity, cognition, and political life. These theorists might use the terms “emotion” and “affect” interchangeably, or they might note subtle differences between the two. They might ask how emotions work on the body, how they influence everyday life, how they participate in cognitive processes, or how they act as subjugating and subjectifying forces. The particular paradigm I wish to articulate understands the workings of affect as part of political, communal, and individual organizing and subject-formation that necessarily and always functions within raced and gendered configurations. The ways in which affect functions “autonomously” between bodies (be they human or non-human), for example, is nevertheless predicated on the ways in which raced and gendered structures of power situate those bodies, both intersubjectively and spatially. Jordan’s lyric description of an architectural redesign of Harlem offers a compelling case study of the affecting power of built environments, and of the relationship of that power to the regulation of space and of the bodies that inhabit it, for example. The ghostly hauntings in Morrison’s *Beloved*, as well, insist on the materiality of affective forces across space and time, and Lorde’s explorations of emotions and sensory experiences assert their relationship to affective histories of slavery and anti-Black racism for Black and non-Black people alike.

ON AFFECT AND ANGER

Particularly elucidating here is Lorde's speech "Uses of Anger," given before an audience made up of mostly white women at the 1981 annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association. That year's conference title, "Women Respond to Racism," was a response to the tensions that had been building between the organization's primarily white, middle-class membership, and marginalized non-white feminists and women's rights activists. While the title gestures toward hoped-for ruptures in structures of oppression, the conference itself, somewhat infamously, was organized in a deeply racist way, a problem that Lorde's speech addresses.

Lorde opens by stating that her response to racism is anger. She goes on to narrate a series of exchanges she experienced that produced that anger. Some examples:

- I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman, says, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you." But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?
- I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, "Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!" And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct you. And so fifteen years later, at a conference on racism, you can still find that story humorous. But I hear your laughter is full of terror and dis-ease.
- A white academic welcomes the appearance of a collection of non-Black women of Color.* "It allows me to deal with racism without dealing with the harshness of Black women," she says to me.
- At an international cultural gathering of women, a well-known white american [sic] woman poet interrupts the reading of the work of women of Color to read her own poem, and then dashes off to an "important panel." (1984, 125–26)

The narrative device of placing her audience (and later her readers when the speech was reprinted in the anthology *Sister Outsider* in 1984) into these quotidian stories through the use of first and second person has the effect of circulating the affect that Lorde is describing, and in turn reproducing the anger and incredulity she herself felt. Her goal, she says, is not to generate guilt among her white audience, but rather to explore the

affect that racism in general, and racism in the context of the conference specifically, engenders, and then to direct that affect toward change by, in part, re-educating her audience about the value of anger. Anger, she says, “is loaded with information and energy” and “[t]ranslated into action in the service of our vision and future [it] is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (2007, 127). Such translation necessitates looking toward (rather than away from) the objects that produce anger in the first place; that is, it necessitates turning toward and acknowledging those deeply rooted material and psychic structures that condition everyday interactions.

Lorde provides an example of the potential for the (mis)uses of, or turnings away from, anger: A white woman witnesses an act of racism that infuriates her, but rather than saying something, she remains quiet. Like an “undetoned bomb,” Lorde says, the anger sits inside her, only to explode onto the first Black woman to walk into the room; in other words, the affect produced by an act of racism, while lacking intentionality *as* affect, is translated into displaced anger when it sits unexamined, ready for easy transference onto the historically and structurally pre-figured object of blame: the Black woman.

