Black Genders and Sexualities
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We open with three events, only two of which bear an obvious relationship to one another. The first are the killings of two young black people, Sakia Gunn and Trayvon Martin. The third is a controversy that erupted in the wake of provocative blog posts about eliminating black studies programs written by conservative commentator Naomi Schaefer Riley on the Chronicle of Higher Education website.

On May 11, 2003, Sakia Gunn a 15-year-old black “aggressive”—female bodied but gender nonconforming—was stabbed and killed at a Newark bus stop after she and her friends rebuffed the sexual advances of older men. The story of her murder circulated in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) press and among some rights-based organizations. But Gunn’s story, and the vigils and anti-violence demonstrations held in the wake of her death, went largely unreported by the mainstream media (Pearson 2006). At first glance, the killing of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, seems different insofar as his death has provoked a widespread national discussion. These discussions center on antiblack violence, racial profiling, and the indifference or outright violence of state police and other state agencies. Yet, importantly, Martin’s case only gathered the nation’s attention weeks after his killing as the result of the work of three black male journalists, T rymaine Lee, Charles Blow of the New York Times, and Ta-Nehisi Coates at the Atlantic, who refused to allow Martin’s murder to become another example of what is sometimes called in newsrooms, “a garden variety killing” (On the Media 2012). T rymaine Lee, who writes for The Huffington Post, observed that while the local Florida media was covering the case and that the story was circulating widely on social media like Facebook and Twitter, the national media wasn’t paying much attention. But Lee, along with Blow and Coates, helped ensure the story gained a wider audience. Each had a personal connection to the case by the very fact of being black men, either because they had been subjected to racial profiling themselves or because they had known other black men who had been the victims of violence. They refused to submit to the increasingly matter-of-fact assumption that black men are doomed to violent fates.

The differences between the deaths of these two young people, and the national response to them, are striking. Perhaps talking about death in the introduction of a book ostensibly about black gender and sexuality is startling.
But the death of both of these young people and the responses to their murders turn on the particular ways differences of gender and sexuality matter in black life. Trayvon Martin’s death has, at least for a time, galvanized the nation to the recognition (once again) that black men are disposable and that black masculinity continues to pose a kind of existential threat to the American imaginary. Sakia Gunn’s death shows us that gender nonconformity incites murderous violence and an equally murderous silence and forgetting insofar as her death was not recuperable to the lobbying efforts of LGBT policy groups or antibullying campaigns. After all, she was no Matthew Shepard; she was black and poor and “aggressive,” and she fought back rather than wait for things to “get better.” Black lives, these killings remind us, are more than precarious; they simply don’t count for much. In the differences in media coverage, one might conclude that a black woman’s life is patently less important than that of a black man; that a lesbian’s death—particularly a butch’s death—does not warrant the same outrage as that of a presumably straight young man. But neither of these conclusions would be the only point here.

The real point is that the awkward scenes of subjection of black gender and sexuality both prevail in policy and in the popular imagination (see for example, among many others, Alexander 2012; D. Davis 2004; Harris-Perry 2011; Hartman 1997). The black body remains a site of pathologized difference: the black gendered body is typically cast in hyperstereotypical form, violent, muscled Bucks and inviting, sassy, bootylicious Jezebels are pervasive throughout various media. Blacks also cast a shadow in the policy speeches of the Republican nominees for president in the 2012 primaries, who repeatedly invoked tired tropes about welfare moms and other forms of public aid in which race and class are often conflated. Mitt Romney, for instance, has argued that poor moms should be required to work outside of the home in order to receive public aid, to experience the “dignity of work.” We know he is referring to black and Latino women, although he does not say it. Black bodies continue to be easily yoked into some titillating space of hypersexualization and/or abjection. Black lives are ultimately viewed as politically expedient but ultimately disposable; after all, how does anyone help a people so prone to the internecine violence that result from drugs, poverty, or whatever.

