BLACK LESBIAN AESTHETICS

By

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ABSTRACT

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Black Lesbian Aesthetics argues that after the groundbreaking formation of the Combahee River Collective in 1974, Black lesbian writers who—inspired by the Black Arts Movement—created a literary movement in response to, and which transcended, the limits of the radical politics of the mid-sixties and seventies. By historicizing this era within the context of earlier Black lesbian writings through a sustained engagement with the work of Pat Parker (1944-1989), Audre Lorde (1934-1992), and Cheryl Clarke (b. 1947), I develop the concept of "Black lesbian aesthetics" to argue that this proliferation of literature produced by women of color from 1974-1988 evidence heretical shifts in self-definition. Black lesbian writers were operating within [re]creative and [re]productive modes of being and Black consciousness. My understanding of aesthetics is shaped by Audre Lorde's 1984 seminar at the Free University of Berlin, where she posits that aesthetics should be measured from the "outsider position." Through Black Feminist Thought and criticism, queer of color critique, and decolonial theory, I elucidate the ways in which "Black lesbian aesthetics" offers new insights about political and erotic practices between Black women.

To my mother, Mary.
Thank you for being my best teacher.

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> I finally do not know how to begin because in 1978 I want to be writing this for a Black feminist publication, for Black women who know and love these writers as I do and who, if they do not yet know their names, have at least profoundly felt the pain of their absence.[1]

My project undertakes a relational analysis of literature written by Black lesbian feminists after the radical formation of the Combahee River Collective in 1974. Through Black Feminist Thought, my project closely reads and analyzes how these literary productions offer new insights about the sexual politics and practices of *being* between Black women.[2] These literatures by Black lesbian writers create new corporeal possibilities and discursive spaces for engaging in critical concepts found in the literatures from Black Feminist and Black lesbian writers. Key theories, ideas, and concepts that I employ here include Black Feminist Criticism (Barbara Smith), theories of decolonial thought, a reimagining of aesthetics, the erotic (corporeality, reproduction, recreation), and poetics. Through these approaches, I argue that Black lesbian writers birthed a literary movement, and the poetic contours of this literary production evidences historical narratives about [re]production and [re]creation that are not bound by heterosexism nor the conditions/practices of hu[man].[3] Instead, these literatures center the perspectives, histories, and ways of being between

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[1] Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" 20.

[2] I italicize being to mark a distinction. *Being* is a kind of practice and poetic. More than a set of concepts or categories, and conversely to current conceptions of what it means be human/humanized/hu[man]kind, being is a capacious energy, capable of taking shape, in any way.

[3] Wynter is invested in the development of what she calls a new science of the word, a new science of human systems. Wynter's work posits that there is an overrepresentation of Man—From Christian man—a person who has the ability to inhabit the land—to Columbus's voyage in 1492 wherein rationality became the primary condition of subjecthood, to now, the rise of Man 1. Max Hantel's analysis of Man 1, through Wynter, states: "the new worldview remapped the earth, no longer on the axis of habitability, but rationality. The space of otherness descended from the heavens and colonial forces organized newly 'discovered' populations of natives and Africans according to a hierarchy of reason rather than the binary system of salvation" ("What is it Like to Be Human: Sylvia Wynter on Autopoiesis," 63). Man 2 is instituted after the rise of the biological sciences in the 18th/19th centuries. In her essay, "The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism" Wynter notes that Man 1 is "the Indo-European, now made isomorphic with Being human itself" (36). Man 2, according to Hantel, is the "eugenicist and economic view of human" and "this thoroughly natural organism finds symbolic life through accumulated capital and selected genetic traits. Wynter calls this a 'biocentric' descriptive statement, or *homo oeconomicus*, embodied in the bourgeois Western white male overrepresenting all humanity through violent demarcations of colonial difference" (64). Wynter's theorization of Man 2 provides insight about my

Black women and Black lesbians—a body of peoples whose histories and realities are usually peripheral or rendered invisible.

My project is the first to name the proliferation of literature written by Black lesbian writers during the 1970s and 1980s a literary movement and is the first to think through the concentric relationship between Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke. For example, Audre Lorde is the *chosen* Black lesbian, globally, but especially in North America, and within feminist contexts. [4] To-date, Lorde has three independent films and two biographies about her life and work, the largest archive of her papers reside in a repository at a historically Black women's college, her work is represented in the most recently published *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, and she has a street named in her honor in Berlin, Germany.[5] No monolith, Lorde was a poet who emerged because of a movement, and a Black lesbian who evolved because of her relation to other women—other Black lesbians.

However, scholars have located various moments of encounter between Parker, Lorde, and Clarke.[6] *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker*, edited by Julie Enszer, describes moments of [inter]relation between Lorde and Parker. In this same text, Cheryl Clarke is discussed in their corresponding letters to each other, evidencing not only relation among the three, but underscores that Lorde had peers, companions, colleagues. And, just before Pat Parker's death, she and Cheryl Clarke had a joint reading at Cal State LA in 1989.[7] My attention to the relationship between these writers is salient, especially as U.S. humanities departments and programs are shifting, calling for more Black feminist work, and as community-led movement continues, privileging more

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move to center poetry by Black lesbians, not only because they sit in opposition to those biocentric descriptions, but they move beyond it, in both form and praxis.

[4] I purposely use "within" throughout this project to describe a presence that is internal, inside of, in the bounds of.

[5] https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/en/manteuffelstrasse-to-be-renamed-after-the-us-poet-and-activist-audre-lorde-li.165529.

[6] Please see image of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde on page 3.

[7] Please see image of Pat Parker and Cheryl Clarke on page 3, as well as an image of Clarke, Lorde, and other Black lesbian writers, such as Michelle Cliff and Jewelle Gomez.

radical formations of activism. Parker, Lorde, and Clarke have created new vernaculars for pleasure *and* sedition.

Figure 1: Pat Parker and Audre Lorde, 1981. Image by Susan Fleischmann

Figure 2: Pat Parker and Cheryl Clarke, 1989. Image by Colleen McKay.

Figure 3: Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, and Cheryl Clarke, 1983. Image by Colleen McKay.

Black feminist literature is often subsidiary in the African-American canon. Toni Cade's *Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), Mari Evans's *Black Women Writers* (1950-1980*): A Critical Evaluation* (1975), Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (1980) and the *New Black Feminist Criticism* 1985, *All of the Women are White, All of the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), Deborah E. McDowell's *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995), Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995), *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*, among other texts, have responded to this kind of erasure by publishing work by Black Feminists, archiving their creative genius and contributions to the birth and evolution of African-American literature. More recently, though, interest in Black Feminism has increased. North American academic institutions have invited applicants to apply for newly created positions that are said to be Black Feminist centered. Ironically, this interest grew after the coup in January 2021.[8] Nonetheless, because Black Feminism has often formed and sustained itself on the edges of larger movements, artistic, political, and otherwise, I believe the work of Black Feminism will always be a nexus within any radical movement—political or corporeal. Developing on the shoreline or precipice places one much closer to precarity but also places one within a certain kind of intimacy.[9] I am curious about how Black feminist writers like Bambara, Smith, Christian, Guy-Sheftall, and even their foremothers, like Anna Julia Cooper, Lorraine Hansberry, write from a position of plurality—they are Black and woman—extricate and enmeshed. This radical positioning of self or way of being [as Black Feminist] is critical but often marginalized in the African-American literary canon, literary criticism, and classroom

[8] On January 6, 2021, white terrorists stormed the U.S Capitol, attempting to overturn the results of the 2021 U.S presidential election. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/30/us/jan-6-capitol-attack-takeaways.html
[9] The Combahee River Collective forms, conceiving not only the theory of identity politics but putting into practice by seeking justice for the 12 Black women that were murdered in Boston, MA, whose deaths received little to no media coverage.

spaces; however, look at the recent data for tenured faculty[10], the ongoing precarity of contingent faculty[11] who also engage this work, and under-funded radical spaces.[12]

Concomitantly, Black lesbian literature is oftentimes outside of African-American and European literary categories. As aforementioned, Black lesbian literature is sometimes narrowly contained by the work of Audre Lorde. Many of the books that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s by writers like Terri Jewell, Anita Cornwell, Terri Jewell, Margaret Sloan, Ann Allen Shockley, Cheryl Clarke, S. Diane Bogus, doris davenport, are no longer in print, and major feminist and lesbian led publishing houses like Naiad Press and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press are no longer operating. However, the exclusion from dominant literary categories and canons have allowed for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work to transpire on the page. Black queer studies have offered space for Black lesbian work to exist. The work by Roderick Ferguson, Mae G. Henderson, and E. Patrick Johnson are paradigmatic of this kind of relation.[13]

In 2015 and 2016, I was under the tutelage of two Black feminist professors—an ethnic studies scholar and epistemologist. Their seminars about Black feminist and indigenous epistemologies and theories of the human mark the early formations of my work. At the outset of my graduate work during my master's program, I was really invested in the poetic contours of Audre Lorde's life.[14] However, these two PhD courses provided me with new language about the poetics of decolonization, the conditions of *being* human, and the epistemologies of Black Feminism. My first

[10] Please see "How Many Black Women Have Tenure On Your Campus here: https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-many-black-women-have-tenure-on-your-campus-search-here
[11] https://howardprof.medium.com/an-open-letter-to-nikole-hannah-jones-from-a-howard-faculty-member-ad1fb3f9c05b
[12] Please the Black Lesbian Archives here https://blacklesbianarchives.wixsite.com/info and the Black Feminist School, https://www.blackwomenradicals.com.
[13] Such as *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* by Roderick Ferguson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Mae G. Henderson and E. Patrick Johnson, and *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson.
[14] Although my MA Program offered very limited resources for Black Queer Studies, Michigan State and the professors I was under the tutelage of provided the material and intellectual resources I needed to undertake my areas of study.

full year of PhD study, under the mentorship of my professors, focused itself upon multiplicity from the purview of feminist philosophy and theories of the flesh, through the lens of Black Feminism.[15] I analyzed how authors like Lorde and Clarke described decolonization and eroticism, in their respective works, and I concentrated on attempting to construct a methodology for reading their work.[16] But, my nascent, imagined project needed to expand itself and be refined. I needed to do more archival research, to study the evolution of each writer's work and the various epochs; I needed to re-read the primary texts from 1970s and 1980s; I needed a clear method, that included my description of key terms, ideas, and concepts.

