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Towards a Method of Black Feminist Archival Bricolage: Memory-Keeping within, beneath and beyond the Archive

By Tiera Tanksley

ABSTRACT

This essay considers the erasure and visceral laceration of Black women's herstories from white, masculinized archives, timelines, and cartographies of the past. It simultaneously centers the identity-oriented and historically anchored ways everyday Black women collect, curate, and pass down personal archives for the purpose of intergenerational survival and uplift. In centering the life writings and oral narratives of three Black women in the author's immediate family, this essay disrupts archival silences around the movements, mobilities, and resistance strategies of everyday Black women; rather, it reveals how Black grandmothers, mothers, and othermothers continue to sustain Black women's viability and visibility through their work as memory-keepers and family historians. By centering the life herstories of her grandmother, mother, and aunt, the author engages in a process of Black feminist archival bricolage, weaving together fragmented pieces of distinct yet overlapping life narratives that—when put together—tell a more complete and complex story of Black women's movements, resistances, and archival pedagogies. In doing so, archival fissures are collaboratively challenged in order to reclaim, recover, and recenter the invisible cartographies of everyday Black women.

KEYWORDS

Black feminist thought; memory-keeping; archival research; resistance; mobility

Introduction

Extant literature has documented how institutionalized archives work in tandem with historically anchored systems of power to fragment, dismember, and obscure continually the voices and lived experiences of Black women. As material extensions of the settler-colonial apparatus, archives are not only enmeshed in the legacies of genocide and slavery, but also laden with the power to (re)construct and (re)tell history from the vantage point of those in power.[1] Because they play an indispensable role in

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the maintenance of imperial control, archives are rife with raced and gendered omissions, particularly as they relate to the power and complexity of Black women's lives, mobilities, and resistance practices.[2] Yet Black women continue to work as community archivists, dedicated to the political project of gendered memory-keeping.[3] The personal archives kept and curated by everyday Black women—often a multimodal assemblage of handwritten letters, photograph albums, oral histories, and family heirlooms—illuminate their collective struggle to memory-keep within and against archival silences. In doing so, they boldly challenge whose lives, movements, and resistance stories are worthy of being remembered.

In recognizing the pervasive erasure of everyday Black women's lives and mobilities in institutionalized archives, this essay endeavors to recover, recollect, and recenter the oral herstories and life writings of three Black women in my family. The purposeful inclusion of these narratives is threefold: (1) to recognize the ways Black women view movement and mobility as a means of resisting physical, spiritual, and epistemological erasure; (2) to show how Black women foster intergenerational resistance by way of keeping, curating, and passing on these memories of movement and resistance to Black girls; and (3) to assert that both the dangerous moves and the memory-keeping processes of Black women form the anatomical foundations for a Black feminist theory of archival research that is intersectional, multimodal, and historically anchored. Ultimately, this work disrupts institutionalized fissures in historical archives by weaving together fragmented pieces of three separate yet overlapping narratives of Black female movement, resistance, and memory-keeping. When woven together, these everyday standpoints form the theoretical underpinnings for what I have come to call *Black feminist archival bricolage*—a means of recentering and recovering Black women's everyday cartographies within, beneath, and beyond the archival margins.

Black Feminist Theory: A Call for Intersectional Archival Methodologies

For years, critical archivists have called for more decolonial, feminist, and race-centered approaches to archival research that can center the voices and lived experiences of Black women in robust, intersectional ways.[4] These scholars challenge the presumed neutrality of the archive and instead recognize that the conventional positivist methodologies used to collect, curate, and evaluate the significance of historical artifacts are enmeshed in white, masculinized ideologies and value systems.[5] As a result of these hegemonic structures, Black women's life herstories are often sterilized, oversimplified, and distorted in ways that meet the

fluctuating needs of the Empire.[6] Whether it is downplaying the severity of intersectional domination or hyper-focusing on Black suffering because images of Black people dead or dying are immensely profitable,[7] Black women's bodies, voices, and lived experiences are regularly fragmented within conventional museums and archives.