This sense of black disposability is what animates Naomi Schaefer Riley’s dismissal of black studies as a discipline. In a widely derided post in the Chronicle of Higher Education blog “Brainstorm,” Schaefer Riley dismissed the work of emerging black studies scholars (Schaefer Riley 2012). Her post responded to an earlier article written by Stacey Patton (2012), “Black Studies: ‘Swaggering into the Future.’” In her article, Patton examines what she regards as the third wave of black studies, focusing predominately on Northwestern University’s program. Her assessment is that while earlier black studies scholars wrested their knowledge in a particular discipline, like history or sociology, newer graduate students are benefitting from an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the ongoing salience and reproduction of race. Patton expressly notes how black studies has grown as a field and solidified its place in higher education, evidenced by the now 11 doctoral programs that can be found around the country.
In a bald failure to apply even the most basic standards of intellectual or journalistic rigor, Schaefer Riley’s rationale for dismissing black studies rested on a fundamentally erroneous premise: the irrelevance of the dissertation research of a few doctoral students in the Northwestern program. Their dissertations, Schaefer Riley asserted, amounted to “a collection of left-wing victimization claptrap.” Her evidence? Although her post’s title, “The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations,” points readers to the dissertations specifically, she hadn’t bothered to read them herself. Apparently she only needed to read the titles to know that the work amounted to nothing. And from the titles, she concluded, the discipline itself must be antiquated and out-of-touch. The work of the students she identified focused on natural childbirth, histories of housing policies and their effects on blacks, and black conservatives’ rolling back of civil rights gains. Of course, as commenters on her blog, students she attacked, faculty at Northwestern, and many others observed, all of these continue to be pressing issues in the larger tapestry of black life, indeed American life generally. For Schaefer Riley, these varied projects amount to left-wing claptrap because these students blame white racism for the problems that face black people. But since she didn’t read the work, how would she know? Since being fired from the blog, Schaefer Riley has gone on a range of conservative media, in increasingly familiar ways, to claim that she wasn’t victimizing anyone but is herself the victim of intolerant politically correct liberals, a point made repeatedly by commenters defending her original post and follow-up.

Schaefer Riley is not the first, nor will she be the last, to denigrate black studies. In 2002, for example, Candace de Russy, a trustee of the State University System of New York was prominently featured in an article on the state of black studies programs (Evans 2002). She criticized black studies on several grounds, saying that they lack rigor and amount to little more than “feel good” programs. In de Russy’s opinion, black studies programs have an anti-American bias and do little to advance “real” knowledge (D. Davis 2011). De Russy, like Schaefer Riley, is connected to organizations whose ideologies and aims include the dismantling of public higher education and, indeed, many of the tenets of a liberal education. In a generous reading of their views, they seem to want to return to what Stuart Hall calls, skeptically, “the grand narratives of history, language and literature” (Hall 1993, 107). In other words, the classics. But increasingly, right-wing attacks go much further, arguing that public funding for any “soft” fields of knowledge, including sociology, English, or history, much less women’s or black studies should be eliminated. Public funding, this argument goes, should be restricted to more “useful” disciplines, to hard sciences like engineering, mathematics, and the like. They say this without irony, even as they simultaneously form alliances with other culture warriors who attack the very foundations of the scientific method and rigor in disciplines like biology or environmental science, arguing instead for a faith-based approach to our shared material reality in which evolution and global warming are unproven theories that have become doctrine through the conspiracies of a tight knit cabal of leftists.
In her closing argument, Schaefer Riley notes that “there are legitimate debates about the problems that plague the black community from high incarceration rates to low graduation rates to high out-of-wedlock birthrates. But it’s clear that they’re not happening in black-studies departments.” We agree with Schaefer Riley that these are real and pressing issues. We disagree that this work isn’t taking place in black studies departments; in fact, it is often from such departments that this kind of work is most likely to arise, even if it doesn’t appear in the three dissertations whose titles she read. Schaefer Riley’s assault on black studies and by extension on the black community is a form of violence. It is likely that her original blog post was simply intended to create debate, to “stir the pot” as one commenter put it and increase traffic for the Chronicle’s website. This sort of provocative disruption is like the online practice known as “trolling,” which often uses highly charged racist, sexist, and homophobic language to incite another’s response. Then when the victim of trolling responds, the troll takes further pleasure in observing the victim’s hurt, anxiety, and anger. The best response to trolls is no response at all (in Internet slang, “do not feed the trolls”). Of course, for people whose lives are always already marked by violence, ideological and otherwise, it’s not so easy to shrug off attacks like Schaefer Riley’s. In her desire to end black studies, she does a disservice to its history, to the knowledge produced by it, and to the transformations it has effected in both intellectual life and larger social spaces. From Schaefer Riley’s perspective black (and likely queer, gender, and Latino) studies are all about victimization. This mistakenly understands that the only use of, say, a black studies department, is to either soothe the beast or uncover solutions to the pathology of the beast. The victimization trope is an idea for intellectual babies. Indeed, Schaefer Riley’s condemnation reflects and reproduces forms of antiblack violence and thereby clearly points to the need and continued relevancy of blackness as a worthy subject of interrogation, precisely what black studies, as well as gender and sexuality, programs continue to do.