Being introduced to the various discourses in decolonial thought and Black feminism during the first year of my graduate study provided a necessary foundation for me to understand Cheryl Clarke's oeuvre. My ethnic studies professor introduced us to the work of scholars like Maria Lugones, Xhercis Mendez, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. My philosophy professor introduced us to indigenous feminisms and taught us how to read Black Feminist texts.[17] These courses taught me how to read generously, how to place voices in relation to one another, rather than assuming that hostile critique was the necessary tool to engage these histories, ideas, and movements. My attention to Clarke's deployment of "decolonized" was made possible because of the knowledge I ascertained from the aforementioned courses. I mapped constellations between Clarke's theories of

[15] *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* by Mariana Ortega.
[16] At the time (2016), I defined this methodology as an "articulation of multiplicity." In my final paper for my philosophy course on Black Feminism and indigenous epistemologies, I wrote, "I argue that black lesbian poetry and prose must be read as articulation of multiplicity, so that it may be used as a methodology for works produced by black lesbian writers and a hermeneutic tool to examine and explicate the sexual nuances that are particular to black lesbian writing."
[17] We read Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, as well as *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, among other texts.

decolonization, and scholars Qwo-Li Driskill's notable work on bodily sovereignty and eroticism.[18] These connections are also where I began to understand my project as one rooted in relationality.[19]

As an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary Black queer studies scholar, I am invested in the 'narrow but deep'[20] conversations within and across diverse fields of study. I was also trained by scholars in ethnic and queer studies, as well as philosophy. My core classes modeled not only how to read to and across each other, but how to practice generosity—how to *make* generosity concomitant in the exchange.[21] With this tutelage, my close readings of literature and relational analysis engages Black Feminist Thought, [Black] literary criticisms, decolonial philosophies, and indigenous feminisms. These approaches to my project have afforded me the opportunity to produce a body of work that not only desires to discover what is counted as new, but a project that is deeply wedded in relation and care. My dissertation and book, *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought* also share a concentric relationship. These projects were birthed and developed alongside each other. I hope that they demonstrate my deep focus on literary production, and also filling in histories, silences, and chasms by marking/naming moments of pleasure and revolution. I hope that a Black feminist study and Black feminist criticism amplifies the radical work in Black studies, queer and feminist studies, and decolonial thought. I also hope that this work crosses over academic borders and sojourns any place people will need it.

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[18] Please see Jose Esteban Muñoz's, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, as well as Mark Rifkin's, Qwo Li Driskill's *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, *The Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* by Mark Rifkin.

[19] Locating these connections influenced how I constructed my third chapter on Cheryl Clarke's work and her theory of decolonization at the level of the corporeal.

[20] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon.*

[21] Generosity is a Black feminist practice. When I use the word generosity, I understand it as a capacious practice of kindness. During my coursework, while under the tutelage of Black Feminist scholars, reading generously meant that we would foreground peoples' ways of knowing, seeing, and understanding the world and underscore how their work was effective and useful. In academia, harsh and hostile critique is commonplace. However, I am thankful for my professors' heretical pedagogy. Additionally, their generosity also reminded me of home—a place where I was under the care of generous Black women and matriarchs. This is where I first learned how to practice generosity, and I am beyond thankful to be on the receiving end of this kind of praxis—generosity and reciprocity have been generational for me.

In the forthcoming sections, I describe the multifarious origins of my work, historicize the work of Black feminist critics who explored the relationships between Black women contemporary writers and artists, explicate some of the central ideas, concepts, and terms used in the chapters, and provide a brief overview of each chapter. Recognizing my project and book as concomitant workings that are part of a larger Black feminist history is central to understanding the stakes of my work—heretical stakes uncaptured by metrics but rooted in a desire to understand this work as relational. Terms and concepts like Black feminist criticism, Black lesbian aesthetics, poetry, and uses of the erotic, are central to the formation of my project. I describe these ideas and terms and their innerworkings within my project. I offer a brief outline of Barbara Smith's, "black feminist criticism," to underscore how my project takes shape and mirrors her philosophy, endeavoring to answer the call she makes in the essay, and I describe the political and literary impact of the Combahee River Collective. Lastly, through an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach, I provide an overview of each of the three chapters and underscore how Parker, Lorde, and Clarke, expand our discourses about aesthetics, sexual politics, and the project of decolonization. Their work contributes to the yet-to-be, long durée, of liberation and freedom.

HISTORICIZING THE PROJECT

I mark the year 1974 the nexus of this literary movement that was birthed after the formation of the Combahee River, but the literary and sonic foremothers cannot go unnamed. Black feminists like Akasha (Gloria) T. Hull, Angela Davis, and Cheryl Clarke's earlier works about the concentric relationships between Black women writers from the Harlem Renaissance, Blues era, and Black Arts Movement were paradigmatic of modes of care and labor rooted in identifying relation. Hull, Davis, and Clarke taught me how to work the periphery, and how to move between peripheries and centers. Their re-readings of these writers and their re-telling of histories were both revelatory and fundamental.

Akasha (Gloria) T. Hull published *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* in 1985 after working on the project for a decade. In the preface, Hull states that the Harlem Renaissance needed a "rewriting," but most importantly, Black women artists were "struggling against unfavorable odds to create their personal selves" and were worthy of being reclaimed "for the lessons and the blessing that they give us" (xi). The unfavorable odds that Hull outlines in the introduction are Black women being bound by domestic duties, in addition to receiving very little support from their literary counterparts, and grappling with ageism, misogyny, and homophobia. In her review of Hull's book for *The Nation* in 1988, Black lesbian feminist Jewelle Gomez remarks, "In addition to struggling with their many multifaceted careers, these women writers were also in charge of households" who received "rather meager support…in comparison to men" (617). Gomez's review of *Color, Sex, and Poetry* makes clear that Black women's lives were uniquely burdened because of the imbalance in support in both private and public spaces. Hull's bifurcated impetus imbedded in the "unfavorable odds" and the reclamation for "the lessons and blessings" reveal the ebbs and flow that permeate these literary epochs.

From Hull's purview, the Harlem Renaissance is examined from myriad angles. The Harlem Renaissance transmuted social and political criticism into artistic forms of poetry, music, fiction, and visual art. Hull notes that this energy from the Harlem Renaissance helped birth organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The Great Migration of Black folks from the South to the North also generated a particular kind of income and mobility, which resulted in Black folks operating from a space of racial confidence, autonomy, and authority.[22] Hull notes, "In general, United States blacks added their voices to the international outcry of black self-assertion. As

[22] Hull notes, "World War I had introduced black soldiers to a world of tolerance, thus intensifying their abhorrence of American racial prejudice" (3).

seen most in Garveyism, this attitude involved race solidarity and pride and a conscious connection with the African homeland. All of these moods and ideas emerged as newly articulated themes in the art and literature of the period" (3). The literal movement of Black folks generated collective unity and cultural capital.

One of the focal points of the Harlem Renaissance was an investment in getting Black folks' work into print. Post-reconstruction, one believed that they could mitigate harmful stereotypes by countering these narratives with artistic Black voices—Black folks using myriad artistic forms to offer an authentic account of their lived experiences. Hull states, "In particular, the proximity to the publishing world was crucial. It facilitated opportunities for mainstream outlets that augmented those provided by race magazines such as *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, and to lesser extent, the *Messenger*" (3). Hull accounts for the presence of Black women writers like Jessie Fauset, who was the literary editor for *The Crisis*, Ethel Ray Nance, Charles S. Johnson's secretary at *Opportunity* magazine, and Anne Spencer, founder of the Lynchburg, Virginia NAACP local chapter, who was discovered by James Weldon Johnson a little before the 1920s, resulting in her first poems being published in Johnson's book, *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). While Hull provides an overview of Black women writers who were considered a part of the Harlem Renaissance, she is clear about the chasms. Hull writes, "Of course, from a feminist perspective, it is ironic that one of the notable ways women contributed to the period was through hostelrying-hostessing-salon keeping, refinements of their traditional domestic roles extended into the artistic and cultural arena" (6). Hull, as a Black Feminist, can parse out the nuances of what could easily be perceived as representation and progress.[23] While Black women writers may have had a publishing record or presence in the Harlem Renaissance, the patriarchal ordering of things prevailed. Hull goes on to say,

[23] Hull writes, "Major talents like Jessie Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennet, and Zora Neale Hurston made their mark across a range of genres. Some, like Nella Larsen, Anne Spencer, and Helene Johnson, excelled in one specific form…poets such as Clarissa Scott Delaney and Lucy Ariel Williams, flashed briefly and less brightly" (7).

> …despite what appears to be full participation of women in the Harlem Renaissance, one can discern broad social factors and patterns of exclusion. One of the most basic is how male attitudes toward women impinged upon them, how men's so-called personal biases were translated into something larger that had deleterious effects. This became especially invidious when such men were in influential and critical positions…An excellent, though upsetting, case in point is Alain Leroy Locke…. The problem with Locke, however, is that he behaved misogynistically and actively favored men…this contempt for women and disparagement of their intellect inevitably carried over into his judgements and actions…Locke's behavior becomes even more problematic because of his obvious partiality toward young males, to whom he was sexually attracted.[24]

Locke graduated with his Ph.D. from Harvard University, was a Rhodes scholar, and considered the "midwife" of the Harlem Renaissance, according to Langston Hughes.[25] Locke's intellectual distinction is noteworthy because it can be attributed to his place at the vanguard of the Harlem Renaissance. His 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, gave the Harlem Renaissance a definitive shape, but also evidenced a clear preference for Black male writers. Hull transcribed an interview by Owen Dodson that reveals how misogyny was also the center of Locke's teaching practices. Dodson notes that Locke would either dismiss female students on the first day of class by asserting that they would automatically receive a C for simply attending his class, telling them to "come here at your own risk" (7). These misogynistic practices buttress the belief that Black women are incapable of being producers of knowledge—a belief that still pervades both classroom and publishing spaces. Concomitantly, while Locke was openly misogynistic, he was a closeted same-sex attracted man. Hull brilliantly shows how misogyny is also connected to homophobia, twin evils. Not so ironically, Locke's same-sex desire dictated who he gave publishing opportunities to. Hull notes, "Locke, in fact, functioned within a homosexual coterie of friendship and patronage that suggests that literary events were, in more than a few instances, tied to 'bedroom politics' and 'sexual cronyism'…The point here, though, is that women were definitely excluded from Locke's beneficence and this

[24] *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 8.
[25] Please see *The Big Sea* by Langston Hughes, p. 218.

particular sphere of favoritism" (8). Notable Renaissance figures like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes shared an intimate relationship with Locke that ensured access to academic resources like awards and grants, as well as an exhaustive amount of publishing opportunities.[26]

While the Harlem Renaissance created an undeniable proliferation of writing and art produced by Black folks, Hull's last and most poignant critique is that "the Renaissance, despite its veneer of equal opportunity, was a time when not only Harlem and the Negro, but men as usual were 'in vogue.' In a world that values and caters to males, they enjoyed the lion's share of all the available goods and…in literature, were more apt to be seriously encouraged as professional writers" (10). These kinds of gendered and sexual polarities evidence how Black women writers are deprived of opportunities to create their art. Hull rightfully underscores how these Black male writers were given resources, a room of their own, and plenty of time to produce their writing.[27]

The publication of Angelina Weld Grimké's, "El Beso" in 1909 and Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson's, "You, Inez," in 1921, are early poetics of Black lesbian life that Hull brought to bear. Jewelle Gomez's book review in *The Nation* attests to Hull's impact with a book of this kind: "Hull opens up a very important discussion about the part sexuality plays in the growth and appreciation of black women's writing…Hull's candor about these women's lives indicates that the mountainous terrain of sexuality must be tackled in order to make a place for a full, realized body of literature by Afro-American women" (618). Hull outlines the literary lives of these Black lesbian foremothers, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Georgia Douglass in her book, making it plain that,