The white woman’s anger and its transference holds information, Lorde notes. Initially, it tells that woman that her first reaction of outrage is the proper, liberal reaction to the racism that structures Western society. But her secondary response, blaming the Black woman for her rage, tells her that the same racism she condemns nevertheless structures *her* interior life as well. Leaving the anger unexamined, she is easily able to transfer its object from racism to the raced other. To conflate Lorde’s examples somewhat, a white woman at a conference on racism is able to say without irony to a Black woman: “Tell me how you feel, but don’t say it too harshly. Tell me how you feel, but don’t make me (the concerned non-Black questioner) uncomfortable. Tell me how you feel, but don’t make me *feel you*. Because then I might feel your anger, too. And your message that, if I am to be ethical, my life would have to change; the object of my anger would have to be all those things—structural, material, social, emotional—that make me *me*.” This realization is, as Lorde points out, terrifying; but, to take the pursuit of social justice seriously, she says, is to take anger and its rhizomatic relationship to structures of feeling seriously.³ For white women, this means developing a politics of affect that is imbricated with an ethics of allegiance with women of color. For both white women and women of color, this means drawing out the historical references to which that anger (along with other emotions that are responses to historical

affects) relates to in order to examine it as both inside and outside the self, moving such emotions from the private space of the individual into the public space of the political.

THE AFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND LIVING COMMUNITY

June Jordan's well-known speech "Where is the Love?" (1978, published 1981) articulates self- and community-love as essential to Black liberation. The kind of love she describes works *on* the body and *through* the body toward changing sedimented attitudes, behaviors and structures of feeling, with changing material structures and everyday living conditions as the ultimate horizon. Her work on urban planning is born of this perspective. However, the work's subsequent dismissal from the canons of architecture and design is born of a world in which "women's work"—especially Black women's work—"is all, finally, despised as nothing important, and there is no trace, no echo of our days upon the earth" (145–46). Jordan's poetic description of the Harlem redesign project that she embarked upon with architect Buckminster Fuller, for example, was dismissed as "utopian" by the editors of *Esquire Magazine*, where it was published, and the project's architectural design was attributed not to Jordan and Fuller, but to Fuller alone. According to Jordan, she and Fuller fully intended the plans to be implemented as part of federal reparations "to the ravaged people of Harlem" (1981, 24). She titled her article "Skyrise for Harlem." *Esquire* renamed it "Instant Slum Clearance," with a subhead reading "R. Buckminster Fuller designs a total solution to an American dilemma: here, for instance, is how it would work for Harlem." None of the grace and sensitivity toward the people of Harlem expressed in the article is contained in those words. Nor is that grace expressed 50 years later in the words of a May 18, 2015, *Esquire* article titled "6 Wild Predictions of the Future from *Esquire's* Archives," with the subhead: "Some were close, others not." Jordan's piece is listed as number six: "Giant towers will fix Harlem."

Unwittingly signifying the desperate need to historically contextualize this entry, the only note accompanying the 2015 reprinting of Jordan's article is this: "An ambitious (and morally ambiguous) stab at redeveloping Harlem, the *Judge Dredd*-like towers from this article seem even more dystopian today." Far from "morally ambiguous" or dystopian (or utopian, as the earlier editors complained), the project was conceived by Jordan with the needs of the current Harlem residents as its primary concern. In the preface to a letter to Fuller published in *Civil Wars*, Jordan

presciently notes that one of her worries was that any plan for redevelopment of a Black neighborhood almost certainly means the eviction of those Black people during reconstruction, and their inability to return when they are priced out of the new neighborhood. Together, Jordan and Fuller conceived of a way to build new buildings atop the old, while current residents could remain living in the lower portion of the towers. When the new buildings were complete, the residents would move up into them, and the old would be razed, freeing enormous ground for communal open space, something environmental psychologists and medical professionals have long noted as essential for healthy living.

Jordan's aim with her article describing the plans was to complement the visual presentation of the proposal, and "not simply explain/duplicate the visual presentation of our design" (25). She wanted to express the affective quality of what she envisioned, give a sense for the *feel* she expected to experience in the streets of New Harlem. And the feel she was after aimed at nothing less than the "exorcism of despair" from the city. The relationship between subject and object in living spaces "may actually determine the pace, pattern, and quality of living experience," she asserts in the article (Jordan and Fuller 1965, 111). Architecture, in many ways, creates that relationship. Every housing unit in her design has at least 1200 feet of space compared to the current (at the time) 720 feet per family. Each unit would include a deck, and every room would have a view. The units would begin at the tenth floor, above the dust level and highway systems, and from each of these "[h]anging gardens," both local rivers would be visible (111). Jordan envisioned circular walkways rather than the grid-design of sidewalks and streets that produce "rigid confrontation of mass-against-mass" and that "deadened space into monotonous experience" (111). Jordan and Fuller also designed a roadway system that would disrupt the racial segregation of the highway and public transit systems, connecting Harlem to other communities and parts of the city that were otherwise nearly inaccessible for poor Harlem residents. Jordan closes the article with the following entreaty:

