

## Lesbian Legacies #2:

## Archive Affections

Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Millie Wilson,

Archives are not neutral institutions. They determine what is preserved and how it is interpreted, and what is discarded as worthless. In this sense, they are tools of power and control. Artists take these fundamental insights as the starting point of their artistic-political practice. Embedded within a broad field of cultural critique, in which the archive itself becomes a central stage, they attempt to reclaim repressed history—working both with and against the archive. Above all cultural scholars working from queer and BPOC perspectives not only challenge the interpretive authority of hegemonial historiography. They also emphasize the importance of “counter-archives” as repositories of affect and emotion, as theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Ann Cvetkovich, insisting on their ruptures, gaps, and damages—not to be ignored but instead valued as vital sources of intergenerational solidarity (Heather Love)—or on the utopian potential of ephemerality, which resists established practices of archiving (José Esteban Muñoz). In this context, practices of repair also emerge, such as Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation”, a politically poetic method oscillating between documentary evidence and speculative imagination, devised against the silence of normative archives.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden: Sleight of Figure [for Gladys]

It does so not by representing what is the case [...],  
but by presenting the falsification of this ‘true’ order  
as a pathway toward its correction.

(Tavia Nyong’ o)

The spectrum of meaning in the word “Sleight” shifts between skill and ambiguation, a play on both the handling of the figure and on the figure’s own qualities. The figure in question is Gladys Bentley (1907–1960), a composer, musician, and performer of the Harlem Renaissance, who identified as a “Black lesbian masculine woman” and openly addressed her queer desire in her songs. Bentley’s career and identity were destroyed by the homophobic repressions of the McCarthy era: she was forced to wear women’s clothing again and to publicly declare herself a “real woman” who had overcome her “inclination toward women”.

McClodden focuses on a historical figure whose material legacy is almost entirely lost. Only a handful of photographs exist, virtually no written testimonies in her own words, and even the house where she was born has disappeared. The few existing vinyl recordings of Bentley can scarcely be played today due to the fragility of the medium. McClodden does not attempt to fill the gaps and silences, nor does she seek to deny absence. Her project insists, rather, on the blurriness and ambiguity that are essential to Bentley’s legacy. Her strategic ambivalence draws on Tavia Nyong’ o’s concept of “Afro-Fabulation”, which situates Black queerness at the center through a critical distancing from dominant discourses. Nyong’ o advocates a resistant fictionalizing that produces no new representations, but instead resists legibility, availability, and fixed categorization—thus opening fleeting moments of presence that simultaneously slip away.

The Bentley oeuvre spans photography, film, painting, and music. At the center is one of the rare photographs of Bentley, dating from the 1920s, signed by her own hand, and now belonging to McClodden's private collection. Another component is a series of leather paintings incorporating archival fragments. Leather is a material McClodden frequently works with; it references marginalized subcultures of Black and queer communities, cites codes of queer cruising, ballroom culture, and BDSM practices, and symbolizes intimacy and self-empowerment. At the same time, leather enables a physical, tactile remembering that both reveals and withholds Bentley's story—just as Bentley's biography oscillates between visibility and radical unreadability.

Engaging with Bentley's lost legacy—erased through neglect and destruction—is part of a “Black queer genealogy”. McClodden conceives this not as an individual artwork, but as an interdisciplinary, intergenerational, collective project. At her invitation, the poet, educator, and activist Cheryl Clarke, drawing from surviving records of Bentley, dedicated the poem “Gladys Bentley's Mannishly Modernist”, which was edited by the artist and author Rhea Dillon.

Other elements of the project, not included in this exhibition, consist of two films: “VIII. Eminent Domain”, which documents the Philadelphia neighborhood where Bentley was born, and “VII. Looking North”, which presents historical maps of North Philadelphia around 1900. Additionally, the composer and pianist Courtney Bryan created a sound improvisation inspired by Bentley's music.

#### Millie Wilson: The Museum of Lesbian Dreams

Make your own museum. Confront as you slice your way through while taking up space with your pathologization as deviant, as porn trope, as a figure somehow always already clinically depressed, if we take the hollow of absence (of affect, energy, capacity for movement) as not, or not only, metaphor.