> Without women writers, the Harlem Renaissance would have been a bleaker place…the color they added completed the total spectrum. Not only did the women play their usual and some additional special roles, but the work that they produced

[26] Please see Akasha (Gloria) T. Hull's introduction, "Color, Sex, and Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance," in her monograph, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance.*

[27] Hull notes, in rare cases, "women received a good word or small favor here and there" (10). She notes instances where writers like Nella Larsen received assistance from Walter White, who volunteered to have his secretary type *Quicksand.*

> clearly—if sometimes 'slantwise'—embodied the female half of human experience and swelled the ranks of the New Negro artists. Poetry, in particular would have suffered had they not been writing.[28]

As Hull recognized the chasms in the Harlem Renaissance, my attention turned to the poetics that developed alongside the Black Arts Movement. Hull's archival research that provided her with a fuller picture of these writer's lives was a paradigm for my earlier dissertation work on Angelina Weld Grimké and Audre Lorde. A vestibule that I traveled through to understand my research and future encounters in domestic and international archives.[29] Through Hull's work, I was introduced to the controversies, chasms, and debates of the Harlem Renaissance. The gendered and sexual politics from this era, especially in the realm of publishing, are akin to the controversies, chasms, and debates, that would imbue the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Hull excavated the gendered and sexual politics of publishing that other Black feminist and lesbian writers like Angela Davis and Cheryl Clarke would name in their respective monographs. I understand Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, as a foundational text for my project and a seminal text that served as a paradigm for Black feminist critics. She teaches us how to feel backward, to locate what is left in the margins, to bring forth new worlds.

In her deep study, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday*, Davis discusses how her re-engagement of these three blues artist's recorded performances allowed her to see that their music was a fertile terrain for examining the quotidian lives of working-class black communities. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* is a radical study because at the time of its publication, Black feminist historical traditions did not extend itself to the ideas of poor and working-class folks. But seeing their artistry through a Black feminist consciousness allows

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[28] Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 30-31.

[29] I began my intense archival research in the Summer of 2017, beginning with Angelina Weld Grimké's papers at the Moorland-Springarn Research Center at Howard University, thereafter, Audre Lorde's papers in the Women's Resource and Research Center at Spelman College and the Free University of Berlin, respectively, Alice Walker's papers at Emory University, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

us to locate ruptures of patriarchal discourses. Davis even notes: "that their aesthetic representations of the politics of gender and sexuality are informed by and interwoven with their representations of race and class" (xv). The interplay of race and class is made even more legible when thinking through the blues era and Harlem Renaissance. Although these epochs developed alongside each other, the blues was considered an inferior poetic and political art form in comparison to the literary writers and intellectuals of the Renaissance. Davis remarks on these polarities:

> One might expect that because the classic blues era coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, this musical articulation of African-American culture would have been treated extensively by the writers and intellectuals of the day. However, because women…presented and embodied sexualities associated with working-class black life—which, fatally, was seen by some Renaissance strategists as antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement—their music was designated as 'low' culture, in contrast, for example, to endeavors such as sculpture, painting, literature, and classical music (through which the spirituals could be reformed)…few writers—with the notable exception of Langston Hughes…were willing to consider seriously the contributions blues performers made to black cultural politics.[30]

That blues was dominated mostly by Black women makes Davis's analysis not so ironic. As aforementioned in Hull's book, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, the Harlem Renaissance focused itself upon constructing a respectable Black selfhood. From that purview, a respectable Black woman was an intellectual, not an artist who wrote and performed about their sexual proclivities, nor someone who demanded autonomy from gendered domestic labor and partnerships. The blues woman challenges patriarchal constructions of gender. As a Black feminist critic and through her explication of blues lyrics by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, Davis is able to bring to bear how these artists were not only provocateurs but pedagogues of possibility. The blues, as a quotidian form of expression that offers commentary about politics and pleasure, "constitutes an exceptionally rich site for feminist investigation. The overarching themes that define the content of the blues form point the way toward a consideration of the historical politics of sexuality" and Rainey, Smith, and

[30] B*lues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xiii.

Holiday's performances, "illuminate the politics of gender and sexuality in working-class black communities" (xvii). Davis's deep study of these three performers, which included transcribing hundreds of their songs from vinyl, alongside her investment in placing their work within a Black feminist consciousness, illuminated (for me) how to read for the radical ruptures, and situate these heretical moments in historical traditions.[31]

I see Gertrude "Ma Rainey" and Lucille Bogan as foremothers who expressed a plurality of being—beyond absolution, this plurality is exemplified in their respective songs, "Prove It On Me," and "B.D Woman's Blues."[32] In her close reading of Rainey's provocative song, Davis remarks, "'Prove It on Me Blues,' composed by Gertrude Rainey, portrays just such a 'wild woman,' who affirms her independence from the orthodox norms of womanhood by boldly flaunting her lesbianism" (39). Davis notes that Rainey's sexual intimacies with women was known and open—even the aesthetic of the song's advertisement was a blues woman "sporting a man's hat, jacket, and tie and, while a policeman looked on, obviously attempting to seduce two women on a street corner" (39). This close reading from Davis showed me how to read for relation in my project. Davis (and Hull's) respective re-readings of these historical moments attests to the early expressions of Black lesbianism, both in print and in sound. Their research exposes the intimacies between Black women that opened up pathways of study and new ways of relation. These moments of heresy from the purview of the Blues woman can also be understood as a precursor to the Black writers that would emerge shortly after.[33]

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[31] Davis names her desires for her book at the end of the introduction, speaking to the plurality of Black feminist tradition: A book like *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* will not popularize feminism in black communities. However, I do hope it will demonstrate that there are multiple African-American feminist traditions. I hope it will demonstrate that there are multiple African-American feminist traditions. I hope it will demonstrate that feminist traditions are not only rewrought African cultural traces, but also the genius in which former slaves forged new traditions that simultaneously contested the slave past and persevered some of the rich cultural products of slavery.)

[32] When I speak of plurality, I understand it as relating to more than one way of being, a heterogeneous way of being and relating to ourselves and the world around us.

[33] Like activist Ruth Ellis and writer Lorraine Hansberry.

Black lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke published the first monograph that situated Audre Lorde as a central figure in the Black Arts Movement, alongside well-known movement writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and Ntozake Shange, titled *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. Clarke's trope "mecca" examines how Black poets were turning away from the white west to create a new embodiment of blackness. One central facet of Clarke's study is that she was positioning these Black women poets as producers of knowledge who contributed to the development of Black feminism and lesbian-feminism. The particular move to situate a Black lesbian writer like Audre Lorde in this lineage informed how I wanted my project to engage and study the poetic contours of Black lesbian writers who emerged alongside some of the main street actors of the Black Arts Movement. Differently, though, my project actually situates Clarke as a part of this particular lineage, and her remarks in her edited collection, *The Days of Good Looks: The Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980-2005*, concretized that for me. In her discussion of the continuum of Black writing, Clarke remarks, "The Black Power and Black Arts Movements gave me the skills" (ix).

Similarly, to Hull and Davis's texts, *After Mecca*, made legible that understanding these historical epochs like the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement through a Black feminist consciousness could actually challenge the conventional discourses about Blackness, gender, and sexuality, and move us toward a more capacious understanding of sexual politics, eroticism, coalition, and kinship. Through Clarke's study, she examines the various ways in which Black women poets shaped themselves in relation to the Black Arts Movement, within and on the periphery, and how Black women poets constructed a "counter-black counter public" (49).[34] Developing new languages and ways of being Black was a necessary move for Black women poets to make, especially since the Black Arts Movement privileged "masculine-centered poetics and

[34] From *The Days of Good Looks*.

gendered politics" (50).[35] Clarke provides a poignant example of the inner workings of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy within the Black Arts Movement, making note that Baldwin's contributions to and influence on the Black Arts Movement was elided "and erased, because of his homosexuality, by many of its male proponents, chiefly Eldridge Cleaver.[36] Black feminism was a vital necessity in regard to challenging reductive discourses about Black women's role or position in the world. Clarke notes that,

> *The Black Woman: An Anthology* was the first collection of writings by African-American women writers to problematize sexism in the context of black women's lives. Edited by the redoubtable cultural worker, Toni Cade (Bambara)…most of its articles, poems, and stories championed the resourcefulness of black women and challenged the so-called necessity of black male leadership over and of black women…Editor Cade bursts the gendered boundaries of the circle with the following radical notion: 'Perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood…It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of a new identity, a self, perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to the struggle.[37]

Clarke's example of Toni Cade's *Black Woman: An Anthology* underscores the value of the form and function of an anthology. Anthologies operate as textual archives—archives gather voices in order to concretize and preserve histories. The *Black Woman* is a seminal Black feminist text that reflects early iterations of identity politics and models a particular kind of autopoiesis. Cade says the Black Woman is "…a college graduate. A *drop-out*. A student. *A wife*. A divorcée. *A mother*. A lover. A child of the ghetto. A product of the bourgeoisie. *A professional writer*. A person who never dreamed of publication. *A solitary individual*. A member of the Movement. *A gentle humanist*. A violent

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[35] Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*.
[36] For more commentary about homophobia in the Black Arts Movement, please see chapter three, "Queen Sistuh: Black Women Poets and the Circle(s) of Blackness" in Cheryl Clarke's, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, as well as chapter two, "Expanding the Subject: Sonia Sanchez's Does Your House Have Lions?" in Evie Shockley's, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*.
[37] Clarke, *After Mecca*, 84 and *Toni Cade's Black Woman: An Anthology*, 103.

revolutionary. *She is angry and tender, loving and hating. She is all of these things—and more. And she is represented in a collection that for the first time that truly lets her bare her soul and speak her mind*" (1).[38]
By constructing this capacious embodiment of being a Black woman through gathering these myriad voices, the book itself functions as an autopoietic paradigm of an autonomously performing, languaging, and living system. Clarke's analysis and Bambara's text evidence how Black Feminists create ruptures in order to operate outside of the constraints of patriarchy and heterosexism.

