Abstract. A once influential writer, editor and theorist of lesbian identity, the North Carolina-born novelist Bertha Harris is today best remembered for Lover (1976), a fragmentary and difficult to summarise novel that explores questions of fabrication, memory, and queer desire through the lives of a shifting family of saints and art forgers. Harris expressed scepticism about the conventions of queer life-writing, arguing that writers who ‘continually reproduce the coming out process’ in their work were ‘acting like a heterosexual’. In both her fiction and her life-writing, she articulates what she considered to be a specifically lesbian literary practise that prioritizes the pleasures of artifice and disguise over what she dismissed as the dull work of ‘telling it like it is’. How, then, should the literary historian seek to remember and reconstruct Harris’s life and work? This essay explores two, at times contradictory, threads. The first is the attempt to draw on the ephemeral genres of the mid-twentieth century lesbian archive — rumour, oral history, personal correspondence — to recover and remember Harris’s life and work. The second is Harris’s articulation of what she described as the ‘gay sensibility, whose practice hinges [...] on decisively choosing as if over is’, treating the queer past as a site of speculation and invention. Taking these threads together reveals the limits of feminist literary recovery and considers practices of misremembering and fabrication as queer archival method.

Recalling her first encounter with the novelist Bertha Harris, Dorothy Allison writes, ‘it quickly became apparent to me that this woman simply was lesbian literature — outrageous, complicated, fascinating, uncompromising’.¹ Gayle Rubin, too, is effusive in her memories, calling Harris ‘a streaking comet across the firmament of lesbian activist intellectuals’.² Throughout the 1970s, Harris was a singular, leading voice within a rapidly expanding network of lesbian feminist writers, artists, theorists, and political activists. In her novels, alongside her essays in Sinister Wisdom, Heresies, Quest, Christopher Street and Thirteenth Moon, she theorised and pioneered a queer literary sensibility.³ Through her work as an editor with the New York-based lesbian feminist press Daughters, Inc., Harris played a central role in the Women in Print movement.

² Gayle Rubin, email received by Catherine Kelly, 12 March 2019.
of the 1970s. In 1976, Daughters published *Lover*, Harris’s third and best-known novel. *Lover*’s first edition looks like a memoir: its cover shows a black and white photo of a smiling young girl, and a detailed family tree is displayed on its first page. Instead, what follows is a disjunctive text that centres on a shifting cast of saints, writers, and art forgers. In Harris’s view, it was the role of the queer writer to tamper with and distort reality, particularly the reality of their own life. *Lover* is a paean to queer artifice in which, as one character states, ‘the forgery is no different from the real thing’. This approach poses a challenge to anyone who might wish to recover and verify details of the life of an important lesbian feminist writer who is, in the words of Martin Duberman, ‘all but forgotten’. Harris has no dedicated archive and published little after 1976. The physical inaccessibility of much of her work leads to one kind of misremembering: her influence on lesbian print culture remains underexamined. It is, however, Harris’s investment in misrepresenting and fabricating aspects of her own life in her writing that bring about another kind of misremembering: one that illuminates Harris’s queer artistic practice even as it may frustrate the work of the literary historian. This essay sketches the contours of these forms of neglect and recuperation, and considers Harris’s own ambivalent relationship to the work of queer feminist literary recovery in an era in which figures such as Djuna Barnes began to be reclaimed by a burgeoning lesbian readership.

As the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) seeded the ground for new ecologies of feminist print culture in the United States, lesbian readers and writers sought out traces of a queer literary heritage. The feminist theorist Monique Wittig describes the ‘blank’, that lesbian readers faced in the late 1960s, a literary ‘nonexistence’ in which there seemed to be ‘no lesbian books except Sappho’. Responding to the persistent dearth of information about the lives of lesbian writers, Naiad Press co-founder Barbara Grier published *Lesbian Lives* in 1976. This anthology offered short biographies of women who had written for the *Ladder*, the first widely-distributed lesbian magazine in the US. Speaking in 1987, Grier observed that there remained ‘a lot of demand for biography’ among her queer readership. The demand for work by and about lesbian writers extended beyond grassroots literary networks into the academy, where feminist scholarship was ascendant across disciplines. At Richmond College in the early 1970s, Harris was among the first academics to teach a Women’s Studies syllabus at university level. She dedicated much of her academic career to the work of reconstructing a lesbian literary heritage,
presenting her research at the first MLA panel dedicated to lesbian literature, as well as at the first conference of the Gay Academic Union, where her 1973 paper was titled ‘The Lesbian in Literature, Or Is There Life on Mars?’.