Where we are physically is enmeshed with our deepest consciousness of self. There is no evading architecture, no meaningful denial of our position. You can build to defend the endurance of man, to protect his existence, to illuminate it. ... If man is to have not only a future but a destiny, it must be consciously and deliberately designed. (111)

Utopian? Perhaps so, but only because a world in which a physical environment deliberately designed toward communal living, especially *Black* communal living, was and remains but a thing of the (Black) imagination and outside the scope of a white imaginary, which continues to dominate architecture. Jordan's poetic rendering of her and Fuller's architectural design offers a sense of the openness and freedom at which they aimed. Her descriptions of the "hanging gardens" from which the flow of water is visible allow one to imagine a world in which different worlds are possible, and offer a glimpse at the affect such a space could promote, affect that evokes a life of flourish, rather than of mere survival. Jordan's poem "Sweetwater Poem Number One," on the other hand, expresses the affect created by the denial of such a space, by willful raced and gendered neglect:

You assume the buildings and / The small print roadways and / The cornered accidents / Of roof and oozing tar and ordinary concrete / Zigzag. Well. / It is not beautiful. / It never was. / These are the shaven / Private parts / The city show / Of what somebody means / When he don't even bother / Just to say / "I don't give a goddam" / (and) / "I hate you." (2007)

AFFECTIVE HAUNTINGS

I turn now to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) as an example of the ways Black feminist projects that began in the late 1960s were taken up in the literature of later fictional works. I look to *Beloved* in part because of its frequent citation by theorists of affect (Berlant and Ahmed, to name just two)⁴ as noteworthy for its affective work, even if it is not specifically thought of as a text articulating or prefiguring affect theory. I contend that the novel and the discourse surrounding it offer insight into the political work that can be done through examination of the "information" that affect holds. Both the narrative itself and Morrison's extensive discussions about her writing process, in fact, insist upon the examination of affect. Morrison makes clear, however, that the process is at once crucial to the articulation of histories and formulation of memories for African diasporic subjects *and* is psychically threatening, a labor that must be undertaken with great care and communal support. I refer to "diaspora" here both in the immediate sense of geographical displacement of bodies, and in a more removed sense, in terms of historical displacement. This second meaning might be thought of as *deep* diaspora, whereby subjects experience dislocation intergenerationally as cultural memory. Through physical

haunting in the form the ghost *Beloved*, as well as through the theorizing of “rememory” throughout the novel, *Beloved* ties personal histories of the protagonists to a mythical “we” of African diasporic peoples, suggesting that memory functions affectively, moving from body to body across time and space.

Black music and oral storytelling were once privileged media in which affects specific to the Black experience were transmitted and would generate cultural memory, according to Morrison. However, she argues that Black music has been appropriated in such a way as to largely void it of specificity, and oral storytelling no longer fits into the social fabric of Black life. “We don’t live in places where we can hear [ancestral] stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel” (2008, 58). The novel has the potential for an “affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience,” Morrison goes on to observe, which requires “the reader to work *with* the author in the construction of the book” to ensure the affective force is meaningful or transformative (59). The movement between text and reader, between what is said and left unsaid and then filled in by the reader, is what completes a novel, according to Morrison. This active relationality creates emotional charge, and the story then moves within affective circuits of history-making and memory-formation; it becomes part of the cultural commentary and critique that shape subjective and intersubjective (thus political) positions and experiences.