As a direct challenge to these colonial lacerations, the scholar and historian Toni Morrison engendered a radical race-conscious approach to archival research that strives to re-collect and reconnect Black stories in transformative ways.[8] In her construction of *The Black Book*, a sort of community scrapbook, she used collaborative, multimodal, and intergenerational archival methods to present a history of Black life that was "impressionistic rather than authoritative, fragmentary rather than whole."[9] This is because Morrison understood that Black people, as survivors of genocidal violence, "could access collective memory only through fragments, traces, the detritus and hauntings of history."[10] Consequently, her desire to curate a history project that centered "people who had always been viewed as percentages" necessitated a type of archival bricolage—a weaving together of everyday trinkets, recollections, and oral histories across time and space—that could (re)present Black lives in complex, holistic, and humanizing ways.[11]

To accomplish this feat, Morrison turned her attention away from mainstream scholars and conventional archives—entities that she believed "habitually leave out life lived by everyday people"[12]—to ordinary Black people. As she saw it, everyday people were community archivists who possessed "the original raw material documenting our life: posters, letters, newspapers, advertising cards, sheet music, photographs, movie frames, books, artifacts and mementos."[13] By centering collectivity and communal memory-keeping, Morrison disrupted the neoliberal logics of individualism and meritocracy that often inform conventional curatorial practices and divorce Black historical figures, such as Rosa Parks or Fannie Lou Hamer, from the ecological, intergenerational, and intersectional support systems that sustained them. Thus, *The Black Book* was an overlapping, multimodal, and at times discontinuous assemblage of community artifacts that redefined whose lives, stories, and personal effects were worthy of being remembered.

While Morrison's curatorial practices exemplify the power and potentiality of race-centered methodologies, Black feminist thought extends this conceptualization to include gender-conscious frameworks that can recognize the intersectional impacts of racialized sexism for Black women and girls.[14] Because they exist at the precarious intersection of race, class, and gender domination, Black women's experiences with—and subsequent resistance to—archival erasure and fragmentation are nuanced and profoundly distinct from those of Black men.[15] The experiences of Sarah Baartman, known throughout museum circuits as the Hottentot Venus,

exemplify these differences, as well as the necessity of intersectional frameworks in the re-collection and recollection[16] of Black women's herstories.[17] Baartman's exploitation with|in museums, and her post-mortem dismemberment in institutional archives, is a consequence of matrices of domination which encourage, nay demand, that Black women's lives and humanity be divorced from their bodily curatorial representation in the archives to make them "more palatable" and thus easier to consume.[18]

Grounded in an ethics of care, justice, and communal knowledge production, Black feminism challenges hegemonic practices that overlook and undervalue Black women's epistemological expertise and familiarity with archival fissures.[19] Instead, Black feminist thought asserts that "ordinary African American women" have developed a sophisticated, intersectional analysis of the material conditions of archival oppression—one that challenges majoritarian depictions of Black women's lives in distorted, fragmented, and oversimplified ways.[20] Consequently, Black women's "homegrown" standpoints are essential to developing archival methodologies which can present robust and empowering depictions that center—rather than distort, absorb, and erase—Black women's lives, movements, and resistance strategies.

When considered in tandem, Morrison's *Black Book* and Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist thought[21] provide the onto-epistemological and theoretical rationale for developing new archival methodologies that are (1) race-conscious and culturally situated; (2) grounded in the everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge of ordinary Black women; and (3) able not only to recognize but also to rectify the colonial logics that continue to mediate Black women's access to, control over, and representation in historical archives. This essay attempts to answer this call by centering the everyday lived experiences of Black women who continue to survive and resist material, spiritual, and epistemological erasure through intersectional memory-keeping. Specifically, I operationalize Black feminist thought broadly, and Morrison's curatorial practices in particular, to leverage and learn from the experiences of Black women in my family as they (re)collect and (re)construct stories of movement, mobility, and resistance. Using these counterstories as a point of entry, I offer a *Black feminist archival bricolage*—a methodology anchored in the onto-epistemologies and "homegrown" archival practices of everyday Black women that is designed to (re) construct herstory in dynamic, intergenerational, and justice-oriented ways.

Narratives on Memory, Resistance, and "Making Moves"

The women in my family have always been on the move. As a Black woman with Native, Italian, and African American lineage, the legacy of movement, diaspora, and forced displacement sits heavily in my veins. Born to a lineage of Black women who exist within, between, and beyond the margins of

society, I have devised and sustained an intergenerational and historically anchored consciousness of what it means to "make moves"—that is, to resist erasure, disrupt invisibility, and take space when space is not given.

Although their stories are not present within museums or history books, the women in my family have vehemently resisted epistemological invisibility through the curation of personal archives. These archives—a multimodal assemblage of photograph albums, handwritten letters, oral histories, and family heirlooms—have been passed down through generations of Black women via memory-keeping practices that work within, beyond, and beneath the archival margins. Their archival processes are gendered, raced, and classed—a strategic attempt to resist historical erasure and a commitment to teaching and protecting the next generation of Black women from physical, spiritual, and epistemic violence.