Writing in Sinister Wisdom in 1977, Adrienne Rich acknowledges Harris’s influence:

I found [Harris] had described to me for the first time my own searches through literature in the past, in pursuit of a flickering, often disguised reality which came and went throughout women’s books.9

Harris dramatizes this pursuit in her 1973 essay ‘The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism’, in which she describes hours spent lingering outside Djuna Barnes’s Manhattan apartment in the summer of 1959: ‘As often as I could (and with discretion) I followed her, and trailing her, received the silent messages about my past I needed and she could give’.10 In spite of her hostility to queer feminist readings of her work, Barnes was a highly venerated figure among lesbian writers and readers in this era. Wittig’s observation about Sappho, quoted above, is followed by the parenthetical ‘I did not know Djuna Barnes yet’.11 For Harris, Barnes was the last living connection to a semi-mythic 1920s Parisian lesbian coterie that included Gertrude Stein, Renée Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney and Colette. ‘Shadowing Djuna Barnes’ was an entry point into a transnational queer literary genealogy, which Harris felt had been withheld from her.12 Reading Barnes’s work in the late 1950s demanded some ingenuity. Harris writes that she took to ‘prevaricating’ her way into the New York Public Library’s rare books room, passing herself off as a Cambridge professor with a forged ID, dressed in ‘a dumpy tweed skirt, a starched white shirt, black necktie’.13 For Harris, participating in this act of forgery and disguise is part of what it means to ‘shadow’ Barnes and claim a place in her queer artistic genealogy.

At the centre of each project of literary recovery is a claim that the figure in question is significant, neglected, and recuperable. Barnes’s critical recuperation provides a useful counterpoint against which to consider the ongoing neglect of Harris’s work. Barnes, who once described herself as ‘the most famous unknown of the century’, has long since been dredged from ‘virtual oblivion’ to take her seat somewhere near the modernist canon.14 In Harris’s case, the argument for her significance within the literature of the WLM must still be

---

9 Adrienne Rich, ‘It is the lesbian in us…’, Sinister Wisdom, 3 (1977), 6–9 (p. 7)
11 Wittig, p. 44.
made. Writing in 2010, Elizabeth Freeman observes that Lover still has ‘only a cult following and little scholarly attention’. This remains true more than a decade later. Harris, like Barnes, had a tendency to dramatize her neglect. Less than ten years after Lover’s publication, she declared herself ‘something of a museum piece. The museum I belong in is the old Ripley’s Believe it or Not, of Oddities and Curiosities, right next to the two headed calf’. Here, Harris alludes not only to the scholarly neglect of her own writing but to the broader neglect of the political and literary tendency to which she belonged: a largely separatist — in theory if not in practise — strain of lesbian feminism embodied by figures such as Monique Wittig and Jill Johnston. Harris was a friend and collaborator of Johnston’s and played a role in bringing Wittig’s work to an American feminist audience through Daughters’ 1976 reissuing of Wittig’s first novel, The Opopanax. Catharine Stimpson declared Harris an ‘American equivalent of Monique Wittig’, in part because the two theorists shared a conceptualization of the lesbian as, in Harris’s words, ‘neither man nor woman [but] a new separate creature’. Harris, however, is an idiosyncratic thinker, disloyal to a fault and hard to pin to one tendency or another. At times she aligns herself with separatism, at others she suggests her stronger allegiance is to a multigendered politics of gay liberation, and her relationship to the sometimes mutually hostile Marxist feminist and cultural feminist threads of the WLM fluctuated throughout her life. Harris also diverged from many of her lesbian contemporaries in her fondness for the term ‘queer’: ‘I love the word queer and all of its meanings,’ she remarked in 1978, ‘so I am going to use it.’ If Harris is due some critical reappraisal, it is in part for the ways in which her work, like Wittig’s, complicates narratives of a monolithic second wave.

