Introduction: The Feminist Disorder of Diaspora

*There is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical (superficially, at least) than the process of establishing an order among things; nothing that demands a sharper eye or a surer, better-articulated language; nothing that more insistently requires that one allow oneself to be carried along by the proliferation of qualities and forms.*

—MICHIEL FOUCAULT, *The Order of Things*

*The new order didn’t affect only poetry. It also affected history, sociology, and philosophy. West Indian society was not studied per se, as an autonomous object. . . . West Indian society came to be considered as a Paradise perverted by Europe. Everything prior to colonization was idealized. Consequently, from the image of Africa, the motherland, were carefully eradicated any blemishes such as domestic slavery, or tribal warfare, and the subjugation of women.*

—MARYSE CONDÉ, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer”

In the 1924 hit “Freight Train Blues,” Trixie Smith outlines an early feminist critique of diaspora, singing, “When a woman gets the blues, she goes to her room and hides / When a woman gets the blues, she goes to her room and hides / But when a man gets the blues, he catch a freight train and rides.” Smith’s standard blues lyric inhabits what has become the black genre par excellence for the twentieth century, the blues. The paradigm of racial aesthetics, the blues represent African American suffering and histories of both physically forced and economically coerced transience, as well as the forceful originality of these historic standpoints in expressive culture. As such, the blues as a form often signify racial authenticity. Ironically, the blues are also the benchmark of black commodification and appropriation by white America and beyond in critical discussions of distribution, marketing, and circulation. Thus, the blues themselves are a complicated Foucauldian order of things—a quality and form that challenges some
dominant power structures, is complicit with others, and establishes structures of meaning of its own.

The blues are representative, as a genre, of both aesthetic highs and historical lows, stories of exceptional commercial and artistic success in form and normative suffering in content, in the same generic template. Smith’s lyric engages these orders, laying bare the structure of the blues, which is deeply centered around romantic, heterosexual narratives of love and loss, and of its means of championing what seems like a deeply gendered set of options for mobility in the face of trauma and conflict. Her lyrics are also a reminder that even as representation in blues songs, like the material reality of working-class black women’s lives, constrained women to the domestic and the private spheres, the blues as a commodified skill set gave black women performers the ability to literally travel, to break the very dichotomy that the song’s lyrics suggests. This contradiction between content, performance, and distribution signals gender as a complicated shift in thinking through received political and critical orders, as Caribbean writer Maryse Condé suggests in the epigraph; yes, the blues tell “migration horror stories,” but they also necessitate a rearrangement of our politics on black artistic commodification and consumption (Davies 1994). The blues as paradigmatic “matrix” for twentieth-century black aesthetics, then, must reckon with the central significance of gender and sexuality to black form, in production, reception, and circulation, as well as in content (H. Baker [1984] 1987).

Writing nearly seventy years after Smith, African American experimental poet Erica Hunt extends Smith’s aesthetic map of black women’s mobility; “The Order of the Story,” her 1993 prose poem, gives this directive:

Imagine yourself walking into a room as the exercise suggests, and then, describe how you fill the doorway, the direction you dress in, the way you walk out of the frame. Imagine finding stones—the inscriptions that predicted you. Invent the language now. Invent the language as if each inflection belonged to you instead of containing you, or treating you as if you were a commotion in the path of progress. (20)

Hunt’s poetic charge opaquely suggests that too often black women as subjects and artists are hemmed in by their established, legible frames. Black women writers who deviate from formal and generic convention are particularly hard to place for creative communities because of the
limited foremothers they are allowed to claim on the innovation front and a difficult reception history in African American studies post–Black Arts. This latter history finds experimental artists hard to assimilate into direct reference to race and post–Civil Rights politics of identity. Hunt asks us both to acknowledge the traumatic linguistic order of things that has created these recognizable paradigms of identity politics and to “invent a language” to describe them differently—to disorder those representations of black women. She suggests that difficult subjects (black women as authors/agents/disciplinary formations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) require difficult objects (innovative literary texts) to “represent” and certainly to upend this order. In this formulation, Trixie Smith’s prescient materialist critique within the blues form is generically transformed, reordered to think through black women’s mobility in nearly a century’s worth of linguistic and cultural representation in the Black Atlantic.