The black intellectual tradition has currents that are over two centuries old. In periodizing this tradition, Manning Marable (2000) notes that the conceptual period of black studies occurred between Reconstruction and the Great Depression. In this period, which included W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, Horace Mann Bond, St. Clair Drake, Zora Neale Hurston, and Carter G. Woodson, among others, black intellectuals merged their “scholarly production to the lived experiences of black people” (Marable 2000, 20). Marable further notes that after World War II, African American studies broke from its confinement in racially segregated institutions to “a vibrant curriculum and hundreds of programs” (21). One of the most salient observations that Marable offers is that the purpose of the black intellectual tradition has “always been descriptive, that is presenting the reality of black life and experiences. Second, it has been corrective; that is Black Studies has challenged and critiqued racism and stereotypes that have persistently cropped up in mainstream discourse of white academic institutions” (Marable 2000, 17) Finally, Marable argues that the black intellectual tradition has been prescriptive. He says, “Black scholars . . . have often proposed practical steps for the empowerment of Black people” and that “there is a practical connection between scholarship and struggle, between social analysis and social transformation” (Marable 2000, 18).
These are the foundations of black scholarship. And in the tradition of Marable, who viewed scholarship as potentially transformative, we offer this edited volume as an intervention and a trenchant counterpoint to those who have a vested interest in ending black studies, queer studies, gender studies, Latino studies, and the like. We seek to protect and advance the vitality and variability of the study of black life and cultures. The essays included in this book illustrate this commitment. They cut across a range of disciplines (anthropology, history, sociology, public health, cultural studies) and methods (textual analysis, ethnography, and surveys). Taken as a whole, the work collected here represents a more realistic, albeit still very partial, snapshot of work by emerging scholars across race and ethnicity. Many of the authors who first appeared in the *Souls* issues we edited three years ago, with Vanessa Agard-Jones, have already made significant contributions to black and queer studies. Among the recent contributions they have made are a special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, edited by Jafari Sinclaire Allen, whose work appears in this volume. Two other contributors, Marlon Bailey and Rashad Shabazz, are coediting a forthcoming special issue on blackness and gender for the journal *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*. Other participants in this project have forthcoming books, many of which, like the articles here, were based on dissertation projects, giving truth to the lie that new work in black studies is out-of-touch or commercially unviable.

This anthology, like the examples we cite previously, represent an attempt to mark black gender and sexuality as fields that are special without being inevitable. That is, we do not seek to consolidate or reproduce many of the most widely circulated iterations of black bodies and desires or to situate them in stable locations (filial, political, geographic). This is not to suggest that past or present studies of black genders and sexualities have only reproduced stereotypes or fixed the range of identifications and practices that fall under the rubric of gender and sexuality. Indeed, the past three decades have given rise to challenging, critical scholarship on questions of gender and sexuality throughout the African diaspora, as we argue previously. Yet, in unlikely agreement with Schaefer Riley, we have been struck by the way so much of the scholarly literature on black gender and sexuality is focused largely on racism and especially on the ways racism operates as both cause and effect, at once determining black gender and sexual deviance and emerging as an effect of that deviance. Are the range of black gender performances, affinal bonds, emotions, and sexual practices, and their links to larger US political economies, necessarily overdetermined by racist ideologies? We can gesture here toward a range of work that cuts across historical and interdisciplinary sites (Cosby and Poussaint 2007; Gilman 1985; Moynihan 1965). Let us be clear: we are attuned to the ongoing salience of racism—given the everyday impacts of violent antiblack racism that takes shape in murders like the ones we discuss previously or mass incarceration, politicians’ and pundits’ barely veiled rhetoric, and the proliferation of more explicitly antiblack discourse online. It’s impossible not to attend to the ways racism continues to shape American life. Our point, though, is that we did not explicitly seek out work that grappled with racism as its central analytic lens. Rather, we sought to capitalize on what we view as an ongoing disruptive momentum in black studies and emergent black queer studies. The goal was to locate the strongest new scholarship in black gender
and sexuality both in the United States and abroad. And while normative heterosexualities certainly fall under this rubric (see the following), we were more interested in, among other things, new definitions of the alphabet soup: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersexed (LGBTQI); critical approaches to activism and sexuality; neoliberalism and black sexuality; race, sexuality, and affect; sexual citizenship; and/or gender and performativity.