In the following subsections, I showcase the life herstories of my grandmother, mother, and aunt to illuminate the ways they preserved and passed on archival accounts of their diasporas, resistance, and dangerous moves. Thereafter, I leverage these memories and memory-keeping practices into a Black feminist theory of archival bricolage—a means of memory-keeping within, beneath, and beyond the archives.

Floria Parris-Tanksley: Memory-Keeping beyond the Archive

My grandmother, Floria Parris-Tanksley, was born in 1944 into a family of sharecroppers on a plantation just outside of Augusta, Georgia. As one of the youngest of twelve children and one of the "lucky ones" allowed to attend school during the Jim Crow era, my Grams has learned the importance of record-keeping and history-making. While her older siblings spent a lifetime unable to read or write due to their obligations to the family and the plantation owners, my grandmother developed a knack for reading, writing, and arithmetic that she believes helped her to document the lives of loved ones who were unable to do so themselves. Consequently, my Grams is the ultimate storyteller and the keeper of personal, family, and communal history.

Entering my grandmother's house is like walking into the canals of Black history. Her walls are covered with faded pictures of long-lost loved ones and distant relatives; her entry room contains a large dust-covered Bible that has been in her family for almost four generations; and her China cabinet is stocked to the brim with countless sports trophies—from the beloved bowling trophy she won back in the 1960s to the bronze medal that her great-granddaughter won in last year's elementary relay race. I take in these mementos as I make my way toward my grandma's kitchen—an aroma-filled space of memory-keeping and gendered storytelling.

"Hey Grams," I say, popping a piping-hot piece of yellow cornbread into my mouth while her back is turned. "Whatcha making?" I settle into a

nearby chair as she tells me about the recipe she is whipping up. "It's real easy," she says, prepping the cornmeal for the next round of hot water cornbread. "My mama taught me this one." I smile with anticipation, knowing that my journey into history is about to begin. You see, for my grandmother, the kitchen is the entry point into the cartographies of the past. Every turn of the whisk draws us deeper and deeper into history, and the story of our lives as Black women and girls "on the move" begins to unfold:

> You know, my mama had twelve kids. She were a strong Black woman [Figure 1]. She lived a hard life. That's why she moved away from my daddy's farm. When we was on my daddy's farm, mama would cook; she would kill the chickens and pull up the cotton; she took care of us children. She was a lady with a strong passion and she always worked hard in the fields. She was used to hard work. My mom and my dad did sharecropping 'til mama got tired. After the last three kids came along, she said, "This is it! I'm not doing it no more!" She had been workin' the farm all her life and she said, "I want better for my younger children."
>
> So, she packed us up and moved us to the city. I remember the people coming there … two trucks came to move my mother, and my daddy took the shotgun out and stood on the front porch and said, "If anybody come up on these steps, Imma blow you away." He would not let those people move my mother … He did not want mama to go. He was controlling. I remember that well. And that made me all the more determined to go with my mama.



Figure 1. Floria's mother, Eula Bertha Parris.

> So, my brother Ulysees moved my mother and we pleaded with mama to let us go on the first truckload because we did not wanna stay there. And if mama and them got to Augusta and got back late or never got back … we wanted to make sure we wasn't left behind. So me, Eugene, Harvey, and Benny, we went on the first load. And mama said, "Well, we gonna have to take some of the stuff off the truck now if the kids wanna go on there," and we said, "We okay! We okay! We can hide down behind here!" So we got in that truck, and we rode with the furniture on the first load. It was dangerous, you know, my mama movin' out on her own and workin' in the city during that time. But mama didn't care. She was done workin' that farm!

My Grams laughs heartily at the memory, and I cannot help but giggle along with her. As she recalls the various ways the women in her family enacted gendered mobility and resistance during the Jim Crow era, I come to realize that dangerous moves have been a necessary part of our family's survival. While my Grams' mama, Eula Bertha, packed up and moved her kids to the city to escape economic hardship, domestic violence, and educational inequality, her older sister, Eula Lee (Figure 2), made dangerous moves to acquire an education. As she begins washing the collard greens, Grams recounts the story of her older sister:



Figure 2. Floria's older sister, Eula Lee, pictured when she was a young girl and again when she was an older woman.