The innovative Black Atlantic women writers who follow Smith and Hunt in this book offer tentative, experimental economies of form and a set of aesthetic practices that flow unevenly across national and geographic borders in the Anglophone diaspora. Difficult Diasporas starts with the generic dislocation of a stable black subject in creative nonfiction in its first chapter and moves on to analyze “concept” poetry collections, creatively staged dramas, book-length prose, short fiction cycles, and epic nonnarrative poems by twentieth- and start-of-the-twenty-first-century writers as geographically and generically diverse as Jackie Kay, Elizabeth Alexander, Deborah Richards, Ama Ata Aidoo, Adrienne Kennedy, Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, Bessie Head, Zoë Wicomb, Pauline Melville, Harryette Mullen, and M. NourbeSe Philip. These texts and authors, while innovative, also examine and include popular modes of signifying race and gender, turning the popular and the familiar into strange and difficult reworkings of a recognizable frame. They occupy and renegotiate the order of diaspora laid out in the two texts introduced earlier. Reading this archive provides us a politics of representation distinctly poised to offer something other than the teleology of narrative form in its displacement of the novel and of mimetic realism. A critical engagement with aesthetics, as not just a form but the form of politics, moves us into the systemic analysis of how gender and race operate—for better and for worse—through form and through the complex relationship between language and the order(s) of diaspora.

Together, these neglected texts begin to map the territory of “difficult diasporas,” the aesthetic and critical terrains that imagine the feminist
potential for occupying diaspora’s very form itself, the transgressive and often unexpected loops of circulation that cannot easily be traced to fixed points of origin and return. In Condé’s use of the term, to “dis-order” is to expose the gendered limitations of black migration and to imagine new routes of representation such as those of the writers studied in this book. I map correspondences between seemingly incongruous times and places through the innovative aesthetic platforms created by Black Atlantic women writers. Rather than travel’s focus on a definitive “to” and “from,” these textual moments of aesthetic alliance across axes of difference offer a methodological vision of diaspora studies. Diaspora becomes not only a set of physical movements, then, but also a set of aesthetic and interpretive strategies.

The writers found on the pages that follow—whether it is Zoë Wicomb critiquing the “real world school” or Deborah Richards embracing the failure of “trying to include everything”—articulate their own critical interventions into making black women’s innovative writing speak past the boundaries of social realism and other conservative readings of the black aesthetic. The aesthetics of innovative form makes a pact with its readers and critics, requiring the aforementioned intense engagement. This intensity acknowledges reading as difficult work, affectively and politically, that can push us into questioning what we think of as politically progressive under the name of race and gender studies. In bringing the full weight of diaspora to bear on what and how we read for the intersections of difference, these innovative texts insist on the incommensurability of various registers of identity, weighing the “risk and safety” of feminist and ethnic studies’ political boundaries (Morrison 1993, xi).

“Difficulty” then operates here in a multivalent sense. First, I use “difficulty” to signify the intense engagement that reading opaque, formally experimental texts requires of the modern reader. This challenging literacy recasts the constellation of terms that theorists associated with transnational, postcolonial, and diaspora studies have coined to describe similarly intense, ethical relations across various axes of difference: “contact” (Pratt), “affiliation” (Said), “translation” (Edwards), “poetics of relation”/“cross-cultural poetics” (Glissant), “encounter” (Friedman), to name a few. Difficulty is a way to group these relational terms regarding conflict and community together and to think about how that may relate to bodies of literature, rather than just to the bodies represented in literature. Literary and cultural production are, as this book argues, intimately and pervasively present in how we construct analytics of race, gender, and location, in that they invoke and provoke contradictory
desires to have the known world reflected but also to create new and varied connections. The feminist aesthetics of the writers studied in this book scramble the seemingly obvious knowability—“at once radically other and viscerally knowable,” as critic Madhu Dubey succinctly says of perceptions of African American racial identity (2003, 9)—of these cultural and generic orders of signification. In doing so, they forward a technique of reading difference (and reading differently) rather than representing it as a feminist practice of diaspora studies.