(Jill H. Casid)

The works by Millie Wilson presented here stem from the early stages of her “Museum of Lesbian Dreams”, a “meta-project” inspired by Institutional Critique, through which she has spent more than 30 years challenging Classical Modernism with queer perspectives. Wilson deliberately appropriates the presentation strategies of the museum in order to parody—and thereby deconstruct—its institutional authority. She employs classical museological elements such as display cases, inventory tags, collector's cards, and archival materials, which evoke standards of authenticity, seriousness, and scholarly objectivity.

“The Language of Dreams” (1991) and “Errors of Nature” (1992) address the pathologization of queer desire in psychoanalysis and sexual science “before Stonewall” — that is, prior to the queer liberation movements of the 1970s. In the artist's book “Errors of Nature,” Millie Wilson compiles a dictionary of the pathologization of female queerness. It consists of verbatim citations from (pseudo-)scientific publications of the early postwar years. These range from common stereotypes such as the “recruit young girls”, to classic attributions—like enthusiasm for sports, tailored suits, and cigars—to what were, for lesbians themselves, hardly surprising observations—that

lesbians „get what they want in three instances out of four “ and “express no guilt” —to strangely poetic scenes in which they “arrive after dark in closed gondolas” .

With “The Language of Dreams” Wilson takes up—or rather skewers—a dream described by Frank S. Caprio in his 1954 study of female homosexuality: "Dream: ‘Esther needed a ruler (penis). I said I have one right in my desk drawer (panties) and gave it to her with a feeling of satisfaction (insertion followed by orgasm).’ “ Wilson objectifies the scene literally in her installation: a pink, briefs-shaped drawer holding a ruler. With sharp humor, Wilson counters the grand doctrine in Caprio’ s interpretation of the dream of the “missing penis” , which became a central tenet of female sexual development in Freudian psychoanalysis.

In “Twisted Love” (1990), Wilson explores lesbian pulp fiction. These cheap paperbacks, hugely popular in the postwar era, were written by men for a male readership—but were then subversively appropriated by queer women for their own desires. In the 1990s, when newly emerging queer historiography sought primarily positive figures of identification, Wilson’ s interest in “filth and trash was as provocative as it was avant-garde.

## Nightmare 4.0

All the works presented here engage with postwar America, a time marked by economic growth, unprecedented consumer opportunities, and a strong progress optimism—yet also by the massive repression of McCarthyism and brutal racism against Black people. McClodden places Gladys Bentley at the center of a “Black queer genealogy,” a figure whose life was cut short by systematic state, media, and social repression, and whose legacy was suppressed, distorted, or erased. In Wilson’s works, the motifs, colors, and designs of so-called “Mid-Century Modern” aesthetics—with their lightness, clear lines, and promises of comfort and mobility—stand in stark contrast to the violent paranoia that regarded queer sexualities and gender identities as threats to the white, middle-class order of American postwar society. The “American Dream” of the U.S. suburbs was a nightmare for queers and Black people—and not only for them, a nightmare that since January 20, 2025, has been racing into our present with uncanny speed. In Germany, too, forces are gathering that want to force women back into the kitchen, queers back into the closet, trans\* and non-binary people back into their assigned gender, and Black, PoC, and migrant communities out of the country.

It seems we may be heading into difficult times. And these are times when our archives can become a precious resource. They preserve not only documents of repression and persecution but also bear witness to practices of resilience and resistance. They testify to how people, even under the harshest conditions, asserted themselves and wrested dignity—and sometimes even fleeting moments of joy—from a hostile environment.

Birgit Bosold

Tiona Nekkia McClodden (\*1981) lives and works in Philadelphia. Her major exhibitions include the Whitney Biennial, New York (2019, Bucksbaum Award), Kunsthalle Basel (2023), The Shed, New York (2022), MoMA New York (2022–23), and White Cube London (2024). McClodden has received, among others, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Pew Fellowship, and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award. In October, her works will be on view in Paris as part of the group exhibition “ECHO DELAY REVERB – American Art, Francophone Thought” at the Palais de Tokyo (October 22, 2025 – February 15, 2026).

Millie Wilson (\*1948) was a professor at the California Institute of the Arts from 1985 to 2014. Her major exhibitions include presentations at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Walker Art Center, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Hammer Museum, and SITE Santa Fe. Wilson has received, among others, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship, and the City of Los Angeles Artist Grant.