> My sister Eula, she were the only one that furthered her education. Out of all the kids, she were the one that graduated. Cuz she stood up to my daddy and said, "I'm not workin' in the field. I'm goin' to school." She was like that lady that wouldn't go on the back of the bus … she stood up to my dad. She said, "You could whip me"—cuz back then he used to whip the kids—she said, "You could whip me, but I'm not going out in the field and work."
>
> You see, my daddy would keep my sisters and brothers home during school days and they would have to pick cotton—they would pull the corn, whatever had to be done [Figure 3]. They worked in the fields. But my sister, Eula Lee, she stood up to my dad and she said, "I am not going to go to the farm and work. I'm going to school." And she went, too. She went to a place called Boggs Academy and she got her education. Eventually, my daddy just let her go. I guess he got tired of whippin' her. She were a strong woman, just like my mama. She could not be broken.

I am amazed not only at how brave my great-aunt and great-grandmother were to challenge systems of racism, sexism, and patriarchal violence directly through their physical mobility, but also at how much my Grams



Figure 3. Floria's father (*left*) and eldest brother, W. D. (*right*), working as sharecroppers on the Olgesby Plantation in Sardis, Georgia.

remembers about our family history. "How do you remember all of this?" I ask her, watching intently as she strikes a fire under her pot of collards. "Oh, I keeps the records," she says, using her bare hands to flip a sizzling hotcake in her cast-iron skillet. "I gots the receipts." Wiping her hands on a nearby dishrag, she continues, "My mama always told me, 'Don't throw nothin' away.' You keep everything cuz, that way, can't nobody tell you about yourself. You got the records."

And baby, does she have the records! She takes a break from her cooking to show me her collection of family photographs and memorabilia. As I flip through tattered photograph albums, she tells me stories of each and every family member, charting their life histories through stories of their sojourns for better futures. "This here is a picture of the house we lived in," she says, pointing to a black-and-white photograph of a multi-story home (Figure 4). "And this lady right here," she says, pointing to a woman in the driver's seat of an old-fashioned car, "this here was my brother's wife. I guess she was leavin', goin' somewhere, when they took this picture. That girl was always makin' moves!" She laughs, and the connections between memories, mobility, and resistance become ever more concrete in my mind.

Geography is an indispensable part of my grandmother's herstory. As I rifle through boxes of family heirlooms, Grams pulls out a quilt that she bought many years ago from a small shop in Augusta, Georgia (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Floria's childhood home in Sardis, Georgia.

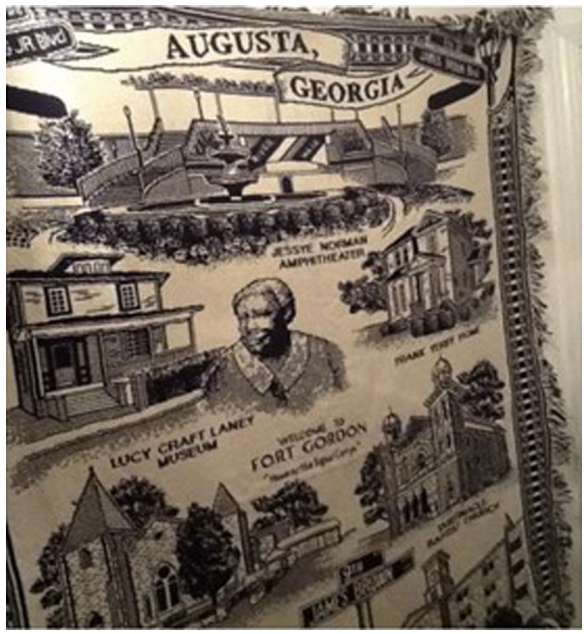


Figure 5. Floria's quilt showing the history of Augusta, Georgia.

She traces her fingers along each image on the quilt, recalling where and when each event took place. The quilt contains images of her parents' church and eventual burial ground; a street sign above the place she used to work; and the schoolhouse-turned-museum where Lucy Craft Laney, the founder of her elementary school, lived. "This how I keeps records," she tells me, carefully folding the quilt and placing it back into the closet. "You know, my mama and them ain't get to go to school. But my mama taught herself how to read and write a little bit. Just enough to get by. She used the Bible, like the slaves did. And she always told me Black women, we gotta remember where we come from—what happened before us. If you don't, you'll forget … and then what?" Grams' question lands heavily on my chest, and the power and intentionality of Black women's memory-keeping is made even more concrete: gendered memory-keeping is a collective struggle against material, spiritual, and epistemological erasure. Our stories of survival, movement, and resistance cannot—and will not—be forgotten.