Alongside her political idiosyncrasies, Harris’s profoundly ambivalent relationship to biographical fact and personal disclosure pose another challenge to a straightforward recuperation of her work. Harris was sympathetic to the organizing efforts of the post-Stonewall gay liberation groups but their emphasis on the liberatory power of public disclosure ran counter to Harris’s

---

16 ‘Bertha Harris’, Undated, Box 4, Catherine Nicholson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
19 On the dominant ideological strands of the North American WLM, see Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad (University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
20 Harris, Catherine Nicholson Papers. A conversation between Harris, Barbara Smith, Jill Johnston and Maria Irene Fornes on the 1993 panel cited above provides an example of varying relationships to the term ‘queer’ among lesbian writers of this generation.
preoccupation with the subversive potential of disguise. Harris wrote to Joanna Russ in 1980 that

Part of my trouble is that in a season that openly worships Honesty, Openness and — above all — Telling It Like It Is, I am still fatally attracted to the Masquerade, The Costume, the Disguise, the Theatrical rather than the sincere disclosure of the facts-of-the-matter.

In the pursuit of what Rich calls the ‘disguised reality’ of lesbian literary ancestors, Harris’s work is often more interested in the disguise than the reality. For Harris, ‘shadowing Djuna Barnes’ is first and foremost an act of fantasy and infatuation. This ‘shadowing’ is a kind of courtship, in which she takes on new identities — the Cambridge don in the archive — and showers her beloved with gifts like the ‘scrunched up sweetheart roses’ she stuffs into Barnes’s Patchin Place mailbox. In the queer underworld of New York a decade before Stonewall, Harris and a queer friend ‘roamed the streets, making up our histories as we went along’, always in the hope that Barnes ‘would stop and take my hand’. Harris’s account points to what Lauren Berlant calls the ‘fundamentally social character’ of fantasy, which functions as ‘a site in which a person’s relations to history, the present, the future, and herself are performed without necessarily being represented coherently or directly’. At the heart of Harris’s pursuit of Barnes is the fantasy-work of remembering Barnes differently, of inventing rather than merely uncovering a lesbian literary past, and with it a conception of a collective lesbian identity in the present. Hers is a fantasized lesbian community with a history, a present and a future, in spite of the unrepresentable and incoherent desires that undergird it.

Performing seduction as queer literary practise is central to Harris’s fiction, particularly Lover. In a 1993 introduction to the novel, Harris writes, ‘I wrote Lover to seduce Louise Fishman. It worked’. Lover is a novel of disguises, in which desire flows unpredictably — perversely, incestuously — and in which no identity is fixed or reliable. As Freeman observes, Lover’s characters ‘do not so much develop as simply enter and exit’. At one point in the novel, a character named Flynn experiences a sensation of profound disorientation while assembling photographs of her childhood:

None of these things are Flynn. They are a lie about Flynn, or they are pictures of herself her fantasies have contrived, or they are her overworked imagination forcing memories of things that have never really happened to

---

22 See Come Out!, the newspaper of the New York Gay Liberation Front.
23 Harris, Letter to Joanna Russ, 1980, Joanna Russ Papers, University of Oregon, Box 18, Folder 4.
In *Lover*, the figure of the lesbian is a kind of forgery, a fabrication that signals that possibility of other worlds. Yet even this identity exists in a state of doubt and fragmentation. Reflecting on *Lover*’s ‘sexual subversives’, Harris writes:

I am no longer as certain as I used to be about the constituents of attraction and desire; the less certain I become, the more interesting, the more like art-making, the practice of love and lust seems to me: it becomes more like something I first grasped as a child.\(^{30}\)

In Harris’s fiction there is abundant space for the inchoate and contradictory threads of fantasy and desire. This uncertain space seems to run counter to the work of the literary historian or biographer. The more I attempt to verify forms of evidence — census records, a marriage license, an address on a letter — in order to construct a narrative of Harris’s life, the more her queer self-fashioning slips further out of view.\(^{31}\)

When Harris died in 2005, she had long been absent from the lesbian feminist literary world she helped to build. She left no collected papers. Far from being absent from the archive of lesbian feminist print culture, however, Harris is abundantly present, threaded through personal correspondence, periodicals and queer ephemera in other archives. Letters from Harris in the collected papers of Joanna Russ, Martin Duberman, Karla Jay, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Kate Millett, Barbara Grier and Phyllis Birkby provide some insight into the more opaque periods of Harris’s life. An address on a postcard to Russ reveals that Harris briefly lived in Malibu, California in the early 1980s; letters written to Birkby in 1972 contain details of Harris’s experiences as an undergraduate in the 1950s. Beyond these insights into Harris’s life, tracing her through other archives illuminates the expansive networks of collaboration and mutual influence within the WLM. In this way, biographical research performs a collective rather than a narrowly individual function. Although she often emerges through the eyes of other feminist writers, thinkers and organizers, I often rely on Harris’s own accounts of her life, and here the record is at once vivid and murky.