Such an understanding of the role of the novel shapes the construction of *Beloved*, which fills in those “proceedings too terrible to relate” (1995, 90–91)—those elements left out of historiography outside the text and left unsaid inside the text—with the creative and constructive impulse of author and the (attentive) reader. Using a technique she describes as “literary archeology,” Morrison creates a history of slave subjectivity in *Beloved* by taking seriously the “hints” of emotional and affective lives that exist between the lines of the written record, as well as in oral histories and her own experiences with her living ancestors. She takes seriously, she says, the “memories within,” or what might be thought of as her own bumping into the “rememory,” as protagonist Sethe calls it in *Beloved*, that exists within the cultural practices of her intimate world. Quoting Zora Neal Hurston’s opening passage from *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, Morrison says, “Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories

within that came out of the material that went to make me” (1995, 92). The development of the story of Sethe, in other words, is based as much on Morrison’s own affective experience as a descendant of slavery as it is on the written record of Margaret Garner’s life—the novelist relied on what she came to intuit through her brushing up against subjects and objects that hold historical, if incomplete, information through their cultural practices and meanings.

Within the narrative of the novel, the affect of absence is theorized through Sethe’s articulations of “rememory.” More complicated than memory, rememory is shaped by histories of collective trauma that leave the former slaves who populate the novel haunted, scarred psychologically and physically. Despite the effort on the part of the former slaves to escape their memories and forge new worlds for themselves in the relative freedom of the north, it is always “there,” as Sethe remarks, “outside my head” (36). Like the imprint of the baby ghost’s hands discovered by Sethe’s living children on a cake, rememory hovers as a physical presence in the landscape, detached from individual rememberers but shaping their relations with each other and their environments and showing up as affective sensory experiences (3). “Someday, you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on,” Sethe tells her daughter Denver. “So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (36). Through Sethe, Morrison attempts a negotiation with these repressed personal and collective memories, the details of which exist only in fragments and circuits of feelings, only in stories, rumors and hints that are passed on between community members. The story of Sethe’s killing of her child is one of the most devastating of many examples in the novel.

While many have read the novel as a declaration for the psychological necessity of recovering memory—both for the health of the novel’s characters and of present-day readers—it is equally, I would argue, a meditation on the trauma that recovering memories can engender. Morrison theorizes the tension between the will to remember and the will to forget through the conflicting intergenerational needs of Sethe and Denver, Sethe’s only remaining child. Denver lives in a state of arrested childhood for much of the novel, unable to engage with the world outside of 124 Bluestone Road, haunted by a family history that she knows only through whispers and backward glances. She is nearly consumed by those absences as they manifest in the physical form of her dead sister, the ghost Beloved, when she appears as a full-grown woman. Her desire for Beloved, her

desire to fill the gaps that Beloved's previous absence represented, threatens to overtake Denver's ability to exist in the present. Sethe as well is nearly consumed on Beloved's arrival. In an effort of self-preservation, Sethe works throughout Denver's childhood to maintain the gaps, to keep at bay those proceedings too terrible to relate. The past cannot, however, be fully contained. It appears in rememory, and in the very form of absence itself: the baby ghost Beloved. When Paul D. attempts to exorcise that ghost, it comes roaring back in the flesh as the grown woman Beloved, fully claiming Sethe with her arrival. Sethe becomes submersed within the (w)hole of her past, giving herself over to the girl who then "ate up [Sethe's] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (250).