Difficult Diasporas reveals the order of representation that animates critical categories of cultural analysis such as that of “The Black Atlantic,” “transnational feminism,” or “diaspora” itself. In fact, its new aesthetic genealogies reimagine diaspora as a site of disorder through its very proliferation of forms. The form of the novel has dominated discussions of Anglophone diaspora literature, with a footnoted strain on narrative cinema. Direct representation to corresponding bodies and locations has taken precedence and has shaped our reading practices—our theoretical formations of what the world does, could, and should look like—in unconscious ways that we do not always or often acknowledge. That the narrative form of the novel has been overly privileged in conceptually laying out diaspora literature and that women and gender have been marginal to its interdisciplinary conceptualization are not coincidences, I argue. The innovative genealogy of black women’s writing that I trace in this book moves toward the nonnarrative, or texts in which narrative is decentered, undone, and thwarted, and so does not shy away from the failures, traumas, and unfinished business of diaspora flows and gender’s difficult place in those networks. The texts studied in this book recognize the value in bending and mixing genre as essential in critiquing the constraints on black women’s subjectivity across the academy and the diaspora.

In this sense, Difficult Diasporas makes a claim for the untapped potential of black women’s writing in designing, defining, and disordering diaspora. This book is the first comparative study of black women writers across the Black Atlantic to demonstrate the crucial role of literary aesthetics in defining the relationship between race, gender, and diaspora. Thinking across national borders to include African, African American, Afro-Canadian, Caribbean, and Black British literature, I bring together neglected literary resources to offer inventive generic combinations beyond the novel in order to negotiate “diaspora” as a critical feminist category. In Difficult Diasporas, black women’s writing is no longer compartmentalized as an addition, supplement, or appendix to
male-centered theories of the diaspora, and literary studies is no longer dismissed as ancillary to diaspora as a concept except for narrative plot and historical action. This book thus challenges work that has “assumed the experience of black masculinity as a collective identity” and as the field’s invisible conceptual center, bringing black women’s literature in to transform the very readings and questions we think the field can offer (Gunning, Hunter, and Mitchell 2004, 3). It also stands to challenge the limits of feminist reading and representational practices around race and the transnational, deeply considering how form, structure, and genres of culture make a difference in what we think of as imaginable identities and categories of analysis appropriate to feminist thought. This archive of difficult texts is critical to remapping both feminist and diaspora scholarship today, as well as our relationships to “black women’s writing” as a recognizable category of “creative theorizing” on race and gender (Davies 1994, 44).

The Difficulty of Diaspora Feminism

When Trixie Smith offers her succinct outline and implicit critique of the gendering of cultural and geographic mobility, she catches this project’s own mobile formation. Coming up in the academy at the turn of the millennium, I was part of a generation of scholars raised on Paul Gilroy’s formulation of *The Black Atlantic*, a manifesto to shift the nationalist frame of African American studies in the US academy that became the public site of the field’s revitalization, as well as its globalization. Encountering Gilroy’s model was an exercise in critical desire and alienation—how could I not appreciate the transnational turn that complicated definitions of blackness beyond America’s borders? How, too, could I not notice the near silence on women’s writing and cultural expressions that haunts the text’s new and sweeping conceptualization of the field? Following the radical extension of the African American canon to include “lost” authors such as Nella Larson and Jessie Fauset, and the vibrant vein of the black feminist thought of Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, and Valerie Smith, here was a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century-centered critique that left out women altogether in its focus on the ship as chronotope—a sexless, ineffable Middle Passage on one route and the possibilities of free black masculine labor on the other.

The critical intervention that endures beyond this lack, for this project, is Gilroy’s focus on the potential of black art and cultural expression to make “race” strange and unfamiliar. The questions of gender,
race, and aesthetics that center African American experiences of chattel slavery, the great migration, lynching, and Black Power, to name a few flashpoints, shift when looking at histories that also include colonialism, immigration, decolonization, and globalization. Similar dislocations of national identity formations were being staged at the same time in transnational feminist discourse and queer and gender studies. These emergent subfields called not just for a more global focus for feminist inquiry but for questioning “woman” as a sign, rather than women as already constituted, assumed subjects (Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem 1999). In particular, the field asked how gender, race, sexuality, and nation, among other identitarian categories, converged to make meaning out of “black women,” opening up what Gayatri Spivak called for in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1993)—namely, attention to the strategies of representation in both/all of its complexities. African and African diaspora feminist theorists, in particular, carefully attended to the material and perceived tensions between “African” and “feminist” as critical categories that mapped uneven relations between the West and the Global South. Feminist studies, then, began to coalesce through contradiction rather than recovery, difference rather than consensus. This embrace of difficulty has become Difficult Diaspora’s methodology for orienting race, gender, and diaspora beyond strictly historical and national frameworks and instead through a textuality that can engender and embody these fundamental tensions in the fields of feminist and diaspora studies.