To say that we were interested in work that didn’t reproduce black genders and sexualities as overdetermined by racist ideologies is not to say that we were especially interested or invested in what is increasingly, though sometimes mistakenly, called a postracial politics. Rather, we sought lateral movements away from those trends in which black bodies and desires have been made congruent with, or in resistance to, cultural pathology and social deviance. We sought to sidestep some of the limits of representational analyses that have plagued scholars and critics of black experiences. The problems attendant in these representations led Hortense Spillers (2003) to make her comment that “black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, unseen, not doing, awaiting their verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues” (153). The equation of black sexuality with pathology has led others to engage in an ambivalent politics of refusal, in which representation is blocked, as in Lorna Simpson’s famous image “Guarded Conditions” in which a black woman stands with her back to the camera. Of course the limits of the refusal to represent are painfully clear: if no image of black gender or sexual difference can fully escape the weighted history of racial violence, then the only “good” image is no image at all. Therefore, while engagements with, or refutations of, the equivalences between black genders and sexualities and pathology or shame are necessarily ongoing, we do not want to revisit those key and still informative (if often only of the anxieties and desires of white cultural imaginaries) controversies about fractured black families, promiscuity, welfare, sexual precocity, and penis size.

This is not to say, of course, that we were unaware of the work that has been done in this area since the 1970s (or earlier, depending on how you periodize black studies more broadly—obviously folks like Ma Rainey and James Baldwin had quite a bit to say prior to the black cultural nationalisms of the ‘60s and ‘70s). Our efforts here, like those of so many others, owe a good deal to those who have gone before us, especially the pioneering work done by black feminists and other feminists of color (A. Davis 1983; Hill Collins 1999; hooks 1999; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), as well as the work that has emerged over the last two decades that has documented a growing synergy between critical race and what has come to be called critical queer studies (Cohen 2001; Eng 2001; Ferguson 2004; Holland 2000; Johnson and Henderson 2005). Like many of the cultural producers parenthetically listed previously (an admittedly truncated list), we had taken seriously the call for intersectional approaches proffered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), while also recognizing the ways intersectionality continues to prove so elusive to realize (McGlotten 2012). Thus even if we’ve resisted framing our intervention as one that begins and ends with racism, race is obviously not incidental to the studies of genders and sexualities these
articles offer. Our point, though, is that black sexuality does not belong only to public policy or to racist or antiracist discourses; black sexuality, like sexuality writ large, is so important and interesting (to think about or even to do), in addition to being so analytically difficult, because it is effectively everywhere, permeating all aspects of cultural life, including the spheres of mainstream political and popular culture and transnational black diasporic spaces.

Rather than begin, then, from what might be called a position of “racial paranoia” that would shape and guide our efforts only in relation to racism, we began from a reparative one (Jackson 2008; Sedgwick 2003). Eve Sedgwick, in an important essay, “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading,” argues that the “hermeneutic of suspicion” in which most intellectuals and academics are trained has mutated into an injunction to be paranoid, a methodological imperative. Yet as she puts it, “For someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences” (Sedgwick 2003, 124). That is, the fact of racism is not the only thing that might make black genders and sexualities special. And knowledge of the metacultural power of racism doesn’t necessarily lead to critiques that take it as a point of departure and arrival. Reparative reading, in contrast, might be about healing—echoing many of the calls that accompany calls for reparations—but it is also about what Sedgwick evokes as “queer possibility” (147). In a series of ongoing and forthcoming works, José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 2009) offers astute and hopeful critiques of the queer possibilities and art of making do that are embedded in ordinary life in ways that don’t necessarily undo or even directly contest the oppressive structures (racism, gender normativity) that so preoccupy paranoid thinking. Many of the essays in this issue share this sensibility, tying black genders and sexualities to everyday (if also interstitial) spaces without fixing them, offering partial views into the ways identities and practices tied to gender performativity or sexual practice are dispersed throughout larger social fields, crystallizing in particular places and time, particular bodies or networks. In short, the essays included here often gesture toward a something or somewhere else, another site in which genders and sexualities congeal without foreclosing other possible iterations. The openness that accompanies the utopian impulses of queer possibilities leads us to speculate that the emphasis on hopeful possibility might be as much a black cultural value as a queer one.

