

UNBOUGHT
AND UNBOSSSED

*Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality,
and Representation*

TRIMIKO MELANCON

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Temple University Press
PHILADELPHIA

Temple University Press
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122
www.temple.edu/tempress

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Published 2014

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Melancon, Trimiko, 1977– author.

Unbought and unbossed : transgressive black women, sexuality, and representation / Trimiko Melancon.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4399-1145-7 (hardback : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4399-1146-4 (paper : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4399-1147-1 (e-book)

1. American literature—African American authors—History and criticism.
2. American literature—Women authors—History and criticism.
3. Women, Black—Race identity.
4. Women, Black, in literature. I. Title.

PS153.N5M39 2014

810.9'928708996073—dc23

2014018279

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1992

Printed in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1



A book in the American Literatures Initiative (ALI), a collaborative publishing project of NYU Press, Fordham University Press, Rutgers University Press, Temple University Press, and the University of Virginia Press. The Initiative is supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. For more information, please visit www.americanliteratures.org.

UNBOUGHT AND UNBOSSSED

For Mama and Daddy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Expressing one's appreciation should never be a meaningless task, but rather a moment filled with heartfelt sincerity. This book has benefited from the cumulative support of so many, to whom I am grateful. For their guidance, generous support, and critical feedback especially during the foundational stages, I extend the profundity of my thanks to James Smethurst, Esther Terry, John Bracey, Andrea Rushing, and Paula Giddings. Words cannot convey how especially grateful I am to Jim Smethurst, whose unwavering support, encouragement, and good humor lifted me at various turns along this journey. No lesser expression of gratitude goes to Paula Giddings, a remarkable source of inspiration and earnest support, as her ever-welcome advice, encouragement, unrelenting faith in me, and generosity of spirit—especially during our invaluable brilliant clarifying “book conversations” stateside and abroad—have enabled *Unbought and Unbossed* to march into fruition. To the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I extend my gratitude for the enormous support—intellectual, financial, and otherwise—that has provided the foundations of my professional and scholarly development, nourished me as a professional and person,

and further cultivated my desire for intellectual rigor and social justice.

Others have had a remarkably indelible impact in ways that may never be fully transparent to them. For her pioneering scholarship, as well as intellectual and pedagogical influence on me, Mary Helen Washington—who may never know the depth of her imprint on me while I studied with her as a visiting graduate student at University of Maryland and beyond—deserves my thanks. I am especially grateful to Thadious Davis for her “warmest best wishes,” intellectual support, model work, and brilliant advice, which was instrumental in my extended fellowship at Emory. Trudier Harris has been not only a constant source of inspiration, but also a model scholar and professional confidante. I also thank Joanne Gabbin and the Wintergreen Collective for paving a path and welcoming me.

Without the generous financial support of several foundations and institutions, this book may well not have seen the light of day. I express my utmost gratitude to the UNCF–Mellon Mays University Fellows Program, especially Cynthia Neal Spence; Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, especially Lydia English and Armando Bengochea; Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, especially Richard Hope, Bill Mitchell, and Caryl McFarland; Social Science Research Council, especially Cally Waite; and Fulbright Commission, especially Reiner Rohr. Additionally, this book was made possible by financial assistance from the Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund, a program of The Reed Foundation. Loyola University New Orleans awarded me two generous sources of funding: a Marquette and a Bobet fellowship. I also thank the staff members at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library; the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University; the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University; the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University; and the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, especially Christopher Harter, to whom I express special thanks for an image, Figure 3.1, used in this book.