Diaspora, for this set of texts, is defined by the difficulty of “establishing an order among things”: nothing about diaspora is easy to create, to define, to fix. Diaspora demands the specificity of times, places, names, and dates, all the while claiming its multitudes as its major strength, its global significance. The African Diaspora (or its more specifically limited instantiation as “The Black Atlantic”) as a historical phenomenon was formed through radical experimentations in technologies of travel and commerce, including chattel slavery—innovations that built on the political and ethical worlds that preceded them and yet demanded their suspension in configuring new and frequently terrible categories of knowledge around difference. Diaspora, in the formal pathways of this book’s archive, can also challenge the order of things—the way we come to recognize and interpret our specific historical and social realities—in its difficult play between the known and the unknown, between recognizable forms of being, knowing, belonging, and acting in the world and the new forms that emerge as we try to understand its shifts.
Diaspora’s possibilities include considering black women’s writing as an act of mobility itself, a necessary reformulation of diaspora subjectivity that undergirds the difficult diasporas I map out here.\textsuperscript{33} Black women’s writing is “a series of boundary crossings” that is highly variable and contingent, as Carole Boyce Davies (1994, 3) claims, a mobility I map in terms of both genre and national/regional affiliations. I take Davies’s and other Black Atlantic feminist work, such as Sylvia Wynter’s (2001) renegotiation of black women as the center of humanistic inquiry, as a blueprint that pushes the boundaries of representation as the frontier by and through which we recognize and make legible the category of “black women.” \textit{Difficult Diasporas} seeks out these critiques not through subjects as representations but through representation itself as a subject.\textsuperscript{24} As such, I try to keep in mind Hazel Carby’s powerful call to counter “the search for or assumption of the existence of a black female language” across texts (1987, 16).

My focus on representation, then, is found not always in the obvious mimetic places but in the forms, genres, structures, and rhetorical patterns that express a relationship to various structures of meaning and reading that do not necessarily seem in direct relation to recognizable discourses of race, gender, and/or location.\textsuperscript{25} This move is one most commonly associated with postmodernism in literary criticism. Postmodernism’s relationship to African American, postcolonial, and women’s writing has been deeply debated on and across all three fields, with critics pointing to the tension between an impossible standard of “realism” and authenticity attached to racial and gendered identities and the unwillingness to cede all aesthetic innovation to a Western-defined style.\textsuperscript{26} While I see the value in interrogating these “frames of intelligibility” skeptically, as critics from Barbara Christian (2007) to Susan Andrade (2011) have thoughtfully done, I also see the critical need for feminist thinking around gender, and especially women’s literature, to explore alternate modes of representation—not just to reproduce the binaries that the “post-” in so many theoretical lexicons threatens. In the aesthetic tactics studied in this book’s reordering of diaspora, there is decidedly a call to revel in this difficult process, with the possibility of “making representation less of a burden and more of a collective pleasure and responsibility” (Shohat 1998, 9–10).\textsuperscript{27} These texts published across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries disrupt the organization and management of Black Atlantic women’s social, political, and even erotic attachments that conventional narrative strategies, themselves hybrid constructions of Western and African cultural form, lay claim to in their
forms. As such, they create a new vision of post–Harlem Renaissance cosmopolitan networks of difficulty that do not rely exclusively on the privilege of travel or even a recognizable literary or political community of production. These innovative texts resist narratives of black identity that emerge as masculine and nationalist but also those that entrench a definitive culture and politics of African diaspora femininity. Through aesthetic difference, they generate cultural productions of black women’s subjectivity that acknowledge, in form and in content, contradiction, complexity, and difference.