The queer of color critique in which our work is situated, then, remains both an emergent and ongoing project, one that continues to proliferate even as it resists neat categorization or institutionalization (something that is both wishful and unlikely given the degree to which so few queer theorists, after more than two decades at the “cutting edge,” have yet to find institutionally stable homes). We hope that this volume might contribute in its own way to this body of work by offering new scholarship that seriously and creatively evidences and explores the mutual imbrication of categories of difference like gender, sexuality, nation, race, and class, among others. The emergent scholarship on black genders and sexualities across the diaspora that we offer here locates these axes of differences within broader fields of knowledge, politics, and history. Put plainly, we looked
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for and found important new work that operates both to queer black studies and to orient this queering toward local and transnational politics and practices, activist, academic, and otherwise.

Three works examine aesthetic and popular culture texts. Simone Drake explores the meanings of black gender and sexuality projected onto the screen and on canvas. In her chapter “Craig Brewer and Kara Walker: Sexing the Difference and Rebuilding the South,” Drake looks at filmmaker Craig Brewer’s and artist Kara Walker’s examination of the South. She seeks to root experiences of US racial melancholia that both artists explore in a particularly southern sensibility. For Drake, memory and place are organizing themes for both artists, and they gesture toward a reconciliatory or recuperative vision for gender and racial differences. C. Riley Snorton explores the “ghettocentric imagination” at play in R. Kelly’s episodic musical soap opera, “Trapped in the Closet,” while Guy Mark Foster critiques the documentary on black boxer Emile Griffith, Ring of Fire, for the ways it eludes a serious contextualization of his identity as a black Caribbean man in favor of the established narrative of the “the closet.” Arguing that the model of the closet that the film employs is inadequate, Foster instead situates the film against the backdrop of what Jasbir Puar (2007) calls “homonationalism,” the complex interaction between nationalism, racial difference, sovereignty, and a national heterosexuality that includes homosexuality as a mark of national exception(alism). Snorton likewise argues that in Kelly’s (still?) ongoing saga, black sexuality emerges as a congeries of class and gender relations, performatively enacted affective scenarios, the musically saturated history of black expressive culture, and a meditation “that inextricably ties black sexuality to queerness in the popular imagination” (this volume, p. 16). If Foster pushes against the limits of the closet metaphor, Snorton multiplies its meanings.

Drawing on ethnographic methods, the chapters by Aimee Cox, Tanya Saunders, and Marlon Bailey examine the interface of performative gender identities with state-run agencies, female masculinities, and as an “intravention,” respectively. Cox’s essay “Thugs, Black Divas, and Gendered Aspirations,” draws on her experiences working in a Detroit Fresh Start social service agency and interviews with residents with whom she worked. Cox looks at the ways neoliberal social service policies “constrain the possibilities for self-identification and sexual expression” among poor and working-class women (this volume, p. 86). At the same time, she highlights how these women find creative ways to negotiate these gendered aspirations, including the enactment of a range of oppositional masculine stylings. The themes addressed in this chapter are critical to considerations of how state institutions and neoliberal models of social service shape, albeit unevenly, the possibilities for self-identification and sexual expression among individuals living in underresourced urban communities of color.

The performance of female masculinities is taken up by Tanya Saunders who explores the relationship between female masculinities, normative models of gender, and the state. In her article, she documents the strange life of Grupo OREMI, a lesbian social services group originally funded by the Cuban government. This state support was later withdrawn when the success of the program became too visible and the increasingly large gatherings of women, especially
poor and non-gender-conforming women, exceeded socially acceptable bounds of propriety and tolerance. In the chapter “Performance as Intravention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit,” Marlon Bailey argues that ballroom community members deploy forms of “intravention,” strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention that are created by and emerge from within the ballroom community, a so-called high risk community.

Autobiography and biography are the focus of three other essays. Examining the production and expression of interiority and exteriority of the self through literature, historian Doreen Drury offers a critical biography of lawyer and civil rights activist Pauli Murray. Drury’s essay “Love, Ambition, and ‘Invisible Footnotes’ in the Life and Writing of Pauli Murray” looks at the threat that Murray’s status as a woman, her love of other women, and her preference for masculine style posed to her dreams of becoming a civil rights leader. This chapter considers Murray’s efforts to resolve her conflicts through several means, including the research and writing of her family history, Proud Shoes. Included are also two first-person narratives, one a polemic and the other a remembrance of clubbing that also engages debates in queer studies about futurity and the figure of the child. In the former, Ashon Crawley’s “Can You be Black and Work Here?,” Crawley draws expressive traditions of black aurality to reflect on his departure from a gay and lesbian nonprofit and the consternation his departure, as well as his communication with leaders in the organization, generated. Crawley’s work is an experimental and experiential account of black queer embodiment in conflict with white gay homonormativity. The second personal narrative “For ‘the Children’ Dancing the Beloved Community,” by Jafari Allen, develops an epistemology that conjures the history of black gay intimacies and the spaces through which they move. Allen’s essay draws on his own experiences in black gay clubs to reflect on life and freedom for black queers. At the same time, he engages recent debates in queer studies about politics and futurity, challenging ideas that queer politics are or should be dead. Indeed, for Allen, even the melancholic nostalgia that informs his memories of the black queer clubs he frequented are important ontological and political resources for contemporary black feminist and queer studies and other democratically or utopian-minded political projects.