In 2017, I had the pleasure of interviewing Black lesbian writer, Cheryl Clarke.[39] Clarke published two essays that were integral to my project's creation, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" (1981) and "New Notes on Lesbianism" (1983). In "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," Clarke draws constellations between decolonization and corporeal freedom—seeing [Black] lesbianism as paradigmatic of that kind of [re]creation, relation, possibility, and practice. She engages Black Feminist Thought, draws from feminist theory, and provides an overview of *radical* lesbian-feminism to argue that heterosexism and its colonial machinations affirm normative ways of being that are rooted and supported by white supremacy and its logic.[40] These logics include but are not limited to what Michel Foucault has named biopower; also, patriarchy, and the master-slave dichotomy. For Clarke, lesbianism is partly about refusal. The locale of rebuff are lesbianism's practices and ways of being, they occupy space beyond coloniality. In "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," Clarke writes, "The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western,

[38] Cade, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*.
[39] I invited Cheryl Clarke to campus for a public poetry reading and talk in the Department of English at Michigan State University, made possible through a departmental initiative that aimed to provide resources for students and faculty to engage race in their pedagogical practices.
[40] I see Tiffany Lethabo King's recent book, Black Shoals and recently published article as a manifestation of Cheryl Clarke's early call in the 1980s for connections between the project of decolonization and corporeal freedom. In King's discussion of the corporeal in, "Some Black feminist notes on Native feminisms and the flesh," she writes The flesh as folding and unfolding matter that is both a site targeted by relations of conquest for ruin and a site of our shared hopes for regeneration. I experience "the flesh" as a Black and Native feminist gathering place for connective tissue…the fields of Black and Indigenous feminist studies in the Americas…recognize a shared intimacy in each other's fleshy stories of horror and ecstasy."

heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a relationship—roles notwithstanding" (25). Clarke's way of seeing the corporeal-flesh-sexual being rooted in reciprocal exchange, facilitating a kind of decolonization is both radical and unique.[41] During our interview (2017), Clarke further expounds on coloniality and the Black lesbian body. She states,

> [*when I said that the lesbian has decolonized her body*], I meant that the lesbian has freed her body from heterosexuality and its institutions…not necessarily heterosexism because that's all pervasive…but from the requirements and obligatory heterosexuality or compulsory heterosexuality…I meant the lesbian [*has*] rejected heterosexual institutions like marriage, the family, child bearing, child rearing…all of those conventions that mark women's oppression.[42]

Clarke's attention to the nuances between heterosexuality and heterosexism is key here. She recognizes that heterosexism has systematic and systemic roots. The former acknowledges that sexual and gendered violence against Black and brown folks means that coloniality is working with precision; the latter knows these forms of violence are structural. For Clarke, then, heterosexuality and its practices can be rebuffed and undone. Lesbianism is an act of resistance because it facilitates fissure and collapse. Clarke is careful, though, to not position lesbianism as an antagonistic modality or way of being. Lesbianism is also about possibility, capaciousness, and fungibility.[43] Clarke remarks again about this kind of plurality two years later in "New Notes on Lesbianism." For her, being both Black and lesbian are not only connected to one's way of being in the world, but also about aesthetic possibility. Her art is expanded, her way of relating to other women deepens because she resists fragmentation: "I name myself lesbian…I call myself 'Black,' too, because Black is my perspective, my aesthetic, my politics, my vision, my sanity" (86).

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[41] Clarke is the first Black feminist to use "decolonized" in her discussion of bodily sovereignty.
[42] For context, Clarke also notes, "not that you're not oppressed by those things, you know, because becoming a lesbian doesn't necessarily liberate you from all of them."
[43] I see [Black] lesbianism as fungible because it can represent the performance of mutuality within exchange. Please see "On a Night of the Full Moon" or "Recreation" by Audre Lorde.

Through studying more work by Black lesbian writers, my understanding of Barbara Smith's scholarship expanded. Although Smith's revolutionary work is usually associated with the Combahee River Collective and their statement, her essay, "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism (1977)," crossed unchartered literary terrains. Whereas Toni Cade Bambara's *Black Woman* (1970) was the first to honor Black women literary writers, Smith's essay is original in its call for Black feminist criticism. In her discussion of Smith's essay and its salient impact, Black lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke asserts that it was not until 1977 that, "Barbara Smith's, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' in *Conditions*, a lesbian-feminist journal and part of the ascendent feminist print movement, create the impetus for a national reappropriation by black feminist critics of black feminist writing" (5).[44]

In Smith's discussion of her impetus and to write "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" and the necessity for it, she notes that criticism produces legibility and materiality: "The necessity for non-hostile and perceptive analysis of works written by persons outside of the 'mainstream' of white/male cultural rule has been proven by the Black cultural resurgence of the 1960s and 70s and by the even more recent growth of feminist literary scholarship. For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about" (20). Smith observes that when Black women's work is engaged in the context of Black literature, sexual politics are peripheral or elided altogether. She also marks whiteness as antagonistic and incapable of comprehension and generosity. Smith keeps record of the hostility projected at Black women by naming various critics who offered reductive and harmful reviews of Black women's writing. White reviewers like Jerry H. Bryant, wrote in 1973, that *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, was not a feminist story but an attempt by publishers to exploit Black and feminine subjects.[45] Smith notes that feminist, Sara Blackburn, writes racist

[44] From *The Days of Good Looks*. Also, the publication of *The Black Woman: An Anthology* is a vestibule that Smith traveled through, helping her birth "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"—both were calls rooted in creating space for Black women's experiences and intellectual production to exist.

[45] Robert Bone, another white reviewer remarked that Ann Petry's The Street is about black victimization. Boone describes a kind of solidarity between his opinion of Petry's novel and that of Alaine Locke, remarking, "As Alaine

comments that are akin to Jerry Bryant's, in her discussion of Morrison's *Sula*. In the New York Times Book Review in 1973, Blackburn remarks that Toni Morrison "is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life."[46] Smith concludes her tracking of harm committed by critics by underscoring misogynoir in Ishmael Reed's comments about Black women writers. In an interview in the *Boston Phoenix*, Reed remarks that his book would have sold more copies if he was a young female Black writer who "filled my books with ghetto women who can do no wrong."[47] I appreciate Smith's attention to the ways in which Black women's writing is perceived as rudimentary and reductive in both Black and feminist spaces. Misogynoir and sexism pervade their critiques, eradicating an opportunity to understand and learn from Black women's writing. This kind of obfuscation works against the re-memory and materiality of Black women's writing that Smith outlines in the first part of her essay.

In "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith was not in opposition to opacity.[48] Conversely, she believed that when recognition and generosity undergirded critique, it helped produce legibility and comprehension. *Sula* by Toni Morrison illuminates the nuances between opacity and legibility. In this essay, Smith affirms that Sula is a lesbian novel before critics ever mapped or explicated intimacy in the novel from that purview. The relationship between the two protagonists, Nel and Sula, is opaque because it cannot be contained by heterosexist ideologies about relation. Smith understands *Sula* is a lesbian novel not solely because of the passionate relationship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's, "consistently critical stance toward the

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Locke observed, '*Knock on Any Door* is superior to *The Street* because it designates class and environment, rather than mere race and environment, as its antagonist." Quoted in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" page 21.

[46] Review of Toni Morrison's work by Sara Blackburn, who Barbara Smith notes is a "putative feminist" who wrote "racist comments" (23). Additionally, Barbara Smith notes other hostile and racist reviews about Black women's writing, notably, Jerry H. Bryant's review of Alice Walker's *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black women* in *The Nation* in 1973 and Robert Bone's review of Ann Petry's The Street in *The Negro Novel in America*.

[47] From John Domini, "Roots and Racism: An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *Boston Phoenix*, April 5, 1977, 18.

[48] Black women and artists have a right to opacity. Not all things can be known by the viewer/reader. However, Smith's critiques of these critics was not about the work being opaque, it was their prejudice that prompted ambiguity; their refusal to learn, their refusal to see.

heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives" (23). Smith offers a generous reading of Morrison's novel to provide a paradigm of Black feminist criticism. When applied to a particular work, black feminism criticism as praxis, "can overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions" (23).

For Smith, literature is about politics and practice. Who gets to write, publish, critique—who gets to be remembered—share an affective and effective relationship. Black feminists like Smith, Davis, and Hull, have tended to Black women's work—whether in archives, out of print books, or stories not yet finished. Care permeates this kind of labor. It is ironic that Smith wrote this essay the same year the CRC statement was published. Care also permeated that labor. Embedded in the statement is an analysis that prompts Black women to develop politics that are connected to their material experiences. Identity politics is the first framework to understand the underside of plurality. While we can occupy many ways of being, these pluralities can beget more precarity. Being a Black lesbian mother is capacious; however, it can also be deadly. Barbara Smith's bodies of work model for me how to preserve and care for Black lesbians. Through her methods, she reminds me that the gratifying, necessary work, is revealing the subtleties in bodies of literature, rather than building a case solely upon "the negativity that already exists." This kind of generosity is a Black feminist practice and is an exemplar of the aforementioned sightings of care.[49]

The concentric relationships between Black women writers that Hull, Davis, and Clarke, center in their respective monographs made me consider questions such as: How does the archive

[49] An example of this care and generosity is Kristie Dotson's essay, "Inheriting Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist* epistemology." Dotson writes, "Black Feminist Thought gave me hope. Dramatic as that may sound, it is also true. From its insistence that black women of all walks of life and class positions were, are and can be intellectuals; to its highlighting that knowledge economies are engines for oppression; to its boldness in constructing a black feminist epistemology, Collins's book became one of my epistemological cornerstones" (Dotson, 2322).

function as an essential site of possibility for Black women's work? In what ways can the archive offer redress or circumvent erasure, since Black women continue to have a precarious relationship with publishing? How does interviewing and transcription make more legible what may have slipped through the cracks or been excised from public record? How can I resituate Black women's work within a respective era, epoch, or movement, and how might close readings reveal and teach? Additionally, how can reading generously and closely allow me to mark pleasure in relational and material ways, showing me where these tongues (languages/voices) have converged and diverged? Most importantly, how does a Black feminist criticism make these moves possible? My interviews with Black lesbian writer, Cheryl Clarke, my re-engagement with Barbara Smith's essay, "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," alongside the knowledge I acquired from publishing my anthology and studying Black [feminist literature], offered space for me to engage these questions. That I was interested in Black lesbian feminist writings as primary texts, as well as situating these writers work within contemporary discourses made my project take shape in a relational way. What I desired to do was engage in close literary, historical, and theoretical readings that would utilize and privilege two bodies of literature: Black Feminist Thought and Black lesbian writings written by Black women.

From the margins to the center

In my project, I build a case for defining black lesbian aesthetics to account for the proliferation of literature written by Black lesbian poets and critics, beginning with the formation of the Combahee River Collective in 1974.[50] These writers tackled issues of racism, sexual identity, class, and other forms of interlocking oppressions, while also articulating a multiplicitous and

[50] And by proliferation, I am referring to the publication of *Loving Her* (1974), The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), *All the Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), *Black Lesbian in white America* (1983), For *Nights Like This* (1983), *No Telephone To Heaven* (1987), *Dyke hands & sutras erotic & lyric* (1988).)

empowered selfhood. They insist that self-definition is based upon indivisible facets of existence.[51] Depicting the contours of Black lesbian poetic innovation, I underscore, name, and situate innovative poetics that have been largely marginalized and dismissed because of the misogyny and homophobia that pervaded the Black Arts Movement and Black liberation movements. This dissertation argues that the Combahee River Collective articulated a bifurcated utility of Black Feminism as both a political and personal posturing. Black women's oppression is analyzed, and liberation is sought after at the same time love and pleasure are cultivated and sustained.