Difficult Diasporas argues that our own interpretive strategies must shift not away from form and structure but toward it. The book’s texts are not the naturalized heirs but the carefully and often innovatively constructed gendered responses to histories and patterns of black migration throughout the Black Atlantic. They call attention not just to the geographic limits placed on familiar black subjectivity but also to the aesthetic and disciplinary boundaries that undergird such cognitive systems of understanding race. If, as Paul Gilroy remarks in Postcolonial Melancholia, “the colony acted as a place of governmental experiment and innovation,” innovation should not be unquestionably celebrated (2005, 21). Language, like the postcolonial metropolis, is an ideological practice, one that can succumb to what Caribbean writer and artist Wilson Harris names “the illiteracy of the imagination” (1999, 77). The point of innovation, and of the noticeable tension between form and content in the texts studied here, is to reroute and retrain our reading practices and hence the existing order(s) of diaspora. In their aesthetic range, these texts break standard reading practices within and across disciplinary categories as well as the category of “black women’s writing” as it is canonized.

Diaspora is here recognized and enacted as an “aesthetics of identity,” not just a politics to be narrated (Arana 2007, 2). Diaspora can then represent more than direct reference to the Black Atlantic’s elsewhere (Africa, the Caribbean, Black Britain), more than “the sum of the place we find ourselves” (Arana 2007, 3). In this book’s geographical spread, it does not then attempt to reinforce the lines of nationalist comparativism. Instead, it looks across diaspora women writers’ form as a way to conceptually expose how “we work very hard to make geography what it is” (McKittrick 2006, xi) in relationship to race and gender. This book instead reformulates diaspora through formal innovation—taking its unpredictable routes to imaginative, nonnarrative realization—in order to centralize gender beyond literal travel. Black women’s writing
innovatively reimagines black women as subjects of diaspora, but it also performs a reconstruction of the possibilities of diaspora studies itself—and its historical coming up in the academy at the intersection of postcolonial, transnational feminist, and Black Atlantic ways of reading difference. In this sense, this book takes up Rachel Lee’s call for women of color, broadly defined, to stop “haunting” the center and instead to claim what she calls “territory” in speaking to one another across difference in their aesthetic—and critical—forms (2002, 99).

Like Trixie Smith’s song, *Difficult Diasporas* attempts to make visible and at the same time disorder a genealogy of black cultural production. The exuberant interrogations and displacements of fixed identitarian politics in Black Atlantic women’s formally experimental writing, art, and culture refuse stereotypical readings or affiliations around categories of difference. In unflinchingly reusing “the order of the stor[ies]” being told about and by and in the name of black women, this archive of largely neglected resources remakes the order of diaspora not just to “include” women but to constitutively challenge how we conceive and read for signs of race, gender, and transnational geographies, in literature and beyond its imaginative borders. These formally innovative texts threaten with their abstraction, their sometimes downright refusal to claim race or gender or “black women” in legible ways. Instead, their innovations of language, genre, and form suggest the potential futures of the field as yet unknown, as well as the revision of complicated histories of black women as subjects in and of the academy.

**Mapping Black Atlantic Feminist Aesthetics**

The experimental aesthetics showcased in *Difficult Diasporas* embody the irrecoverable, unevenly legible presence of the historical in twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of race and gendered belonging—presences that draw from the well of an incredible variety of source material and that find resonances in unexpected, uncomfortable locations. The historical here does not explain as much as it fractures, fails, and/or erupts. Violating the temporality of historical context, the archive of this book also directly challenges the tradition-versus-modernity line that both diaspora and feminist studies has interrogated as not just problematic but the problem central to defining racial, gendered, and globalized difference. Innovative reorderings of the materials of blackness in line with “tradition” argue not just for its simultaneity with the modern but for the critical necessity of thinking race, gender, and
modernity as mutually constitutive phenomena, through the long tail of contact and capital. A large, if subtle, part of the construction of modernity was narrated and justified through gender and sexual difference—and the lingering effects of this undergirding pervade both Black Atlantic and transnational feminist studies in the very form of “women”—black, Third World, Western, and so on—that appear as “the worst victims and the redemptive agents of the postmodern condition” simultaneously (Dubey [on African-Americans] 2003, 8). These representations and critical strategies around representation seem to resist both diaspora and feminist studies’ relentless attempts at deconstruction.\(^{37}\)