My grandmother's memory-keeping by way of photograph albums, trophy cases, quilts, and cooking disrupts archival fissures that overlook or downplay the significance of everyday Black women's movements and resistance strategies. While she memory-keeps *beyond* the institutional archives—re-collecting stories, trinkets, and family heirlooms—my mother worked to recover memories of movement and resistance *within* conventional archival spaces, including the museum and the local library.



Figure 6. Monica Gayton-Tanksley as a young woman.

Monica Gayton-Tanksley: Memory-Keeping within the Archives

My mother, a biracial Black woman from Upstate New York, has always had a passion for archival research (Figure 6). She has spent her entire life navigating institutional archives in search of her complex and obscure racial past. My mom's hunt for her family history began at a young age. Born from an interracial love affair that occurred during a time of heightened anti-Black violence, my mom never had the opportunity to know her mother as a child. Whenever I visit my mom, she makes a note to show me the newest additions to her family-history project. "I wrote another couple pages to explain our history," she says, and opens a coat closet to reveal shelves of scrapbooks, family-history charts, and colored folders. She pulls out a folder full of journal pages and shows me the first few sheets of her life writings: "I've been writing down everything I could remember about our family history: names, places, everything I could think of from my childhood." There are innumerable boxes and folders in this closet, and each one is carefully labeled by year, location, and the names of the family members whose memories it contains. "You're so thorough," I tell her, staring in amazement at her life's work. "I have to be," she says, pulling another box to the fore. "I want you to know our history, so you don't ever have to wonder about your past." She stops for a moment, gesturing at the boxes of memories, and adds, "Plus, I want you to know where you can find it, so you don't ever have to look as hard as I did to know who you are. You'll know that it's right here, in this room, in our house." Her tone is intentional, and I am immediately

reminded of her ongoing struggle to gain entry into institutional archives as a Black woman.

As she rifles through a box in search of a particular newspaper clipping, I peruse the first few pages of her autobiographical journal, a piece she has begun lovingly to call "The (In)visible Woman." In it, she writes:

> My humble beginnings began with my grandmother [Figure 7]. She was a strong-willed and fiercely loving Afro-indigenous woman who would do just about anything to protect her family. We lived in the house that her father—my great-grandfather—had purchased in the early 1900s. When he passed away, my grandmother, me, my brother, and my dad continued to live there. My brother and I were too young to really know why our mother didn't live with us. It was never discussed nor was her name ever brought up in conversations.
>
> One day when I was four years old and my brother was five years old, an old station wagon pulled into our gravel driveway [Figure 8]. I stood on the couch and watched from the downstairs living-room window as my dad



Figure 7. Monica's grandmother, Helen Peterson.



Figure 8. Monica and her brother, Perry, as children before they were mysteriously separated.

put my brother in the car. I never saw who was driving the car. I only remember thinking they were just going to the store or taking my brother to a doctor's appointment, and he would be coming back soon, but he never did. From that point on, I grew up alone with the illusion that I was an "only child." Neither my dad nor my grandmother ever mentioned my brother, my mother, or their whereabouts as I was growing up.

When I turned seven years old, I was baptized at the local church. A few days later, an oversized envelope arrived in our mailbox. I remember seeing my church's name and address in the upper-left-hand corner of the envelope. I gave the letter to my grandmother, watched her open it, peek inside, and then hurriedly stuff it inside a drawer under some linen. It was strange of her not to mention what was inside the package. I remember wanting to know what was in that envelope and wondering why she was hiding it in a linen drawer.

It took me almost two years to find out what was in that mysterious envelope. One day, when my grandmother was away at work, I snuck into her room and opened the drawer. I carefully opened the envelope and took out the contents. It was a small ivory-colored book titled "Memento and Certificate of Baptism." It was there, in pages of this book, that I saw my mother's name for the first time: Peggy. I kept this secret to myself, never letting anyone know what I had found in the drawer that day. I felt like the book had been hidden by my grandmother for a reason, although I didn't know what the reason was, and with that I was determined to not let her or my dad know that I had discovered their big secret.