The Combahee River Collective was formed in 1974 by Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith. The collective borrowed its name from the river that Harriet Tubman crossed to free over 750 slaves in South Carolina.[52] Combahee River Collective members did not want to name themselves after a person; instead, they wanted to "name ourselves after an action…and not only a political action but a political action for liberation."[53] The CRC politicized Black Feminism and this particular statement introduced an analysis, "interlocking oppressions," as a way to describe the simultaneity of oppression and the ways in which oppression can be compounded, making Black women more vulnerable to various kinds of subjugation. They write, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."[54] The CRC's understanding and concretization of "interlocking oppressions" builds upon their foremothers, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances Beale, and many others. Sojourner Truth, in 1851, asks if she is a woman—for her, woman is another moniker for human.

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[51] For example, when Audre Lorde says she is Black Lesbian Mother Warrior Poet.
[52] Tubman is still the first woman in U.S History to ever successfully lead a military campaign.
[53] Please see *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and The Combahee River Collective*, 31.
[54] The Combahee River Collective Statement in *"Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought,* 232.

She questions if she is human enough to receive relief and rest like her white female counterparts. In her refrain, "Ain't I A Woman," we see race and gender collide. Anna Julia Cooper, in 1862, demands that her race and gender be considered indivisible identities that are simultaneously operational in all *rooms* she enters. Frances Beale coins "double-jeopardy" in 1969 to address the myriad ways Black women have been misrepresented in society, and the exploitation Black women face sexually, socially, and economically.[55] The Combahee River Collective and statement are a bridge with multiple crossings. The statement galvanized Black women and expanded the vision of Black feminism. Our foremothers understood racialized gender and class—their vision is extended through the CRC's understanding of racialized sexuality, too.

The Combahee River Collective Statement was published in 1977. The statement itself is divided into four parts: (1) the genesis of contemporary Black Feminism; (2) what we believe; (3) Problems in Organizing Black Feminists; (4) Black Feminist Projects. In section one, the collective's citational practice is underscored, as they name the foremothers of Black feminism, remembering that they come from a long lineage of fugitivity and radical thinkers. The collective writes,

> Before looking at the recent development of black feminism, we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation…There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Francs E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon unknown—who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.[56]

[55] These theories continue. In 1988, Deborah King publishes her essay, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology" wherein she describes how the oppression that Black women face culminate together to create even greater subjection to marginalization. Also, in 1991, Crenshaw builds upon the aforementioned activists and coins the term "intersectionality" in 1991. She provides a name and constructs a frame that allows us to see where power comes from, where it collides, and how Women of Color, most specifically, are made more vulnerable to forms of structural and/or systematic and systemic oppression. See, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and violence against Women of Color."

[56] *Words of Fire*, 232-233.

The Combahee River Collective speak to the long lineage of fugivity and activism that predates the birth of their own revolutionary thinking. Black women's radical activism begets Black women's radical activism. CRC's analysis is an extension of previous articulations, revolutions, and uprisings. The authors express that their presence has been rendered invisible because of racism in the second wave feminist movement and sexism and homophobia in the Civil Rights, Black nationalism, and Black Panther movements: "It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of black and white men" (233).[57] These chasms created through circumstances beyond their control that rendered them invisible and overlooked, motivated the formation of the collective, and the creation of a statement aimed to embolden women of color.

The CRC prioritized bringing language to the specific inequities they had to contend with and that is why their political analysis is salient: "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (234).[58] The CRC homed in on the ways in which their specific lives rendered them to more vulnerable to particular forms of oppression. During the 70s, Demita Frazier was a part of the Black Panther Party in Chicago and both Barbara and Beverly were Socialists. All three were feminists, too. However, before "identity politics" they were marginalized in both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movements because of misogyny, sexism, and homophobia. In Barbara Smith's 2017 interview with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, she says, "We were marginalized in the Black movement, in the Black liberation movement, certainly in the Black nationalist movement.

[57] *Words of Fire*
[58] *Words of Fire,* 234.

And we were marginalized in the white feminist movement, for different reasons. One of the reasons we were marginalized in the Black movement, besides sexism and misogyny, was also homophobia. A lot of us were indeed lesbians…" (60).[59] Barbara Smith reflects on the imperatives of the collective 40 years after the publication of the Combahee River Collective Statement and 43 years after the collective came together. The collective created their own politics because Black men did not understand their gendered *and* racialized oppression and white women could not see privilege nor color. And neither could fathom sexuality being integral to any liberation movement. Cheryl Clarke remarks on an integrated analysis, too, in her monograph *After Mecca: Women Poets and The Black Arts Movement*:

> Blackness opened me to poetry in the 1960s, and feminism and lesbianism in the 1970s…As black lesbian-feminists, we had learned (within the various social justice movements of the nineteen sixties) to invent our political identities and histories; articulate a "belonging," connection, and solidarity with lesbians of all colors as well as black communities; construct a "utopian narrative;" adapt a cultural logic that intersected with gender, sexuality, and class politics; and enunciate an antiheterosexist analysis of white, male, and capitalist domination.[60]

Clarke discusses how movements like the Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements articulated a strong sense and acceptance of Blackness—these movements aimed to unmark and uplift the Black voice; however, as Clarke states in this text, there were still limitations of misogyny and heterosexism that imbued the politics of the 60s and 70s. Although many Black lesbians were influenced by the black liberation movements of this era, they decided to create new liberatory politics that would account for the intersectionality of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class—a lens to assess where power comes from, where it collides, and how these intersections make women of color more vulnerable to systems of oppressions. Clarke asserts that Black lesbians learned the value of

[59] *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and The Combahee River Collective*.
[60] *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, 5.

constructing a politics that would succinctly articulate their histories and identities—a politics that would be coalitional, a politics that would adapt a cultural logic and analysis that would give them the lens to scrutinize oppression. Clarke, although not an author of the Combahee River Collective Statement, is a Black lesbian feminist who was influenced by the collective's insistence on an integrated analysis and identity politics—an analysis that accounted for interlocking oppressions and a politics that would address the nuances of their lived experiences.

In 2017, the National Women's Studies Association honored the forty-year anniversary of the Combahee River Collective statement. The conference was held in Maryland, and the audience consisted of an innumerable amount of attendees. Barbara Smith was among those honored that year, and it was apparent that the statement helped many name their oppressions, while providing a paradigm of how to construct new worlds. There was what can be described as a bifurcative utility of the statement: *I develop an identity politics while simultaneously naming my plurality of being.* Race and gender matter, and the CRC extended this knowing by accounting for sexuality. Attendees remarked that the CRC statement is indeed a public declaration of a Black feminist ideology and praxis. Being Black and lesbian was central to the development of the collective and their philosophies because they were challenging heterosexuality and simultaneously creating a life outside of the heteronormative structure.[61]

Almost three years after the 40th anniversary of the Combahee statement's publication, CRC founder, writer, and critic, Barbara Smith endorses Democratic senator, Bernie Sanders. With this endorsement, the CRC statement is re-analyzed through the lens of Philip Agnew, Bernie Sanders campaign National Surrogate. Agnew, in his discussion of identity politics, reminds listeners that the term was first coined by Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith. He says,

[61] Man as head of household, woman as desexualized domestic servant, etc. See Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.*

> It seems as if, too often we conflate a perversion of identity politics with what identity politics is and where it came from. Barbara Smith, the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde. Barbara Smith, who has endorsed our Senator Sanders, right, is the one of the first people to coin that phrase. And what it talked about is, that my identity allows me to move in the world or restricts me from moving in the world in certain ways. Right? And that the oppressions, the twin, quadruple, oppressions that we all face are exhibited, and are expressed, and are felt differently, as a Black woman, as a lesbian, as a queer person, as a Black man—that oppression doesn't always look the same.
>
> The wellspring of what identity politics, in the tradition of the Combahee River Collective, is talking about is deeply embedded in a Black, radical, feminist, socialist agenda that says, "we need all of us, we need to come to the table; it doesn't look the same; the thing that brought us to the table does not look the same; your poverty is a little different than my poverty; your harassment, your assault is different than mine but we are at this table and it is because of those differences that our Movement has the colors, and the beauty and the representations that it has." That is what identity politics is.[62]

Agnew's words reflect a deep reckoning with Black Feminism and also reflects coalitional praxis. He defends the intellectual contributions from CRC and Black Feminists, rightfully names the usurpation, and in turn, provides a thorough explanation of the CRC statement, portraying it as historically relevant. In his explication of the Combahee River Collective Statement's widely cited concept, "identity politics," Agnew underscores the importance of going back to the reading, returning to the primary source. He explains that identity politics is coalitional in its praxis—one's lived experience is the impetus for eradicating oppression and ascertaining liberation. Identity politics is a source of power, a continuous supply. The CRC articulated a plurality of being and created a politics from that articulation. They are Black, lesbian, feminist, radical, socialists and their agenda reflect that kind of plurality. Agnew rightfully attributes the mis-definition of this concept as a "perversion." Perversion, as in, travesty, misrepresentation—a distorted interpretation that intentionally deviates from the original meaning. And yet, in spite of usurpation and mis-definition, what was made clear in the construction of identity politics cannot be made obscure. The proof of

[62] Transcript from "Philip Agnew and Cornwell West on Identity Politics|Class Warfare|Harvard."

its clarity and cogency are in the statement. Agnew's cogent articulation of the statement is testament to just that. His insistence that we re-remember the value of the collective's politics is also paradigmatic of the coalitional praxis that also imbues the statement. The CRC writes, "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive black men…our situation as black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race…we struggle together with black men against racism…" (235).[63] These remarks underscore the importance of viewing difference as a mobilizing force and seeing value in its utility. Agnew's public engagement with the CRC's ideologies is an ethics of care. He names the authors Black, Lesbian, Radical, and Socialist to mitigate the perpetual disavowal of these particular identity markers. Agnew recognizes that it is the particularities of their identity that made their politics so revolutionary and historically relevant.

There is no irony in the Combahee River Collective Statement re-emerging in current political discourses. This recurrence highlights the historical value of the Black lesbians involved in the statement's creation. Naming oneself Black, lesbian, Socialist, was a posturing that allowed the CRC to create a radical politics that gave credence to both multiplicity and intersectionality. In the construction of their politics, it means that: *I have the language to name myself lesbian and I have the lens to assess my oppression and structural power[s]*. The statement has been carried and gestated a million times over. Because of the statement's refusal to be silenced, I have thought more deeply about its impact [not only in this contemporary moment] but at this time of its conception. It is evident that the statement's philosophy of an integrated analysis not only yielded itself to activism and coalition, but to intimate relationships, too. The CRC statement instantiates that the personal is political.

