

A Definitive Technical Analysis of 'Black Like Us': Mapping a Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction

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The publication of **Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction** represents a seminal moment in both African American studies and Queer theory. Edited by **Devon W. Carbado**, **Dwight A. McBride**, and **Donald Weise**, this anthology provides a comprehensive architectural framework for understanding the intersectional identities of Black LGBTQ+ individuals across the 20th century. This article provides an in-depth technical analysis of the anthology's structure, the archival methodologies employed by the editors, and the theoretical frameworks—specifically **Critical Race Theory (CRT)** and **Intersectionality**—that underpin the selection and categorization of the included works.

1. Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory

To understand the depth of *Black Like Us*, one must first analyze the academic backgrounds of its editors. **Devon W. Carbado**, a prominent Professor of Law and African American Studies at UCLA, brings a rigorous legal and structural lens to the literature. His work often explores how law constructs race and how intersectional identities are marginalized within traditional legal and social systems. This background is critical to the anthology's mission: it does not merely collect stories; it maps the **sociopolitical erasure** of Black queer voices and reclaims them through a curated literary canon.

1.1. The Intersectional Matrix

The anthology operates on a multi-dimensional matrix. Unlike traditional anthologies that might focus on race *or* sexuality, *Black Like Us* treats these variables as inextricably linked. In technical terms, the editorial strategy utilizes an **Intersectional Analytic Framework**. This framework posits that the experiences of Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals cannot be understood by simply adding 'Blackness' to 'Queerness.' Instead, it recognizes a unique **ontological space** where these identities converge, creating distinct forms of resistance and expression.

1.2. Legal-Literary Convergence

Given Carbado's expertise in law, the anthology functions as a form of **Evidence-Based Recovery**. Each piece of fiction serves as 'testimony' to an existence that was often legally and socially unrecognized. The editors utilize literature to challenge the **normative 'Black' subject** (often assumed to be heterosexual) and the **normative 'Queer' subject** (often assumed to be white). By doing so, they dismantle the 'single-axis' framework of identity politics.

2. Historical Eras and Archival Methodology

The anthology covers 100 years of literary history, categorized into distinct movements. The archival methodology used by Weise, McBride, and Carbado involved extensive recovery of texts that were either out of print, censored, or read through a heteronormative lens at the time of their original publication.

2.1. The Harlem Renaissance (1900–1930s)

The editors highlight the often-submerged queer subtexts of the Harlem Renaissance. Key figures like **Langston**

Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and **Richard Bruce Nugent** are analyzed not just for their contributions to Black arts, but for their specific navigation of 'the closet' and public identity. Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" is a cornerstone text here, representing one of the first explicit depictions of male-male desire in the African American canon.

2.2. Mid-Century Realism and Protest (1940s–1960s)

This era focuses on the tension between the Civil Rights Movement's need for 'respectability' and the lived realities of queer Black people. The inclusion of **James Baldwin** is pivotal. Baldwin's work serves as a technical bridge between the racial protest novel and the queer identity novel. The editors analyze how Baldwin negotiated his identity as an expatriate to gain the distance necessary to write honestly about both race and sexuality.

2.3. The Black Arts Movement and Radical Feminism (1970s–1980s)

The anthology meticulously tracks the rise of **Black Lesbian Feminism**. This section features heavyweights such as **Audre Lorde**, **Alice Walker**, and **Ann Allen Shockley**. The technical shift here is from subtext to overt political manifesto. The stories selected from this era focus on the **reclamation of the body** and the structural critique of patriarchy within both white and Black communities.

3. Comparison of Literary Anthologies and Frameworks

The following table provides a comparison between *Black Like Us* and other significant anthologies in the field, highlighting the technical differences in scope and objective.

Anthology Title	Year	Primary Focus	Analytical Scope	Editorial Lens
Home Girls	1983	Black Feminist Writing	Black Lesbian identity and theory	Radical Feminist
Brother to Brother	1991	Black Gay Men	Gay male experience and HIV/AIDS	Social Activism
Black Like Us	2002	100 Years of Fiction	Cross-gender, cross-century survey	Academic/Archival
Mouths of Rain	2021	Black Lesbian Thought	Centering the Black Lesbian experience	Contemporary Intersectionality

4. Technical Breakdown of Themes and Motifs

The editors categorize the fiction based on several recurring technical motifs. Understanding these motifs is essential for any scholar using the text for academic research.

4.1. The Motif of 'The Mask'

Drawing on the W.E.B. Du Bois concept of **Double Consciousness**, many stories in the anthology explore 'triple consciousness.' This is the process where the protagonist must navigate three distinct social masks: one for the white world, one for the Black community, and one for the queer community. The technical execution of this theme often involves complex narrative shifts and internal monologues.