Even though I have heard this story hundreds of times, I am glued to the pages of the journal. "I still cannot believe they tried to play it off like you didn't have a brother," I say, running my fingers across the laminated pages. My mom nods, holding a small, brown corn-husk doll in her hand. "I think my grandmother knew how dangerous it would be for our family. She had spent a lifetime surviving racial violence, and because she worked for a powerful white family, she sort of had her ear to the ground, so she knew when and if things would pop off." She hands me the doll, and I am reminded of how Great Grandma used to share her Afro-indigenous heritage with my mom by making these dolls. "We were the only Black people in town," my mom continues, twisting her grandma's turquoise eagle ring around and around on her finger. "If it ever came out that my mom had an affair with a Black man, they would come for us. You know they were lynching people back then. And my grandma was *not* about to let anything happen to her son, *or* her grand-baby." I nod, understanding the full weight of my great-grandma's decision to hide the truth of my mom's biracial past. I turn the pages of the journal, eager to read the rest of the story:

> When I turned ten, my grandmother passed away and with her she took any and all secrets about me, my mother, and my brother. Fear of losing my heritage with my grandmother's death consumed me, and I dug deeper. It became an obsession: a need to know who I am. I couldn't stop looking for a sense of where I came from and making sense of my light skin color.
>
> For the next few years, different pieces of the puzzle just kept falling into place. One time, a neighbor walked by while I was in the garden with my father and asked me, "How's your brother doing?" I was bewildered. "My brother?" I asked, worried I had not heard him correctly. My father stood to his feet, dusted the dirt off his pants, and invited the neighbor to check out some of his newest plants on the other side of our garden.
>
> Another time, when I was working as a teller at the local bank, a woman came up to the counter and said, "You know, I'm your aunt." There was a moment of silence and I wondered if she had mistaken me for someone else. She cleared her throat and clarified, "Your mother's sister." Once again, it felt like the wind had been knocked out of my chest. This woman couldn't be my aunt. She was white! Did that mean my mom was white? Did that mean I myself was white?
>
> It was time to confront my father [Figure 9]. Though he seemed hesitant, my dad sat me down and explained to me the secrecy around my birth. He explained that interracial relationships back then were "forbidden" because Black people at that time were not really treated as equal when my brother and I were born. However, when my brother and I were born, our complexions were so light my mom was able to pass us off as white for a few years, and convince her husband we were his so he would sign



Figure 9. Monica's father, Herman "Pete" Gayton.

> the birth certificates. With us having her husband's last name, no one would question our births, and my dad would be safe from harm. After our conversation, it all began to make sense and I could read between the lines. The real reason my mom left town wasn't because her husband was an abusive alcoholic, though that was definitely a part of it; it was because she could no longer hide my brother and my skin tones. We were darker than her husband's two real daughters (our stepsisters) and, as we grew older, she was worried he would eventually figure out that we weren't his.
>
> After that, I began to carefully document every detail I discovered about my mom, my brother, and my mysterious past. In lieu of asking my family, neighbors, and community members for more information about my past—which still felt like dangerous knowledge—I decided I would find out the answers for myself. That's when I decided to use the archives. I spent hours each day at the town library, going through each and every microfiche I could get my hands on, searching until it closed each night. I visited local museums, watched splotchy film reels of the town's history, read pages and pages of faded newspapers, and even wrote letters to hospitals, universities, and museums requesting access to primary sources that I thought could help me solve the mystery of "me."
>
> With the help of digital repositories, I have not only been able to trace my mother's side of the family but have begun tracing my dad's side as well. I have traced our lineage on my father's side back to the slave ship that once brought my ancestors to Southern Tier, New York State [Figure 10].

My mom's narrative powerfully captures how institutional archives hold some degree of promise and possibility for Women of Color. Because she was biracial with white lineage, my mother was able to leverage white, masculinized cartographies and timelines to recover portions of her racial



Figure 10. A page out of Monica's family-history scrapbook.

history that were otherwise obscure and illegible. When asked how her multiraciality informed her experience with archival research, she states, "Because I was mixed, I was able to combine traditional resources that usually preserve white history, like museums and census records, with Black community resources, like stories and family heirlooms that never make it to the museum. I really think it was my multiracial consciousness and my ability to memory-keep 'between worlds' that allowed me to piece together the entire story of me." It took nearly twenty-five years, but my mom eventually was able to locate and make contact with her long-lost brother, Perry. Once she found him, she used the archival documents she had collected over a lifetime—birth records, marriage and death certificates, military records—to prove her identity and reclaim a racial lineage that had been lost. This meeting was life-changing for my Uncle Perry, who had been raised to believe he was white, despite him feeling otherwise. "I think he knew deep down what the truth was," my mom says, closing the book. "But with the birth certificate and government documents supporting all the stories my mom told him, he didn't have any hard evidence. He just had a gut feeling that something wasn't right." Where racism and anti-Black violence had viscerally lacerated a family, a repurposing of the archives for resistance and reclamation ultimately mended deep-set historical wounds.