Identity politics, as outlined by the collective, is a robust concept that aims to empower. Its strength is found in the firm belief that your voice is valuable and the starting place for articulating the particularities of your own life. Identity politics, especially as it is understood through the

[63] Please see *Words of Fire*.

theories by Black lesbians, is a praxis-oriented concept. In *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and The Combahee River Collective*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes,

> But "identity politics" was not just about who you were; it was also about what you could do to confront the oppression you were facing. Or as Black women had argued within the broader feminist movement: "the personal is political." This slogan was not just about "lifestyle" issues, as it came to be popularly understood, rather it was initially about how the experiences within the lives of Black women shaped their political outlook. The experiences of oppression, humiliations, and the indignities created by poverty, racism, and sexism opened Black women up to the possibility of radical and revolutionary politics.[64]

Taylor underscores the complexity of identity politics, expressing that it is both a personal and political positioning that places Black women's experiences at its center so that a cogent politic can be constructed to address these nuances, with the end goal being liberation. The convergence of the personal and political challenges the philosophical and western split between mind and body. Mind, in this instance would be associated with the political, and body, in this instance would be associated with the personal. The CRC and Black feminists alike recognized that one's personal life experiences *do* impact, influence, and sometimes converge with one's political ideologies. In fact, the CRC believes that the personal is the starting place for the development of a praxis oriented politic.[65] And, the CRC naming themselves "lesbian" in this statement functions as a direct paradigm of how the personal is political. Being Black *and* lesbian for the CRC was both a personal and political positioning. While Black lesbian signified/symbolized how and who they loved, Black lesbian was also a political posturing—a political posturing that allowed them to further develop the nexus between race and gender that their foremothers articulated decades prior. Black lesbian, for the CRC, was also a personal articulation of how they approached love. Naming themselves Black lesbians in the statement made way for the complexities of oppression to be further understood, as sexuality became an important site of inquiry, too. There was no shame in naming one's self lesbian

[64] *How We Get Free*, 9.
[65] What does it mean to name—to have the courage to? Poetics offer that/give way to that action/activity.

because that particularity gave them a unique lens to articulate their lived experiences; a unique lens that made their vision and politics even more expansive. It was the ostracization in their own communities that led them to envisioning a world where everyone would be free. Beverly Guy-Sheftall even notes,

> This black feminist manifesto is a clear articulation of the revolution of contemporary black feminism and the concept of the simultaneity of oppressions that black women suffer. It also emphasized the importance of eradicating homophobia and acknowledging the role of lesbians in the development of black feminism. Black lesbians have indeed been critical to the development of black feminism as ideology and praxis.[66]

Guy-Sheftall names the Combahee River Collective Statement a manifesto—a public declaration of a revolutionary Black Feminist politic. Guy-Sheftall's insistence that Black lesbians have been integral to the politicization of Black Feminism further legitimizes how important the Combahee River Collective and statement are to Black Feminism, and how Black lesbians helped create and sustain Black Feminism through ideology and practice. In practice and at its best, Black and lesbian converge so that the personal and political can coalesce. Black lesbian is a posturing that articulates a capacious vision of liberation; a posturing that understands the fluidity of sex, sexuality, gender, and orientation—a posturing that privileges plurality, porosity, and eroticism—Black lesbian as politic, descriptor, symbol, heretic, haptic, hermeneutic, analytic. Black lesbian as aesthetic.

The Combahee River Collective was crucially concerned with change and invested in challenging the status quo, in their own specific ways. In the aforementioned discussion of the collective and their influence, I mapped out how and why the collective's politics galvanized women of color, especially Black lesbians. The questions that reverberate are, how do you capture the magnitude of the CRC's impact, what language can be used to explain this kind of influence, and how do we describe the proliferation of literature, most specifically, poetics, that emerge after the

[66] *Words of Fire*, 231.

collective is formed? This dissertation is an invitation to explore those questions and to bring language to the particularities of how the collective and statement's historical impact birthed a literary movement.

The CRC statement politicized Black feminism and unveiled the voice of Black lesbians. And from this statement there is what can be described as a full exploration and articulation of the Black lesbian [feminist] experience and the construction of an ideology, politics, an aesthetics based in part of it, which I call black lesbian aesthetics. After the Combahee River Collective was formed in 1974 and after the subsequent publication of the Combahee River Collective Statement, there is a proliferation of literature published and performed by Black lesbians, but there is also an aesthetic that forms because of it. For example, Ann Allen Shockley published *Loving Her* in 1974, the first book to have an African American lesbian as the protagonist. Audre Lorde published *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Coal* (1976), *Between Ourselves* (1976), *Hanging Fire* (1978), *Black Unicorn* (1978), *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982), *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1983), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986), *A Burst of Light* (1988). Becky Birtha published *For Nights Like This* (1983), and Anita Cornwell published *Black Lesbian in White America* (1983). Cheryl Clarke published *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* (1981), "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" (1981), "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" (1983), *Living as a Lesbian* (1986). Michelle Cliff published "Notes on Speechlessness" in *Sinister Wisdom* in 1978 and *No Telephone to Heaven* in 1987. Pat Parker published *Womanslaughter* and *Movement in Black* in 1978. S. Diane Bogus published *Dyke hands & sutras erotic & lyric* in 1988. And anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men: Black Women's Studies* (1982), *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) were published, too. Collectively, these texts are invested in articulating the particularities of a Black lesbian experience. An extrapolation of an identity politic.

On May 17, 1984, Audre Lorde taught a seminar titled, "The Poet As Outsider" at Freie Universität Berlin.[67] During this particular class, Lorde discusses aesthetics as a way to build a case for an understanding beyond western philosophy, and to argue how valuable poetry is when thinking about how to subvert the status quo.[68] She says,

> Poetry is an art. It comes out of the lives and experiences of the people who create it…there is no such thing as universal poetry…Aesthetics comes from a Greek word which means pertaining to the senses. It means the study of and perception of what is beautiful…things perceptible to the senses…the first and deepest meaning of aesthetics. It pertains to things material as opposed to things thinkable; aesthetics: there is more than one approach to the beautiful. What we consider to be beautiful is formed by all our experiences and in which the ways we have been trained to see affects our concepts of the beautiful. There is not one aesthetic contrary to the Western European culture…It is within the true outsider, the poet, who visions, who attempts what has not been, who measures an aesthetic not by an objective standard but by what feels beautiful, that has an effect that is useful and makes us more than who we wish to be. That piece of art or poem is measured and that is the outsider position. That is a position that will always by definition challenge what has been acceptable. i.e., what already exists, what is comfortable, what has been defined as acceptable within a culture…governments by definition are reactionary, codified definitions of aesthetics are reactionary. They must be because they came from what has already been established, accepted…there must be a place beyond that, that we must look to, must examine, and begin to formulate before we have been assured it is correct. Since there are no patterns, no laws, to guide us to say— "hey that is beautiful!"—has it led us somewhere, somehow, better within ourselves, has it taken us to a place where we have not been able to go before, threatening or otherwise? This is what we ask of our art, of our poetry.[69]

Audre Lorde rightfully positions aesthetics alongside poetry. Although she assigns the origins of its meaning to western philosophy, it is her position as both poet and Black lesbian that prompts her to expand the meaning of aesthetics. Lorde recognizes that aesthetics has been the private enterprise of western thought; however, she redefines aesthetics to account for materiality (the physical, the bodily) to open up new ways that the outsider might articulate the particularities of their own experience, their own vision(s). Recognizing the hegemony that defines beauty by the standards of

[67] Audre Lorde was invited by Dagmar Schultz to be a visiting professor from 1984-1992.
[68] Implicitly challenging someone like Immanuel Kant's belief that beauty is universal.
[69] Transcription from seminar at the Free University of Berlin on May 17, 1984, titled "Poet As Outsider."

the majority, Lorde turns to the alien entity, viewing this position as having heretical value and insight. At its most useful poetry, as a form of art, should seek to examine systems of power, and challenge authoritarianism and orthodoxy. Poetry, for Lorde, is an art form that allows us to closely examine our own experiences and empower us to create a new world beyond calamity and oppression. Lorde emphasizes the utility of poetry and echoes these same remarks in her prose piece, "Poetry is Not a Luxury." She writes,

> THE QUALITY OF LIGHT by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.[70]

Lorde's understanding of aesthetics is novel because she desires to expand the definition to account for heterogeneity rather than homogeny. Where western philosophy aims to define aesthetics on the basis of universal meaning, Lorde sees value in diverse understandings of what we deem as attractive and useful. Lorde sees poetry as the vehicle that drives us to a deeper comprehension of who we are and how we exist in the world. Poetry excavates. It highlights. Poetry helps name and bring to language what may have otherwise gone unarticulated or invisible. As a Black lesbian poet, Lorde's definition of aesthetics guides this dissertation because the literature that is published after 1974 by Black lesbians is invested in articulating the particular experiences of what it means to exist as a Black Lesbian (in U.S contexts). The literature that is published is invested in *taking us to a place where we have not been able to go before.*

During the "Poet as Outsider" seminar, Lorde mentions that the black aesthetic is "an authentic voice that no longer looked to a white audience for humanness."[71] My project concretizes

[70] *Sister Outsider,* 36.
[71] Transcription from seminar at the Free University of Berlin on May 17, 1984, titled "Poet As Outsider."

Black lesbian aesthetics and reworks this statement by stating that "Black lesbian aesthetics is an authentic voice that no longer looked *any* audience for humanness." Not looking to a white audience for humanness or black [male] audience for humanness, Black lesbian aesthetics is not bound up in acknowledgement but invested in self-definition and collective freedom. Although identity politics, as defined by the Combahee River Collective, involves the ways in which we confront the particularities of our own oppression, identity politics is useful because it demands a sophistication—a deep reckoning with and privileging of the voices made to be oppressed because of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. I demonstrate that writers like Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke use an integrated analysis to name the ways in which they are oppressed, and that this practice of naming the particularities of their own experiences is also the impetus for articulating the ways in which they exercise their freedom as Black lesbians. Black lesbian aesthetics, then, brings language to this kind of materiality.

In her essay, "Saying the Least Said, Telling the Least told, Cheryl Clarke offers an insightful understanding of aesthetics from the purview of a Black lesbian. She writes,

> *Living As A Lesbian*, my second book of poetry, served to advance a lesbian aesthetic and perspective—politically, lyrically, and unequivocally. I plainly wanted to advance Audre Lorde's thesis in her piece, "Uses of The Erotic," by promoting the concept of lesbian sex, which itself is poetry—it is and without beginning, middle, and end.[72]

Clarke's promotion of a lesbian aesthetic is defined by the erotic and its uses. A [Black] lesbian aesthetic, through Clarke's own extension, is invested in bringing to language, via poetry, the nuances of the Black lesbian experience. She sees lesbian copulation, in its myriad forms, as a poetic action and poetic site of inquiry. I converge Audre Lorde's novel definition of aesthetics with Cheryl Clarke's to describe black lesbian aesthetics as a restoration between body/flesh, sacred/sexual, work/play, self-care/coalition. Through black lesbian aesthetics, there is an articulation of quotidian

[72] *The Days of Good Looks*, 141.

lesbianism, a desire to clearly express everyday modes of being—from intimate love to their practices of direct action to ascertain political or social goals. Through Black lesbian aesthetics, there is also an expression of an identity politic(s), a lens that scrutinizes the particularities of their own experiences—within this scrutiny, black lesbian aesthetics reveals that one's personal endeavors can also be read as an extension of political commitment. Through black lesbian aesthetics, the poetics of the erotic is praxis, something to be exercised. Celebrating the erotic can be understood as marking one's pleasure.[73] Through Black lesbian aesthetics, a plurality of being is described as process of self-identification that is based upon an intrinsic knowing that one's existence contains more than one configuration. Through black lesbian aesthetics, futurity concerns itself with the prosperity of children and the environment, the privileging of queer kinship and interdependence—all of which challenges empire, and ultimately necessitates its fall. The functions and resonances of Black lesbian aesthetics is fungible, so these descriptions are interchangeable and able to adapt to new situations.