As I have had the marvelously good fortune of being a visiting scholar and fellow at Emory University's James Weldon Johnson Institute for Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies (JWJI), I am especially indebted to the founding director, the late Rudolph P. Byrd, a trusted advisor, charismatic scholar and human, and model of protocol. A host of individuals at Emory enriched my project and fellowship period: Calinda Lee, Dorcas Ford Jones, Robbie Lieberman, Joshua Price, Tekla Johnson, Mab Segrest, Bill Turner, Evelyn Crawford, Chandra Mountain, Erica Bruckho, and Yolande Tomilson, all in some way affiliated with the JWJI, and Martina Brownley and the Fox Humanities Center. Amy Benson Brown, Randall Burkett, Frances Smith Foster, Brett Gadsden, Bill Gruber, Leslie Harris, Lynne Huffer, Larry Jackson, Mark Sanders, and Kimberly Wallace-Sanders at Emory also deserve my thanks. My most profound and heartfelt gratitude goes especially to Natasha Trethewey, a kindred spirit whose continual encouragement, advice, and unrelenting support have been as welcome and enormously appreciated as her poetics and friendship. I am so incredibly thankful for the crossing of our paths, as she will never fully know that I have traveled and endured this journey far longer, more courageously, and with head and shoulders elevated higher precisely because of her.

At Loyola University New Orleans, I am incredibly fortunate to have not only a vibrant, supportive, and affable cadre of colleagues, but also an intellectual home. To former Provost Ed Kvet; former Dean Jo Ann Cruz; Dean Maria Calzada of the College of Humanities and Natural Sciences; my department chair, John Biguenet; and my colleagues in the Department of English, I extend my deepest thanks. I owe a very special expression of gratitude to Katherine Adams—my former chair and an absolutely marvelous person and colleague—for her steadfast advice, enthusiasm, and good humor; Kate has showered me with much support, which has helped garner fellowships, and I am deeply appreciative. Many thanks go to Barbara Ewell and especially my faculty mentor, John Mosier, a generous and dedicated advisor,

for professional support, goodwill, and necessary good laughs over countless good meals, and to Chris Schaberg for his incredibly jovial, intelligent, and ever-willing support and inspiration as I completed this book. I also benefited from colleagues and institutional support at St. Lawrence University, Auburn University, and Freie Universität (Free University) in Berlin, Germany, during my time as a J. William Fulbright Scholar of American Literature and American Studies. For that amazing intellectual and personal experience, I am thankful to my colleagues in the Department of Literature: Ulla Haselstein especially for serving as my mentor, as well as Catrin Gersdorf, Andrew Gross, and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber, who were incredibly welcoming and brilliant—inviting me to present my research at the colloquium, while also providing an international venue in which to engage, research, and teach race and black feminist theories, literary studies, and African American studies. *Sehr vielen dank!*

Words cannot begin to express the profundity of my thanks to Melissa Harris-Perry, who not only served as my mentor for my Woodrow Wilson National Foundation Career Enhancement Fellowship, but also graciously welcomed me as a visiting scholar and fellow at the Anna Julia Cooper Project on Gender, Race, and Politics in the South, of which she is the founding director, at Tulane University. For her constant enthusiastic support, model work, advice, and encouragement, especially as I completed the book revisions and beyond, I am forever grateful. Similarly, special thanks go to Sara Kugler, whose presence and cordial spirit always made work more pleasant. Morgan Franklin, my student researcher at Tulane, and Yolande Tomilson, my graduate research assistant at Emory, deserve my sincere thanks. I also extend enormous heartfelt thanks to the late Rudolph Byrd, Evelyn Crawford, Sandra Duvivier, Melissa Harris-Perry, Cheryl Hicks, Candice Jenkins, Esther Jones, Calinda Lee, and Reanna Ursin for their intellectual generosity and critical feedback on the manuscript. I owe a very special expression of gratitude to Cathy Schlund-Vials, an amazing person and friend, for her always intelligent, deeply appreciated feedback on the

manuscript in its entirety, as well as incredible support of this book. I also extend my profound thanks to Robert Reid-Pharr for his brilliant feedback, model scholarship, and enthusiastic support of this project; in each encounter, I have been impressed by his intelligence, approachability, and refreshing humor, which *always* leave me yearning for more academics like him in this world. Last and certainly not least, I was so very fortunate to embark upon this intellectual journey with Catherine Adams, Stephanie Evans, Adam Linker, and Zebulon Miletsky; for intellectual stimulation, camaraderie, and so many incredibly good times, especially when I needed them most, I express my deep gratitude.