4.2. Spatiality and Geographic Displacement

A recurring technical element in the anthology is the movement of characters from the American South to the North (The Great Migration) or from the US to Europe. The editors argue that **geographic mobility** is often a prerequisite for **sexual self-discovery** in Black queer fiction. The 'North' or 'Europe' acts as a laboratory for identity construction, away from the rigid social hierarchies of the Jim Crow South or the conservative Black church.

4.3. The Role of the Black Church

The church is presented as a site of both trauma and communal support. Technically, the prose in these sections often mirrors the cadence of sermons (homiletics), creating a stylistic irony where the language of the institution that excludes the queer subject is used to express the queer subject's yearning and spirituality.

5. Pedagogical and Research Applications

For educators and researchers, *Black Like Us* serves as a foundational primary source. Its structure allows for several pedagogical approaches.

5.1. Syllabi Integration Strategies

- Comparative Literature: Use the anthology to compare the evolution of 'The Passing Novel' (race-passing vs. sexuality-passing).
- Sociology of Literature: Analyze how the shift in legal rights (pre- and post-Stonewall) affected the narrative structures of the fiction.
- Critical Race Theory: Apply Carabado's theories of 'Acting White' or 'Gender Normativity' to the characters within the selected stories.

5.2. Archival Research Workflow

For researchers, the anthology provides a roadmap for further archival work. The process of uncovering these texts involves:

1. Identifying Small Presses: Many of the contemporary works first appeared in niche queer or feminist presses (e.g., Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press).
2. Coded Language Analysis: Searching for 'lavender' keywords in early 20th-century periodicals.
3. Cross-Referencing Memoirs: Using the non-fiction essays of authors to decode the fictionalized accounts of their lives.

6. Case Studies: Analysis of Selected Works

6.1. Richard Bruce Nugent: 'Smoke, Lilies, and Jade' (1926)

This story is a technical masterpiece of **Modernist Stream-of-Consciousness**. The use of ellipses (...) creates a sensory, dreamlike atmosphere that allows the protagonist's attraction to a man named Adrian to flow naturally and without judgment. The editors include this to prove that queer desire was not a 'modern' invention in the Black community but a long-standing aesthetic reality.

6.2. Ann Allen Shockley: 'The Love of Landry' (Contextual Analysis)

Shockley's work is essential for its technical bravery. Writing during an era where Black lesbianism was often silenced by the nationalist movements, Shockley utilized **Realist Fiction** to depict the day-to-day lives of Black lesbians. Her work serves as a technical manual for depicting 'the ordinary' queer life, moving away from tragedy and toward sustainable identity.

7. Operational Challenges in Canon Building

Creating an anthology of this magnitude involves significant logistical and intellectual challenges. The editors had to balance **geographic diversity**, **gender parity**, and **stylistic variety**.

7.1. The Challenge of Gender Representation

Historically, gay male narratives received more visibility than lesbian or bisexual narratives. The editors address this through **Strategic Over-Correction**, ensuring that the volume provides ample space for women's voices, thereby reflecting a more accurate sociological picture of the century.

7.2. Navigating the 'Black Authenticity' Trap

One of the primary technical hurdles was selecting stories that did not fall into the trap of 'correcting' the image of Black life for a white audience. The editors chose stories that were 'Black Like Us'—internal, raw, and focused on the intra-communal dynamics of the African American experience rather than the external 'white gaze.'

8. Structural Matrix of the Anthology Sections

The volume is meticulously organized. Below is a breakdown of the thematic pillars used to organize the 100 years of content.

Pillar	Core Objectives	Featured Authors (Examples)
Part I: Emergence	Recovery of early 20th-century subtext.	Nugent, Thurman, Dunbar-Nelson
Part II: Transition	The move toward overt queer identity.	Baldwin, Hansberry
Part III: Explosion	The impact of the 1970s feminist and gay movements.	Lorde, Walker, Shockley
Part IV: Diversity	Post-modern and contemporary intersections.	E. Lynn Harris, Samuel R. Delany

9. Synthesizing the Century: Legacy and Impact

The legacy of *Black Like Us* extends far beyond the classroom. It has become a reference point for contemporary authors like **Robert Jones Jr.** and **Bryan Washington**, who continue the tradition of centering Black queer lives. By providing a technical and historical pedigree for these voices, the editors have effectively immunized the genre against the claim that LGBTQ+ identities are 'alien' to the Black experience. Instead, they demonstrate that these identities have been central to the Black literary imagination for over a century.

Through the rigorous application of **Critical Race Theory** and a commitment to **archival recovery**, Carbado, McBride, and Weise created more than just a book; they constructed a **literary monument**. The anthology serves as a reminder that the act of writing—and the act of collecting that writing—is a profound form of political resistance. It demands that the full spectrum of Black life be acknowledged, archived, and analyzed with the same technical precision as any other facet of the human experience. In the evolving landscape of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and academic scholarship, *Black Like Us* remains the definitive blueprint for intersectional literary analysis.

Tags: [#Black Literature](#) [#Queer Theory](#) [#Intersectionality](#) [#Devon Carbado](#) [#Archival Research](#)