Through aesthetic innovation, *Difficult Diasporas* structures itself based on fronts of critical interest shared between diaspora and feminist studies. First and foremost, it reconsiders the primacy of location and the geography of bodies that often defines the former fields. Arguing that cultural flows are just as salient markers of “diaspora” as the migration of peoples, it tracks iconographies, art objects, and ideologies to create new networks of diaspora possibility beyond historically and geographically corresponding subjects. This move also shows in my methodology, drawing liberally from poststructuralist, deconstructionist, performance, and postcolonial theory as well as feminist, postcolonial, transnational, ethnic, and diaspora studies across regional and national traditions. In line with this project’s dislocation of the individual, historically coherent subject, it is also concerned with the often binary scripts that black women’s bodies occupy in diaspora studies (officially invisible, domesticated sites of trauma or its public, performative resistance) and in feminism (localized sites of economic and physical violence and/or collective romanticized, monolithic communities). These texts offer a tentative blueprint for considering the corporeal as necessarily containing both exploitative and progressive possibility, as they dwell in some of the most abject narratives and most innovative representations of black embodiment.

Hence, the texts I collect in this innovative archive practice difficult descriptions of difference itself rather than provide definitions.\(^{38}\) The individual chapters engage feminist and diaspora debates over each field’s comparative failures of coherence. The first two chapters challenge the most overdetermined strategies for representing black women in the diaspora: location and corporeality. The next two chapters consider two key conceptual terrains of diaspora and feminism, history and modernity, from an innovative black feminist standpoint. Finally, the last two chapters question the value of narrative itself in representing diaspora
feminist practice, disordering both “diaspora” and “feminism” as recognizable objects in their innovative collections. These texts do not, of course, exhaust the resources of formally innovative black literature. I focus on these particularly underrepresented texts in scholarship and teaching to make a distinct point about the wide gaps and absences in our curricular and canonical thinking around black women’s writing, as well as around diaspora and feminist studies at large.

The paratactic, recombinant strategy of critical framing in Difficult Diasporas mirrors the fault lines it finds in a variety of mobile textual practices—for example, Deborah Richards’s Last One Out, with its layered text boxes, quotations from European travel narratives, and references to actress Dorothy Dandridge nested into a single poem or the unusually structured short story cycle/novella You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town, with its singular narrator but large gaps in temporality and location. If poetry has long been the only scene for looking at poetics, this book also expands that terrain, thinking through the forms of prose from Jackie Kay’s mixed genre profile of Bessie Smith to Zora Neale Hurston’s uneven ethnography of the Caribbean, to the postmodern metatextual parts that make up Erna Brodber’s fragmented novel, to the complex relationships between plot and sequence that define the small-scale fictions of Bessie Head’s, Zoë Wicomb’s, and Pauline Melville’s collections. At the center of these prose and poetic negotiations lie both poetic interrogations of diaspora, in the form of nonnarrative collections and book-length lyrics, and perhaps the most critically neglected genre of black expression, experimental theater.

Hence, I begin with Jackie Kay, a black Scottish writer of growing reputation, and the author of the Jazz-era transgender novel Trumpet, whose poetry and prose writing sit just outside the bounds of black recognition because of their focus on sexuality, transracial adoption, and Scottish culture. What happens when her liminal black experience comes into contact with what we might think of as a paradigmatic racial subject in the figure of blues singer Bessie Smith? How does someone who came to be and to know blackness outside of its normative boundaries—geographic, gendered, sexual, cultural—negotiate that diasporic identity differently, in literary form, than those who have access to easily marked routes? This first chapter, “The World and the ’Jar’: Jackie Kay and the Feminist Locations of the African Diaspora,” focuses on Kay’s 1997 work Bessie Smith, a biographical contemplation of the blues singer mixed with a memoir of the author’s relationship to Smith’s image and recordings. As an amalgam of the blues and the discordant location of nineteen-sixties Scotland,
this text lays the groundwork for reading diaspora through gender and sexual difference. Kay’s process of reincorporating Smith into Black British experience redefines the future of diaspora studies through connections that move unevenly across distant axes of space and time. I analyze nonsyncretic links between unlikely temporalities and geographies in Kay’s genre-bending prose, arguing that these aesthetic reconfigurations conceptualize the African diaspora as constitutive of queer and feminist readings beyond a literally traveling subject.