One of two new essays that appear in this book, H. Sharif William’s “In the Heat,” sits between the intimate autobiographical/autoethnographic essays previously mentioned and the more traditional research projects we outline shortly. Williams’s essay mixes social science research on black men who have sex with men with evocative reflections on the ways black men experience intimacy with one another. Four other pieces relate findings from research projects and one offers commentary on a conference. Annecka Marshall and Donna-Maria Maynard’s “Black Female Sexual Identity: The Self-Defined” shares findings from a questionnaire survey distributed to female university students in Barbados and Jamaica to reveal diverse attitudes about female sexualities in the Caribbean. Participants acknowledge that at the same time that Caribbean societies are undergoing positive changes about sexuality as a consequence of globalization and the mass media, degrading notions that women are promiscuous and viewed as sex objects, persist. Renee McCoy’s research “Ain’t I a Man: Gender Meanings
among African American Men Who Have Sex with Men” illuminates the meaning, identity, risks, and cultural beliefs of twenty African American men who have sex with men (MSM) and the consequences that labeling men as “gay” or on the “down low” has on HIV/AIDS interventions. Ana Paula Da Silva and Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette’s “Sexual Tourism and Social Panics” details how these two anthropologists came to be involved in working with the Brazilian Prostitutes’ Network, an advocacy group that has increasingly come to challenge the ways state policies position prostitutes as victims of sexual tourism, an identification that in fact makes them more vulnerable to surveillance and police harassment. The commentary by Zethu Matebeni, “Feminizing Lesbians, De-Gendering Transgender Men: A Model for Building Lesbian Feminist Thinkers and Leaders in Africa?” examines the 2008 Feminist Leadership Institute held in Mozambique. The Institute sought to develop African lesbian feminist thinkers and leaders and was attended by diverse participants, which facilitated an interrogation of African feminisms. At the same time, it highlighted issues around sexuality, particularly same-sex sexuality, as well as contentious issues about gender. Reflecting on this institute foregrounds many of the challenges posed to a model of African feminism used to negotiate sexual orientation, race, class, and gender.

Three pieces explore black masculinity. Ethan Johnson and Roberta Hunt’s essay, “Race, Sexuality, and the Media: The Demotion of Portland, Oregon’s Black Chief of Police,” the second of the new essays that appear in this volume, focuses on the newspaper coverage of a sex scandal involving Portland’s black chief of police. They crucially point to the differences in coverage between the mainstream and black presses. The public geographies of black gender and sexuality are astutely critiqued by Rashad Shabazz’s chapter, “So High You Can’t Get Over It, So Low You Can’t Get Under It: Carceral Spatiality and Black Masculinities in the United States and South Africa.” Shabazz looks at the ways in which carceral or prison space, and the techniques that make prison punishment possible, shape black living and working space and how in turn they influence black masculine performance. Using the Robert Taylor Housing Projects and South Africa’s mining compounds as case studies, he examines the carceral logics that underwrote these spaces, specifically focusing on the practices that seek to fix blacks spatially.

Taken as a whole, this volume, which was made possible by Manning Marable, Elizabeth Kai Hinton, and the Souls Editorial Working Group, illustrates some of the powerful political struggles and structures that shape black gender and sexuality as ideological, epistemological, and spatial articulations and assemblages. It features established and emergent scholars who cross disciplinary boundaries in the ongoing process of tracing the lineaments of black gender and sexuality across local, national, and international frameworks. And the book frames black genders and sexualities as special, in the ways they are embedded in the ordinary texture of life yet tied to larger social imaginaries, institutions, and ideologies, rather than only as a special “problem.” Finally, we hope that our efforts here operate to do some modest justice to the discursive and material violences black people experience as well as to the resilient vitality and creativity of black life in and outside the academy.
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