Consider for example, the last piece of writing Harris published, a 1999 essay titled ‘This Song is Dedicated to the One I Love’, which contains an account of her parents’ wedding:

John and Mary Zuleika eloped one night by driving across the state line [...] Her Coty powder and lipstick were in her navy blue pocketbook, which almost exactly matched the navy blue suit and the little veiled hat she was

---

\(^{29}\) Harris, *Lover*, p. 74.

\(^{30}\) Harris, *Lover*, p. 18.

wearing. She had chosen the navy blue suit because it would set off the white orchid he would give her.\(^{32}\)

This passage reads as if Harris is describing a photograph or perhaps retelling a memory her mother shared with her. She quickly tells us that neither is the case: ‘I’m making this up. I questioned her about every instance of her life before John, and then before me. ‘You hush,’ she always said’.\(^{33}\) Harris’s essay appears in an anthology of ‘coming out stories’ by queer women. Appropriately for a writer who professed disdain for the genre, Harris’s essay is not a coming out story. Instead, it explores her early childhood in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and in particular her strained relationship with her mother. This moment in the essay in which Harris undercuts her own account is significant. ‘I’m making this up’ is both a self-consciously glib assessment of her literary practise, her long entanglement with, as she puts it, ‘the lies that happen to be fiction’, and also an invocation of what she calls both a queer and a Southern way of life.\(^{34}\) ‘Storytellers’, she remarks in a letter to Duberman, ‘is just a Southernism for liars’.\(^{35}\) The fabricated details of her parents’ elopement serve a storyteller’s purpose in Harris’s personal familial mythology. It is necessary to misremember the past, to partially invent Mary Zuleika Jones, the wide-eyed bride-to-be — dressed for an orchid that she will not receive — in order to make sense of the mother Harris remembers: the violent, embittered Mary Zuleika Harris. Harris conducts a similar kind of misremembering in writing about her own life, prioritising constructed narrative over ‘the facts-of-the-matter’.

Perhaps this is what Harris is getting at when she describes the indeterminacy of desire and ‘art-making’ as something she grasped as a child. In her 1999 essay, Harris places her early experience of enforced silence within the home alongside her first brushes with queer desire. Hot housed in codes of silence, pleasure, and shame, Harris develops an appreciation for the power of the hidden, the distorted, the repressed. From her mother, who kept her own past stubbornly opaque, Harris learns to ‘cultivate the curse of amnesia’:

> My ability to forget has been essential to reinventing myself. I was ashamed of myself. Mary Zuleika made it plain how I ought to be ashamed of myself. I became fiction. My secret life has always been memory in infinite detail, and its reworking.\(^{36}\)

---

\(^{32}\) Harris, ‘This Song is Dedicated to the One I Love’, in A Woman Like That: Lesbian and Bisexual Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories, ed. by Joan Larkin, 1st edn (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), pp. 12–25 (p. 18)

\(^{33}\) Harris, ‘This Song is Dedicated to the One I Love’, p. 18.


\(^{35}\) Bertha Harris, Letter to Martin Duberman, 3 January 1994, Martin B. Duberman Papers, Box. 120, Manuscripts and Archive Division, New York Public Library.

\(^{36}\) Harris, ‘This Song is Dedicated to the One I Love’, p. 16.
In a 1972 letter to the filmmaker and architect Phyllis Birkby, Harris strikes a similar note: ‘got this memory I call a fictionmemory [...] I keep telling people that fiction is truth and they say, No, truth is one thing, fiction another and I say, they are the same when I am in the car’.37 This too is a moment in which queer desire and literary fabrication are tightly bound. This is a love letter, and a trace of Harris’s ‘secret life’. Harris, who had been in a relationship with the academic and Sinister Wisdom co-founder Catherine Nicholson for several years, had recently begun an affair with Birkby, writing letters from the safety of her office at the University of North Carolina. Indeed, the articulation of ‘fictionmemory’ emerges in the letter as Harris lingers on the moment in which she first met Birkby in New York: ‘it was Kate [Millett] driving that godawful car around all over town after the bar closed [...] and I sort of fell over the seat and kissed you twice’.38 This is ‘the car’ that Harris refers to in the passage from her letter quoted above, a machine in which Harris transforms memory into fiction. Like Lover, it is a transformation crafted to seduce.