While my mom and grandmother showcase the power and potentiality of memory-keeping within and beyond the archive, my Aunt Wanda—a survivor of institutional and carceral violence—positions the Black female body as a corporal site of memory, resistance, and mobility.

Wanda Tanksley: Memory-Keeping beneath the Archives

My Aunt Wanda, known for her characteristically smart mouth and her unwavering love for her family, is a survivor of institutional, interpersonal, and state-sanctioned violence (Figure 11). By all traditional accounts, her life as an addict, a sex worker, and a single mother on government assistance does not have a place in the traditional archives. Yet she refuses to let her story of survival and displacement be erased from history. Whenever we spend time together, she points out her scars, recalling each and every instance of the abuse she survived. Her corporeal archive is a testament to Black women's resilience and relentless desire to be seen, heard, and remembered.

Aunt Wanda sits on my Grams' couch eating hard candies and rubbing her aching joints. She has spent a lifetime on the move—escaping abusive partners, navigating the prison system, working the corners to make ends meet for her daughters and granddaughters—and the pain of it all has taken residence in the joints of her legs. "I ever tell you about the time I escaped The Hole?" she says, massaging her hip. I shake my head no and sit quietly, and she draws the memory out from her aching bones: "I had to jump out a movin' car. Woo,



Figure 11. My aunt, Wanda Vernice Tanksley.

child, was that a trip. I was with this Joe, we were in his car, and he started drivin' me somewhere. I'm like, 'Where is we going?' Because when you trickin', you don't usually leave the lot. The stroll. He gon' lock the door and told me we goin' to a hotel. I'm new to California, so I don't know where we goin', but we was in the valley. There's this place in the valley, they call it The Hole. You go there, you don't come back. Ever. And I wasn't about to be taken to no Hole. So I told him let me out this car. He wouldn't, he started fighting me. So we fightin', and I got the door open and I jump out of the car. Do you know this man kept drivin', and he's holdin' onto me. So I'm hangin' out the car, gettin' all tore up from the road. I kept hittin' him and I got loose, but that was the worst pain I ever experienced. I'm tellin' you. But you do what you gotta do to survive, you hear me? Ain't no man 'bout to take my life."

Aunt Wanda's stories are messy—they are the "dirty laundry" that no one dares speak about in public. But behind closed doors, in the safety of my Grams' living room, my aunt speaks freely and unapologetically about her experiences on the margins (Figure 12). "Uh uh. I wasn't about to disappear," she says, and flips the television channel to a scripted reality show about police encounters. "A man ever try something with you, you tell me," she tells me. I nod, but my silence seems to have sparked a nerve. "You hear me?" she says urgently, and I laugh at her terse response. "Yes Auntie, I know. You



Figure 12. Aunt Wanda in Rochester, New York.

say this all the time." She sits back in her seat and rubs her shoulder joint. "I'm not about to let no man put hands on my baby. You my niece. You my first one, but I tell everybody that's my daughter. That's my baby." I chuckle as she reaches for the remote and tries to turn the volume up. She squints and pulls the remote so close to her face that it is nearly touching her nose. "You know I can't see out of my right eye," she reminds me, and fiddles with the buttons. "Here," I say, and gently take the remote from her hand. I turn the volume up a couple of notches and she motions me to make it higher. "That fool took sight and my hearing too," she says, as the show goes to commercial. "You remember my boyfriend, Larry? He used to beat me so bad. He almost killed me once, I ever told you that?" I nod quietly, and the memories of emergency hospital visits, late night calls for help, and tending to my Aunt's wounds as a little girl bubble to the surface. It was almost as if we had *both* spent a lifetime surviving Larry.

"You know how they break wild horses?", she says, flipping through the channels. "Black men do that to Black women. They break you. I was broken. I had to reclaim myself, my body. I had strength from my grandmother, my mother, and all the women that went through hell before I did, you know what I'm saying? Strong women. I wasn't about to lose my life to that man, to the streets, you know what I'm saying? I loveded me. I had to take *me* back. So I fought back, and that's how I lost my sight in this eye. He blinded me. Lost my hearin' too. But he never touched me again after that, cuz I showed him I'm not the one to be played with. I got too much to live for, you hear me? I got you, Tori, Keke … I wasn't goin' down like that."

My Aunt Wanda's dangerous moves were enacted to escape and survive horrendous violence. Her assertion that she "wasn't goin' down like that"



Figure 13. My Grams (*top right*), Aunt Wanda (*top left*), Wanda's daughters, Tori (*bottom left*) and Keke (*bottom right*), and me (*bottom center*), Rochester, New York, 1990.

because of the Black girls in her life—her daughters, granddaughters, and nieces—beautifully captures Black women's intent to pass on memories of mobility and resistance as a means of protecting future generations of Black female survivors (Figure 13).