The following sub-sections endeavor to elucidate major terms I use throughout the dissertation and interpretations of these key terms and ideas. Ideas and terms such as Black feminist criticism, Black lesbian aesthetics, uses of the erotic ([re]production], [re]creation), and poetry.

HERMENEUTICS, KEY TERMS, and THEORIES

Black Feminist Criticism

Examining literature as way to engage and understand the contours of Black Feminism is one approach that challenges and subverts systems of dehumanization, not limited to heterosexism, misogynoir, classism, and homophobia. In her seminal article, "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism,"

[73] Evelyn Hammonds has offered critical insights about Black lesbian sexuality, noting that, "Black lesbian sexualities are not simply identities. Rather they represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency. Black lesbians theorizing sexuality is a site that disrupts silence and imagines a positive affirming sexuality" (102).

Barbara Smith states that, "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean" (21). What undergirds Smith's critique in this essay is the erasure of Black lesbian writers in both discourse and history. Applying a Black feminist criticism to Black women's work allows us to get at the work's materiality, meaning, and nuances, making "a body of literature recognizable and real" (20). A Black feminist criticism is "highly innovative, embodying the daring spirit of the work themselves…Black feminist would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use…Black feminist criticism applied to a particular work can overturn previous assumptions about and expose for the first time its actual dimensions" (23). That Smith's article is about both the politics and practices of literature makes her call for understanding Black feminist criticism as being connected to a body (Black women) and movement (Black feminism) salient. The demand for Black feminist criticism is about coalition building across differences, as well as constructing new languages to describe Black women and our experiences. Re-reading capaciously is praxis for a Black feminist critic, Smith models this in her careful attention to works by Black women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston.

Farah Jasmine Griffin offers crucial insights about Black feminist criticism in her essay, "That the Mother's May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism." Griffin writes, "…black feminist criticism provided a space for the emergence of black queer studies and black masculinity studies as well. Situated at the nexus of black studies and queer studies but subordinated by both, scholars interested in black, gay, lesbian, and transgendered people provide a critique in both fields and a reading practice that lay claim to both" (500). In relation to Griffin, an argument that undergirds my project is understanding Black

lesbianism as vestibule. Black lesbian feminists have been central to the construction and articulation of radical Black feminism, and Black feminist criticism offered the first insights "into the relationship between sexuality, race, and gender" (500). As vestibule, other fields have traveled through this criticism created by a Black lesbian and taken on its own shape because of this influence.

The goal of my project is to understand the erotic and aesthetic possibilities of Black lesbian writing through practicing Black feminist criticism in my reading of these literatures. Black feminist criticism makes possible reading for chasms and relation. Though some of the arguments about Black feminist criticism reduce it to essentialism[74], Smith's and Griffin's call for a mode of analysis that accounts not only for Black lesbian and feminist literatures but for the experiences of working class and poor Black women opens up space for inquiry. What are the erotic possibilities in Black lesbian writings and how might a Black feminist criticism make these possibilities more legible? How does a relational and generous framework help us read and understand literatures by Black lesbians?

[74] In 1980, Deborah E. McDowell offered a critique of Smith's essay, that at the time, reflected a misinterpretation of Smith's essay and foreclosed an opportunity for relation. McDowell notes many of Smith's "shortcomings" but the most poignant might be McDowell's critique of Smith positing that *Sula* could be read as a lesbian novel. McDowell remarks, "This definition of lesbianism is vague and imprecise; it subsumes far more Black women writers, particularly contemporary ones, than not into the canon of Lesbian writers…All of this to say that Smith has simultaneously oversimplified and obscured the issue of lesbianism…One of the major tasks ahead of Black feminist critics who write from a lesbian perspective, then, is to define lesbianism and lesbian literature precisely. Until they can offer a definition which is not vacuous, their attempts to distinguish Black lesbian writers from those who are not will be hindered" (608). Words like *vague*, *imprecise*, *oversimplified*, and *obscure*, work as chasms that create distance, when in all actuality, Smith's work is/was an invitation. The demand for prescriptive definitions of lesbianism actually works against the capacious embodiment that lesbianism is. Moreover, Smith never stated that one needed to map "lesbianism" onto Black women writers, and the fear that Black women writers may be embraced or classified as lesbians perpetuates the homophobic stereotype that one can "contract" queerness through close proximity. Instead, Smith's essay shows us how to read for lesbianism, based off of clear themes she outlines in the essay. In her discussion of McDowell's critique, Farrah J. Griffin notes, "Ironically, although McDowell accuses Smith of oversimplifying, obscuring, and stripping lesbianism of explanatory power, one of McDowell's more insightful and original essays would read the lesbian subtexts in Larsen's novels" (493). McDowell's essay makes no "new" claims for Black Feminist Criticism like the title suggests and proposing that a Black Feminist Criticism is separatist underscores a missed opportunity for connection between Smith's seminal essay and McDowell's reading of it. However, when McDowell's essay is republished fifteen years later, she writes, "I was fairly harsh in my judgement. I faulted [Smith] for allowing ideology to inform critical analysis, but now I know there is no criticism without ideology" (McDowell, 1995, 23).

In the same way that Black feminist criticism has operated as vestibule for other fields, Black feminist criticism, as it has been applied to my project, allowed me to further understand and describe the moments of convergence, relation, and divergence among Black lesbian writers like Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke, as an aesthetic. Their concentric relationship reflects a plurality of Blackness and being, and evidence how caring for each other fosters kinship and builds community. These alternative ways of relating rupture colonial machinations like dismemberment, heterosexuality, and separatism.

Black lesbian aesthetics

The question of legibility, as we have assessed in the commentary between Black feminists that were examined above, is a constant struggle. The necessity for perceptive and non-antagonistic analysis of works written by Black women still exists, and this is where my concept of black lesbian aesthetics is birthed. The Oxford English Dictionary defines aesthetics in two ways. As an adjective, aesthetic is concerned with beauty and the appreciation of it—giving or designed to give pleasure through beauty. As a noun, aesthetic is a set of principles underlying the work of an artistic movement or the work of a particular artist. The origin of aesthetic emerged in the 18th century and related to the perception by the senses (Greek), by the mid-18th century, Germans coined the sense "concerned with beauty" and by the early 19th century, the word was adopted into English. The brief etymology of aesthetic shows how the word began as a descriptor for how the body perceives external stimuli through sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch—a faculty of feeling, thought, and meaning (from Latin word *'sensus'*), to a word that is also about what beauty is—an authority of judging and naming beauty.[75] Various modalities of Black aesthetics have also been broadly defined and described by Black scholars. In "An Impossibility: Black Queer and Trans* Aesthetics," Shanté

[75] Oxford English Dictionary, "aesthetic," accessed May 25, 2021.

Paradigm Smalls and Elliot H. Powell" state that Black Queer and Trans folks have mobilized their own aesthetics in the face of global anti-blackness and while being situated in an anti-queer world. They write, "Rather than consciously defining themselves against antagonistic white mainstream movements and resistant Black social justice movements (or fighting for inclusion within such movements), Black queer and trans people have made their own movements which have eclipsed or entered mainstream consciousness" (1), and this assessment attests to the ways that Black aesthetics offer heretical possibilities for self-definition. Similarly, to Lorde's definition of aesthetics, there is a turn away from whiteness, a disavowal of those conditions of being human. Additionally, Kemi Adeyemi has connected aesthetics to desire and affect, naming these modalities "key rhetorical and embodied vocabularies through which black queer women have long articulated their relationships to and under regimes of governance" (562). That aesthetics, from this purview is connected to desire and feeling in spite of surveillance from the nation-state positions it as heretical.

Audre Lorde offers a complimentary definition of aesthetics during a lecture at the Free University of Berlin in 1984. Lorde says,

> Aesthetics comes from a Greek word which means pertaining to the senses. It means the study of and perception of what is beautiful, things perceptible to the senses, the first and deepest meaning of aesthetics. It pertains to things material as opposed to things thinkable; aesthetics: there is more than one approach to the beautiful. What we consider to be beautiful is formed by all our experiences and the ways in which we have been trained to see affects our concepts of the beautiful. There is not one aesthetic contrary to the Western European culture…. When you look at something you believe is beautiful you must remember you were schooled to think that is. Straight lines are beautiful…You were raised to believe that creamy white skin is beautiful. There are cultures where to be white is to be dead. These are measurements, these are cultural things. Remember people make art. Power defines culture…because power writes the books.[76]

Lorde is keen to underscore the relationship between power and beauty. The measure for shape, color, and form (read beauty), is weighed by whiteness (read Western European culture). Power

[76] Transcription from seminar at the Free University of Berlin on May 17, 1984, titled "Poet As Outsider."

dictates what narrative and image will be dominant and dispersed, leaving everything outside of those metrics on the periphery. To rupture that dominance, Lorde suggests that aesthetics be measured from the outsider position: "It is within the true outsider, the poet, who visions, who attempts what has not been, who measures an aesthetic not by an objective standard but by what feels beautiful" (4). There is a fragmentation with objectivity—one is presumed to have split the brain from the heart, the mind from feeling. This kind of fragmentation is an integral function of whiteness, and Lorde remarks on this often in her work: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free"(38).[77] The outsider position believes that without feeling, ideas cannot be birthed. In this way, Lorde endeavors to redefine aesthetics from the purview of feeling.

In this same lecture, Lorde provides an overview of how aesthetics functioned within the Black Arts Movement. She asserts, "Black aesthetics is an authentic voice that no longer looked to a white audience for humanness."[78] Aesthetics create space for alternative ways of being. The attributes of humanness, not limited to whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, ability, and the bourgeois class, offer no space for difference. Lorde is novel in her assessment of aesthetics having a connection to how we define who is considered human, and her belief that we must move around these descriptors, behaviors, and practices of human, to create new ways of being, relating, and language. Black lesbian aesthetics evolves from that heretical thinking. Black lesbian aesthetics, then, is an authentic voice that no longer looked to *any* audience for humanness. This turn away from the conditions of human and this turn to the outsider position is what I endeavor to track in the work by Black lesbian writers. The position of the outsider is also theorized by Jamaican novelist and philosopher, Sylvia Wynter. In her book, *Do Not Call Us Negros: How "multicultural" Textbooks*

[77] From "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider*.
[78] Transcription from "Poet As Outsider" seminar at the Free University of Berlin on May 17, 1984.