Special thanks go to the personal and/or professional friends who have truly made this journey not only endurable but, indeed, pleasant: Tina Alpough, Evelyn Crawford, Durriyyah Johnson, Janaka Bowman Lewis, Carolyn Powell, Cathy Schlund-Vials, Halima Narcisse Smith, Letitia Thompson-Hargrave, Howard Ramsby II, Joy Wilson, and Nazera Wright. Without Kimberly Juanita Brown, Esther Jones, Keisha-Khan Perry, and Reanna Ursin, this “life of the mind” would be far less enjoyable, and so, I thank each of them for inspiring me with her brilliance and enriching my life with their friendships. Also, words (at least none in the English language) cannot even begin to express the profundity of my thanks and respectful affection to Sandra Duvivier, Jamie Gray, and Calandra Tate Moore, my “inner circle” and dearest friends, whom I am eternally grateful the universe saw fit to situate in my life; our nearly half-lifelong friendships are priceless and have provided me with a more balanced, pleasurable, and humor-filled existence beyond the academy.

I reserve my utmost heartfelt gratitude for my family, whose deep, unyielding love and indomitable support have sustained me throughout this endeavor. My parents, Sterling and Ramona, have never lost faith in my abilities to succeed triumphantly and have been unceasing in their encouragement, optimism, generosity of spirit, and selfless support. I am everything I am,

entirely and indubitably, because of them, and words could never begin to express or encompass my profound love for and gratitude to them. My sisters Drs. Trina and Trichelle, by earning professional degrees in fields in which African American women are underrepresented, have defied odds, invalidated stereotypes, and served as both personal and professional models for me. I owe my success, in large part, to their exceptional examples. My younger sister, Trichlyn, has forever impressed me with her vibrance, resilience, intelligence, and professional drive; her fortitude, easy laughter, and professional success continue to inspire me. Furthermore, my existence and this project have been enriched tremendously by the likes and lives, fierce determination, and always welcome presence and good humor of Sepehr Saeedi and Alan Wise. Last, my nephews, Shuwn, Sterling Ramon, Aaron, Ian, Aidan, Caleb, Brody, and Owen have always provided warm, pleasant, loving, and welcome distractions from the tediousness and rigidity of writing; I love and thank them dearly, as well as await all that their promising futures hold. Last and certainly not least, my grandparents—living in this world and “up yonder”—never ever cease to inspire me; their love and impression on me are undeniable, and I hope I have to some extent, if even fractionally, made them proud.

For healing conversations and restoring my mind, heart, and spirit, I offer my thanks to Kalpana Murthy, and especially Violet Bryan, Michele Levy, and Eloise Dixon, who have enlightened, supported, advised, and sustained me, as well as have served as exemplar professionals, humans, and now friends. Cecelia Cancellaro has not only provided impeccable feedback but unexpected and welcome support, and this book is better, in part, because of her. My deepest gratitude goes to Janet Francendese for her exceptional enthusiasm, editorial brilliance, constant support, and model editorship; to Sara Cohen for her expert work and always eager support; to Tim Roberts and Gary Kramer for unwavering dedication to this book; and to the three anonymous readers for Temple University Press, for their insightful feedback and intellectual generosity. An earlier

version of the second chapter, "Toward an Aesthetic of Transgression: Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* and the Politics of Same-Gender Loving," appeared in *African American Review* 42, nos. 2-3 (Fall/Winter 2008); thanks go to AAR, especially to then editor Joycelyn Moody and managing editor Aileen Keenan, for publishing and providing an intellectual venue for my work. And, very many thanks go to D. M. Grant for his generosity in allowing me to use *The Night*, which celebrates black women's sexuality, encapsulating the very spirit and gorgeous cover of this book; and, certainly no lesser expression of gratitude goes to Karine Percheron-Daniels for her extremely timely support and generosity in allowing me use of her provocative artwork *First Lady*.