In subsequent chapters, I choose combinations of authors and texts that act as just such “doorways” across national, regional, and reputational borders, in order to critically enact the kind of disordered diaspora that these works call for in their form. I move from Kay’s rearrangements of the foundational geographies of diaspora through gender, sexuality, aesthetics, and cultural circulation in the first chapter to poetic unset-tings of our understanding of the black body in the book’s second chapter, “It’s Lonely at the Bottom: Elizabeth Alexander, Deborah Richards, and the Cosmopolitan Poetics of the Black Body.” Alexander’s *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), and Richards’s *Last One Out* (2003), both poetry collections, reference black popular cultural figures such as Saartjie Baartman (the titular Venus Hottentot) to remap the difficult genealogy of black corporeality. Like Kay’s study of Smith, each collection explores how public concepts of race and gender take form in transatlantic visual and performative iconography, using modernist and postmodernist formal strategies. In doing so, these collections consider and critique models of diasporic subject formation that lean on example, exception, and recovery, creating instead a network of compromised affiliations and cosmopolitan desires that acknowledge both the pleasures and dangers of representation. Tracing a range of alternative ways to engage the vexed black body through its very visible global circulation, Alexander and Richards establish a new genealogy of black women’s bodies in innovative form. Alexander’s accessibly innovative poetic form reorders the legacies of iconic raced and gendered representations, as does the critically neglected Richards in her text-box visions of actress Dorothy Dandridge.

In the third chapter, I take on a crucial period of black and experimental theater’s popularity in the explosive political and cultural scene of the nineteen-sixties by reaching across to Africa not for inspiration but for actual textual production. The unruly historical bodies renegotiated in chapter 2 lead to the embodied performances of history itself in chapter 3, “The Drama of Dislocation: Staging Diaspora History in the Work of Adrienne Kennedy and Ama Ata Aidoo.” Ghanaian
author Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1964 play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and African American dramatist Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, performed the same year, dramatize the period’s various sociopolitical movements via the innovative staging of black women’s bodies. The year 1964 marks a time attendant to explosive political and social movements in the African and African American worlds, from Civil Rights and women’s rights movements in the United States to postcolonial national independence movements across the African continent. Aidoo’s play centers on an African American woman experiencing cultural and sexual dislocation in postcolonial Ghana with her African husband, while Kennedy’s play works around the psychological disintegration of a young black student in New York City. Working at the crossroads of major countercultural investments, these plays grapple with the lingering presence of colonial histories by creating scenes that question the mimetically realist boundaries of the body: stage directions that call for a wall to move through characters on the stage, for instance. Through their generic failures to perform realist resolution, the texts dislocate popular narratives of gendered, racial, and national community across diaspora histories, including the public sphere of politics in the contemporary Africa and African America of their day. Both playwrights negotiate diasporic histories with a critical eye toward claims of racial or gendered solidarity, much as the previous chapters question singular narratives of iconic black women.

Like the first three chapters, chapter 4 looks back, this time to Zora Neale Hurston’s experimental anthropology, not just as a way of marking a legible black past but also as a sweeping study of how gender is at the heart of notions of political and cultural modernity. Paired with the critically neglected Jamaican academic and postmodern novelist Erna Brodber, who uses Hurston’s legacy as her springboard for considering the same post-Depression transnational era as the turn on which modern black feminist literary production stands, Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* claims diasporic affinities through form and genre as well as through location. This chapter, “Asymmetrical Possessions: Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, and the Gendered Fictions of Black Modernity,” unpacks postmodern and proto-postmodern prose forms to engage a black feminist critique of “modernity” that refuses to keep black women locked into static historical notions of tradition. In Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* (1938) and Brodber’s *Louisiana* (1994), black women occupy the center of diaspora conceptions of modernity, particularly through the texts’ critique of modern African American, Caribbean, and Pan-African political
movements. Hurston’s ethnography/memoir of her fieldwork in Jamaica and Haiti explicitly draws links between US and Caribbean gender politics through the representation of spirit possession as a suspension and critique of the existing masculinist social order. As an imaginative reframing of the anthropological impulse in the study of race, Brodber’s novel similarly represents a Hurston-like subject possessed by diasporic black histories. Together, these prose assemblages reposition modernity—the historical and conceptual rise of rhetorics of both humanism and colonial power—as a signifier that not only is haunted by representations of gender and race but ungracefully and unevenly animates those categories’ competing discursive circulations and political imperatives. I also claim Hurston’s early text as a visionary aesthetic and generic practice, one that inspired Brodber’s own experimentation and inaugurates the genealogy of innovative textual engagements with gender, race, and diaspora that this book tracks.