The metaphor of haunting in *Beloved*, then, suggests movement of affect across time and through generations. The devastating confrontation with the guilt, shame, and terror of the past that the grown, fleshly Beloved's arrival brings for Sethe is foreshadowed through her encounters with the affective forces, the rememory, produced by other seemingly innocuous objects. One long passage, for example, describes the affective force of the Ohio landscape:

[Sethe] worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately, her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly to rinse the camomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be on her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where her skin buckled like a washboard.... Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward the water.... Then something. The splash of water. The sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them ... and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. (6)

Natural beauty, which could serve for Sethe as a respite, instead serves as catalyst by which the terror of remembering and the danger of forgetting combine. For Sethe, the "shameless beauty" of the plantation Sweet Home and the sycamores—of the "[b]oys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world"—is a physical manifestation of her conflicted relationship to memory: it is shameful to forget, but too painful to remember, and so memories are displaced and distorted. Rather than one of pleasure, her response to beauty's affect is guilt and suppressed grief: "[T]ry as she might to make it otherwise the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that" (6). Such a response

implies what is later articulated by theorists as affect's autonomy, calling into question universalist assumptions about the pleasures of judgment, especially for those who have been systemically denied access to pleasure.

Ultimately, the novel refuses any easy reconciliation. There is no sudden access to pleasure through cathartic confrontation with history or beauty. Even when Beloved's presence—both ghostly and fleshly—is finally exorcised from 124 Bluestone Road, the affective charge of her having existed remains, if only in the wind, in footprints by the creek, in the bittersweet everydayness of life as the novel's characters carry on (275). As the second death of Beloved suggests, rememory is a remnant, an affective trace of a grief without end for the 60 million *and more*, as Morrison notes in the novel's dedication, who suffered under slavery and continue to suffer in its afterlife. In its representations of facing, and choosing *not* to face, traumatic memories, *Beloved* asks: What is the price of bearing witness to the affect that remains? What is the price of looking away?

Contemporary Black feminists such as Saidiya Hartman continue to grapple with such questions in the present. Also pointing to the power of narration to affect across time and space, Hartman notes that stories of slavery are not stories about slaves themselves, nor about slavekeepers. They are stories about their descendants, and what their descendants make of the records that act as “failed witness” to the tragedy of slavery. Stories like *Beloved* are stories of slavery's survivors, of its descendants who bump into the rememory that emerges from sycamore trees, from the landscape of a ruined Harlem, from the love between women who share no history but oppression. Can these types of narratives “provide an antidote to dishonor, and ... a way to ‘exhume buried cries’ and reanimate the dead? Or is narration its own gift and its own end ... [a] way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation?” Hartman asks (2008, 3). Perhaps not remedy, she suggests, but rather, these stories are part of a historiographical operation that exists in “the conjunction of hope and defeat” (14). Narrative, in other words, can't ever speak the unspeakable or recover histories forever lost. It can, however, articulate the affect of the past that remains, and draw from the information it provides. Such stories, entering into the affective circuits of the present, have the potential to disrupt dominant structures of feeling, including those related to cultures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. An intellectual history of affect theory that tells the story of Black feminist thought within it, in its own small way, has the potential to do just that.

NOTES

1. I use Raymond Williams' term "structures of feeling" here to refer to the complex of systems of beliefs, ideologies, and competing hegemonies that often go unarticulated, but rather appear in senses of things or affective social relations; what Williams described in *Marxism and Literature* as the "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" (1997, 132). In my work, I emphasize that such structures are variable across social and cultural groups, and are in constant tension with competing local and global structures, as well as material and spatial conditions. Specifically, I argue that systemic and structural racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are supported by fluid, but nevertheless dominant, structures of feeling, on the one hand, and contested by variable and also fluid structures of feeling as they manifest within marginalized communities, on the other.
2. bell hooks coins this term to describe contemporary interlocking systems of domination in *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. New York: South End Press, 1981.
3. Deleuze and Guattari describe the organization of culture as rhizomatic rather than hierarchical. The rhizome, they say, includes the best and the worst of a thing. To understand culture as rhizome is to understand it as ceaselessly establishing "connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (1987, 7). There are no universals to establish cultural mores in this model, but rather relations of domination that produce normative cultural modes. I use this term in connection with Williams' "structures of feeling" to emphasize the ways in which those structures are established—and contested—in part through the ceaseless connections between bodies, institutions, object, etc., that affects such as anger produce.
4. See Berlant's *The Female Complaint* (2008), 66–67, and Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), 79–83.

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