In 1982, Harris moderated a panel at the New Museum in New York on the subject of ‘The Homosexual Sensibility’. On this panel, Vito Russo also turned to childhood to consider the roots of his relationship to queer artistic practise and worldmaking. Drawing on W.E.B DuBois’s articulation of ‘double consciousness’, Russo states,

you grow up and the people around you, including your parents, assume that you’re straight, and yet you know different at some point in your life and so you have this double vision. You’re able to see both the truth and the illusion. [...] You imagine all sorts of things in order to create a world where you exist.39

That the skills of self-fashioning and disguise, like the double vision of the queer child, are forged through shame does not lessen their importance as strategies of queer world-making. Harris takes pleasure in her ‘secret life’ as a space of imaginative play, even as the ‘secret life’ remains a painful tool of queer survival. Indeed, for Harris, distortion and fabrication are integral to the ‘homosexual sensibility’ because the role of the lesbian feminist artist is not simply to describe the world as she sees it but to reinvent it — to ‘create a world where [she] exist[s]’. Queer sensibility, she suggests,

might be described as a refusal to leave the world alone. As a tampering with reality, a manipulation of things as they appear to be, ordained or otherwise until they seem to be something more than the real thing.40

Russo makes a similar claim for the role of fabrication and speculation. He describes his experiences of projecting queer narratives onto the apparently un-queer films he watched as a child and a teenager: ‘What I was doing was,

37 Harris, Letter to Birkby, 15 March 1972.
38 Harris, Letter to Birkby, 15 March 1972.
39 Bertha Harris, Kate Millett, Vito Russo, Jeff Weinstein, Edmund White.
40 Bertha Harris, Kate Millett, Vito Russo, Jeff Weinstein, Edmund White.
I was saying, ‘I live here too’. And since this image does not serve my life, I will imagine a way in which it could if the world were different.41 Projecting, misinterpreting and misremembering, beginning anew — these are, for Harris, indispensable strategies for building a world in which queer feminists could ‘live here too’.

If the work of recovering, assembling, and verifying evidence falls short as a method for remembering Bertha Harris, attention to her own life writing may produce a different method. In her 1993 introduction to Lover, she recalls (or invents) a ‘yard sale’ which she named ‘The Maria Callas Memorial Yard Sale’.

Swarms of strangers approached, dropped some small change into my cigar box, and reverently bore away my mismatched kneesocks. No one charged me with falsifying my old clothes; everybody already knew that Maria Callas had never set foot in my socks. Together, the patrons of my ‘Maria Callas Memorial Yard Sale’ and I were collaborating in a sort of workshop production of the gay sensibility, whose practice hinges, like the arts, very much on decisively choosing as if over is.42

Harris’s final, unfinished and unpublished novel which she drafted sometime around 2000, is titled The Dream Life of Maria Callas.43 At the beginning of the novel, an unnamed protagonist is living in a London hotel, attempting to write a biography of Callas. But like Flynn’s attempt at memoir in Lover, Callas quickly fades from view, in favour of increasingly dream-like and fragmented accounts of other lives. Here once more is fantasy’s social character. Harris’s life-writing method resembles the collaborative mode of gossip, in which details are refined and embellished as they pass along the grapevine.

Harris’s fantasy-work of misremembering her own life and the lives of those around her recalls a character in Lover who describes the joys of embellishing her memoir:

My life, as plain and tasteless as white bread in its beginning has become richer than fruitcake. Already, I’ve had everything — love, passion, loss, grief, mutilation of the spirit, and sex. These things taste like the candied fruit inside dark cake.44

The fruitcake is a particularly evocative image, one that is suggestive of Harris’s investment in narrative pleasure and in the affective structures of memoir — how a life might taste, how its fragments might be held together in a state of functional disorder like the ‘candied fruit inside dark cake’. For Harris, misremembering is collaborative record-keeping. As a method for reconstructing and contextualising Harris’s life and work, it foregrounds the element of fantasy in the work of queer feminist literary recovery, in which the status and identifications of a writer are always provisional — subject to

41 Bertha Harris, Kate Millett, Vito Russo, Jeff Weinstein, Edmund White.
42 Harris, Lover, p. 20.
43 A copy of this manuscript was given to me by Harris’s daughter, Jennifer Wyland.
44 Harris, Lover, p. 86.
fluctuation and change. Instead of working to establish a single narrative of Harris’s life and her significance to the literature of the WLM, it allows us instead to hold her as a figure to be remembered differently, by different readers at different points in time and space.