Conclusion

As Grams takes the last piece of crisp, golden chicken out from the fryer, she reflects back on what it means to live life in a Black, female, working-class body. "My daddy had a great big ole farm," she says, placing the sizzling meat on a ceramic plate. Her soul food dinner of fried chicken, collard greens, and hot water cornbread is finally complete. "He had everything you could think of: peanuts, watermelon, cotton, beans, cane, everything! He had horses and chickens, ducks, you name it. But my mama, she worked that farm, and she made her own garden off to the side. And she had these big beautiful peach trees. They was in a area all by theyself." I was in awe at this fact. The idea that my great-grandmother was bold enough to lay claim to a portion of land that was not only operated by her patriarchal husband, but also legally owned by a white plantation owner is a testament to her gendered strength and resistance.

As a subversive space of gendered resistance that existed within, against, and beyond the bounds of the white, masculinized plantation system, Eula Bertha's peach orchard becomes a beautiful metaphor of Black women's contentious relationship with institutionalized archives. In many ways, Eula's peach orchard represents the social, political, and epistemological margins wherein Black women's herstories of mobility and resistance are developed and maintained. Grams tells me more about the intentional layout of the peach orchard, explaining that the trees' position in the orchard played a crucial part in their growth and development. She notes, "There was twelve of them, twelve peach trees. Six on one side and six on the other. The way they was planted, they faced each other. Because the peach trees, they pollinated each other." I nod and hurriedly jot down her words in my research journal. She continues softly, only vaguely aware of my presence, and says, "That's how they grow. They see each other, face each other I mean. They pollinates each other. So, if a one of them peach trees died, some of the other ones might start to wither and die too." I smile, slowly starting to understand her analogy. "They needed each other," she says pointedly. "You hear what I'm saying? They needed each other to survive."

My grandmother's vivid description of her mother's peach orchard beautifully depicts gendered beliefs in community, visibility, and memory-keeping for Black women. According to Grams, peach trees are self-fertilizing—that is, while most trees require pollen from other species of trees in order to grow, peach trees require sustenance from other peach

trees to complete their maturation process. Because peach trees are self-fertilizing, they are uniquely able to thrive and bear fruit in isolation. Nevertheless, their survival can be significantly enhanced through a collective sharing of pollen from other strong, healthy peach trees. "That's why them trees was planted right across the way from each other," she continues, showing me a picture of a peach tree she found online. "Even though they could grow by theyself, you supposed to plant 'em facing each other so they can build each other, help each other survive." Like peach trees, the survival of Black women's lives and herstories has always been contingent upon the memory-keeping practices of Black community members from multiple geographies, generations, and walks of life.

Thus, I offer this scholarly piece as a continuation of the political project of remembrance, reclamation, and visibility that my Black female foremothers have passed down to me. It is my hope that my articulation of a Black feminist archival bricolage—a means of memory-keeping within, beyond, and beneath the archival margins grounded in the everyday standpoints and lived experiences of Black women—can add to a growing body of feminist, racially conscious archival methods.

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Notes

1. Gladden, "These Stories."
2. Emswiler, "'Conditions of Possibility'"; Gordon-Chipembere, *Representation and Black Womanhood*; McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*.
3. Shockley, "Oral History"; Lykes, "Discrimination."
4. Ghaddar and Caswell, "'To Go Beyond'"; Cooper, "Digital Demands"; Haberstock, "Participatory Description."
5. Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand, "Critical Archival Studies"; Ramirez, "Being Assumed"; Cifor and Wood, "Critical Feminism."
6. Ndlovu, "'Body' of Evidence"; McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*.
7. Hunt, "Feeding the Machine"; Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*.
8. Nishikawa, "Morrison's Things."
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History."
12. Morrison, "Behind the Making of *The Black Book*."
13. Ibid.
14. Collins, "Learning."
15. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*; Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*.
16. Nishikawa, "Morrison's Things."
17. Mitchell, "Representation and Black Womanhood"; Kalua, "Venus Reconfigured."
18. Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*; Gordon-Chipembere, *Representation and Black Womanhood*.
19. Nash, "Practicing Love."

20. Pérez and Williams, "Black Feminist Activism"; Matandela, "Redefining."
21. Collins, "Black Feminist Thought."

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