I am blessed and highly favored. If there is Glory, as there most undoubtedly is, I know precisely to whom it belongs.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: Disrupting Dissemblance	1
1 "New World Black and New World Woman": Or, Beyond the Classical Black Female Script	46
2 Toward an Aesthetic of Transgression: Ann Allen Shockley's <i>Loving Her</i> and the Politics of Same-Gender Loving	79
3 Negotiating Cultural Politics	111
4 "That Way Lies Madness": Sexuality, Violent Excess, and Perverse Desire	133
5 "Between a Rock and a Hard Place": Gloria Naylor's <i>The Women of Brewster Place</i>	161
Conclusion: "Without Fear of Reprisals": Representation in the Age of Michelle Obama	183
Notes	191
Bibliography	207
Index	227

Introduction: Disrupting Dissemblance

Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation explores what exercises of sexual citizenship look like, particularly their manifestations through the trope of transgressive behavior, in post-1960s black women's texts. The book's title is taken from Shirley Chisholm's 1968 congressional campaign slogan, "Unbought and Unbossed," and her eponymous 1970 autobiography. As the first black congresswoman and first black to campaign for United States president, Chisholm—in her position in the political arena and her progressive stance on abortion and the rights to the freedoms of citizenship—embodies a particular transgressive subjectivity. One grounded not solely in her political disposition but also in her very presence physically and ideologically within an almost exclusively white and male-dominated political terrain. At the time she wrote her autobiography, the House of Representatives had 435 members: 417 white men, 10 women, 9 blacks; and so, Chisholm herself, as black and a woman in Congress, "ma[d]e it add up right."¹

While inspired by Chisholm's political motto, this book is *not* about politics—not, that is, in the electoral or legislative sense.

Nor is it about Chisholm, who, willing to go against the proverbial grain and challenge the status quo, is a remarkably dynamic figure that certainly merits scholarly attention. This book gravitates off of her notion of “unbought and unbossed” as it encapsulates the spirit and essence of *transgression* (an inherent refusal to be encumbered, unapologetic resistance to “containment,” and repudiation of racial/masculinist domination or hegemony) that characterizes post-civil rights black women’s literary and cultural production. *Unbought and Unbossed* critically examines the ways black women writers of the post-civil rights era deploy black women characters that transgress racial/gender/sexual boundaries, particularly those relating to black heteronormative gender and/or sexuality, and challenge paradigms of black womanhood and female sexuality. Writers such as Toni Morrison, Ann Allen Shockley, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Gloria Naylor negotiate black women’s historical positionality as racial/communal symbols of Victorian propriety and their expressions of individuality in a postmodern society precisely, I argue, through the trope of *transgressive* black women whose various enactments of recalcitrance and purported misconduct defy communal sanctions and problematize notions of a unitary black community. To this end, these characters illustrate the inefficacy of a strategic politics of silence surrounding black female sexuality, or “dissemblance,” as a viable conduit for black sociopolitical advancement in a postmodern society.²

By “transgressive,” I mean those unmediated performances, enactments, or instantiations of (mis)behavior characterized by a deliberate “violation” of certain racial, gender, and sexual sociocommunal boundaries whereby the enactor transcends, if not destabilizes, established normative and acceptable behavior. Neither transhistorical nor static, transgressive behavior signifies and might best be understood as conduct marked by a defiance, inversion, or traversal of prescribed norms or conventions. At the center of this work, then, are black women who participate in various transgressive acts at the very crux of which is *sexuality*: adultery, promiscuity, interracial sexual intimacy,