The reconsideration of the generative black feminist possibilities of prose to stage the conflict of transnational experience continues in chapter 5, “Intimate Migrations: Narrating ‘Third World Women’ in the Short Fiction of Bessie Head, Zoë Wicomb, and Pauline Melville.” Through the short story collections of these South African and Guyanese writers—*The Collector of Treasures* (1977), *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), and *The Migration of Ghosts* (1999)—I explore the narrative dissonance that comes from the act of sequencing and organizing various representations of gender in their contemporary forms. I look to the critically neglected genre of the short story within its larger bounded form—the collection—in the work of these three postcolonial writers whose novels have found more critical attention: South African writers Head and Wicomb (who each sought exile, in Botswana and Scotland, respectively) and Guyanese/British writer Melville. With startling gaps in style, concept, and setting, these collections deny monolithic understandings of the “Third World Woman,” a term first unpacked by Chandra Mohanty (1984). These texts reconstruct gender as a collection of critiques of both state and transnational power formations. This chapter then argues for the strategic use of the collection as a form, one that reorganizes how we might read for sequential meaning without imposing narrative coherence; this critical move suggests a new way to read gender and race as relational analytic categories that abide by but also contain the power to disrupt the organizational logics of narrative representation, especially those that usually dominate discussions of “Third World Women”: family, law, culture, and capital.
Taking the idea of the collection to its extreme, the final two texts I examine, by African American poet Harryette Mullen and Trinidadian-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip, stand as the visionaries of this new and innovative archive, mapping a diaspora that is aggressively informed and formally flexible. In chapter 6, “Impossible Objects: M. NourbeSe Philip, Harryette Mullen, and the Diaspora Feminist Aesthetics of Accumulation,” I engage the culmination of the aesthetic, methodological, and political concerns of Difficult Diasporas. This final chapter centers on Mullen’s Muse & Drudge (1995) and Philip’s She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks (1989). Both poets redeploy race, gender, and diaspora through the epic collection and accumulation of diasporic knowledge, displayed as book-length poems that do not follow a linear, chronological, or even conceptual narrative. These non-narrative epics are testaments to the expansive potential of gender, race, and diaspora as critical categories of analysis, ones that can do far more than mimetically represent a reductive social reality for black women as subjects and for black women’s writing. These texts accumulate the “things” of diaspora and feminist knowledge that are impossible to fully reconcile within a singular order—and claim that this very incommensurability is the central tenet and driving force of our work across and around difference.

Ultimately, the innovative forms of these texts embrace the necessary partialities and disconnections of comparative work as the condition of interdisciplinary studies of race, gender, and diaspora. This book centers on innovative aesthetics to expose, connect, and remake the forms of our desire for an ordered reality and, as James Baldwin articulates, our competing need for “escape” from that order (1985, 32). As such, Difficult Diasporas rethinks “the politics of our lack of knowledge” around race and gender (Lowe 2006, 206) by disordering the regimes of both power and resistance in terms of form and convention. Exposing and engaging these contradictory desires offers possibilities for new, impermanent affinities that not only exist within the terms of narrative cohesion but also interact with the critical values of failure, distance, disconnection, and displacement in constructing interdisciplinary knowledge and critical practice around diaspora feminism.

The texts studied in this book give up the romance of a reading community that makes sense, representing instead the incoherence and failures of the state, of culture, and of our own critical and creative reading practices around diaspora. Through the centering of an innovative archive, a diaspora feminist aesthetics can do more than represent
“black women” as an already known subject and object of study. The reordering of diaspora around aesthetic difficulty can rethink black women’s foundational significance to the very key terms we use in our work, especially diaspora. Remaking these terms through innovative form, the texts of *Difficult Diasporas* stand, pace Hunt, as “doorways” and as “commotions” on the paths of interdisciplinary progress around questions of identity and difference; they are simultaneously maps, links, and radical interruptions of the order of things as critics of gender and race know them.