Perpetuate Racism, Wynter writes, "So, only the liminal perspective whose 'outsidership' is the condition of each order's self-definition can empower us to free ourselves from the categories and prescriptions of our specific order and from its generalized horizon of understanding" (27). My project sees Black lesbians as having an outsider position and Black lesbian aesthetics being a way of understanding and tracking how Black lesbians have freed and defined themselves against the chaos of human—those categories and prescriptions of specific order—and created new languages and ways of being.

Poetry

The Oxford English Dictionary defines poetry as a literary work in which the expression of ideas and feelings is given intensity by using distinctive style and rhythm. Poetry can also describe the quality of beauty and intensity of emotion regarded as characteristic of poems, or something regarded as comparable to poetry in its beauty. From medieval Latin, poetry has sometimes generally referred to creative literature. Definitively, poetry facilitates an expression of feeling. Descriptively, poetry is a combination of qualities, like shape, color, and form, that pleases the senses. Black poetry, then, provides a space for us to redefine the standards of beauty. Black poetry brings feelings to language. In 1977, Lorde published "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, wherein she says, "The white fathers told us: I think, there I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom" (38). My project focuses itself upon poetry by Black lesbian writers because of this. Lorde undoes the Cartesian philosophy of knowledge, the system of knowledge that white fathers created to destroy difference by positioning our feelings at the nexus of knowledge production. Poetry, then, is

how we "turn language over"[79]—poetry is how we not only challenge these western philosophies of existing in the world, but how we actually explore and create new languages, ways of being and relating.

Three years after the publication of "Poetry Is Not a Luxury, Audre Lorde delivered a paper at the Copeland Colloquium at Amherst College, titled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference. During this talk, Lorde builds a novel and necessary class analysis for poetry.

> Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each others' energy and creative insight…Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, on scraps of surplus paper…As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women.[80]

Lorde's attention to the nuances of production and the means required to produce remain salient. Extending English writer Virginia Woolf's idea of women needing a room of one's own, Lorde asserts that this is not solely a question of space, but a question of the actual conditions and material goods that make producing art possible: "A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time" (116).[81] Artistic production is economic, temporal, and spatial, and so, what is produced by Black folks—what is recorded, printed, and archived, reflects how sedition manifests in the realm of the textual, articulating "our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (36).[82] The poetry of Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke, represent working class Black lesbians who describe how they have constructed a sense of self and place, in an anti-black

[79] Virtual, public talk by Dionne Brand titled, "These Tyrannical Times: Poetry as Liberatory, Poetry As Undoing," hosted at the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics," by Harryette Mullen on September 28, 2020.
[80] *Sister Outsider,* 116.
[81] *Sister Outsider.*
[82] *Sister Outsider*

and anti-queer world. My project concerns itself with assessing their ways of being, to probe into how we can learn about the poetic contours pleasure and sedition.

Uses of the Erotic

Audre Lorde's description of the erotic and its uses have aided my understanding of reproduction, recreation, and corporeality. I read Audre Lorde's published essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," her unpublished drafts titled, "The Erotic As Power," and her poetry alongside each other. From the published essay, the erotic is a deeply female and spiritual resource that resides within each of us. The erotic is an "internal requirement toward excellence…the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (54). Lorde maps myriad functions of the erotic: "the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them" (56) which lessens the threat of their difference. Another salient function of the erotic for Lorde "is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy" (56), and the last function of the erotic is our ability to "share the power of each other's feelings" (58). Emotions are the nexus of the erotic—the affective, the sensuous, which begin or form internally. Lorde is keen to foreground mutuality, which is recurring throughout her work, especially her poetry—mutuality is the basis of romantic intimacy and coalition building. Through the functions of the erotic that Lorde outlines, I understand the erotic as an internal relationship we have with ourselves that serves as a measure for our capacity to feel pleasure, to construct pleasure, to exchange pleasure. The unpublished draft of this prose piece, titled, "Erotic as Power" describes the erotic as an "erotic exercise, from fully felt dance to deeply sexual contract which feels like the highest or strongest form of this force about which I speak…" Lorde goes on to describe the contours of the activity she speaks of:

> In the sharing of this movement, the dancing, the erotic wells of motion and music—the synchronization of our response to what starts as external rhythm and then begins to be repeated in our blood and heart beat and to which we begin to respond in more similar ways; the expression of that response within each of us bring us closer together. It is as if we are winding ourselves up into a rhythm, the exercise of which makes us within ourselves—more aware of each other. It is a sharing of joy. [83]

The erotic, grounded in mutuality, facilitates recognition that is not based in hierarchy nor homogeny. The erotic is about bringing bodies together, and Lorde underscores that there is a cadence in movement when it is co-constructed. This rhythm and synchronization that Lorde addresses in the published and unpublished prose manifests in her poetry, too. For example, in "Recreation," Lorde writes: "Coming together/it is easier to work/after our bodies/meet/paper and pen/neither care nor profit/whether we write or not/but as your body moves/under my hands/charged and waiting/we cut the leash/you create me against your thighs/hilly with images/moving through our word countries/my body writes into your flesh/the poem/you make of me" (296).[84] Lorde describes bodies in rhythm, bodies who have come together on the basis of mutuality, bodies who have come together, sharing sexual orgasm, bodies who have become "more aware of each other" because of this exchange, bodies uninvested in dividends. Hermeneutically, then, my project understands and refers to recreation to describe the process of how we remake ourselves—how we create again—how we give new life. From this, my project describes reproduction as what outgrows or is birthed from this process of recreation. Reproduction as the ability to produce work, to produce new offspring. In the process of recreation, what does our remaking of self, cause to exist again? By placing the corporeal at the center of their praxis, Black lesbians, and Lorde, respectively, construct new languages that open up capacious possibilities for recreation and reproduction.

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[83] Transcription from archival draft. Spelman College Women's Resource and Research Center, Subseries 1, Box 18, Folders 105-146, Folder 105.
[84] *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 296.

Chapter Overview

These descriptions of black lesbian aesthetics are recurring themes in the literature that is published after the formation of the Combahee River Collective in 1974 through 1988.[85] I engage the work of Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke, examining how these recurring themes for black lesbian aesthetics emerge in their work, respectively. Through Pat Parker's work, chapter one, "I am the Black woman/& I have been all over" offers meditations on her prose piece, "Funny" and her poetry collection, *Movement in Black* (1978), to illuminate Parker's capacious vision of liberation and her expression of quotidian Blackness, not devoid of her lesbianism. Theoretically, I examine Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* to interrogate the configurations of controlling images. I posit that the iterations and evolutions of the bulldagger, Black Butch Woman, and Black Dyke are uncontrolled images that challenge heteronormative ways of being for Black women. Parker pushes back against matriarchal family structures that she would have otherwise been bound to, as Black [lesbian] woman and former wife. And yet, through her explanation of love, in its myriad forms (platonic, political, romantic), Parker's work reflects a deep investment in defining blackness as something porous—she converges Blackness and love to imagine a futurity where race, sex, or orientation are sites of connection rather than discord. Chapter two, "Flesh, Body, and the Uses of

[85] Although this project spans from 1974-1988, that is not to say that black lesbian aesthetics cannot be associated with contemporary culture. For example, although black aesthetics are associated with the period from 1965-1975, there are still articulations of quotidian blackness, black liberations, and a turn away from dominant structures, especially in music—another form of poetics. See the work of iartists like Syd, Darkoo, Oya Noire, Koffee, among others. And, in literature, see the work of Nicole Dennis-Benn, Staceyann Chin, Savannah Shange, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Zanele Muholi, among others.

The Erotic," examines Audre Lorde's poetry collections, *New York Headshop and Museum* (1974), *Coal* (1976), and *Black Unicorn* (1978), unpublished archival drafts, and her collection of prose essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider*. Black lesbian aesthetics, from the purview of Lorde's work, is described through her construction of the "erotic" and its uses, and the restoral between body/flesh, play/work, and self-care/coalition. This chapter interrogates M. Jacquí Alexander's concept of "erotic autonomy" and Hortense Spillers' essay, "Interstices." Both theorists place black female sexuality at its center, as both problematic and site of possibility. Chapter three, "The Black Lesbian Has Decolonized Her Body," turns to Cheryl Clarke's poetry and anthologized essays. In Clarke's work, I offer insights on her widely cited essay, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" (1981), "New Notes on Lesbianism" (1983) and her collection of poetry, *Living As A Lesbian* (1986). This chapter explores Clarke's firm belief that the black lesbian has "decolonized her body" (1983). Her early articulation of decolonization, at the corporeal level, is understood and modeled through black lesbian poetics. Conceptually, I engage theories of decolonization from the purview of womxn of color feminists and decolonial philosophers to show how decolonization, in the work by Nelson Maldonado-Torres Xhercis Mendez, Yomaira Figueroa and Qwo-Li Driskill, can be understood as an internal gesture. My Coda borrows from Audre Lorde's collection of poetry titled, *Our Dead Behind Us*, to underscore how Black lesbian writers have provided exemplars of self-perpetuating, reproductive living systems. I endeavor to argue that the concentric relationship between Parker, Lorde, and Clarke, as well as the literary movement that was birthed after the formation of the

Combahee River Collective, is paradigmatic of a kind of autopoiesis. My project ends with the future directions of my work, which entails Tina Campt's theories on Black visuality and Audre Lorde's art. Collectively, my project is committed to demonstrating how black lesbian aesthetics *do* take us to places that we have never been before, as Lorde demands, by describing the nuances and value of Black lesbian life.

What's At Stake

Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke came of age as both writers and Black lesbians during the *Black Arts Movement.*[86] In *After Mecca: Women Poets and The Black Arts Movement*, Cheryl Clarke offers a retelling of this historical movement, situating key voices like Gwendolyn Brooks, Ntozake Shange, and Audre Lorde at the center of literary production. Clarke writes, "Black women poets and fiction writers have worked especially hard since the 1960s to revolutionize the literary terrain of the United States…the words of women cleaved art and activism, creating dangerous binaries and new possibilities" (1). Although Clarke names herself a student of the movement, "As a poet who claims Black Arts Movement tutelage, I have always been interested in the connections between black feminism" (5), my dissertation is most interested in the Black lesbian feminist writers who developed alongside this revolutionary movement and the politics that were born from this kind of relation. I view the work of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Cheryl Clarke as concentric—these writers were comrades and literary contemporaries, whose common axis was situated in their desire to articulate and archive nuanced modes of care for Black women, their shared political commitments to critiquing U.S and global empires,[87] their attempt at the heretical, most reflected in

[86] Although Audre is the only poet among the group to have been published by a major Black press during this era (Broadside Press).

[87] Please see Pat Parker's "Don't Let The Fascists Speak," from *Movement in Black*, Audre Lorde's "Grenada Revisited: An Interim" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, and Cheryl Clarke's essay, "New Notes on Lesbianism," "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," and recently published chapbook, *TARGETS*.

the poetics and practices, which describe the new world they were dreaming up. Community is the epicenter. Their capacious praxis describes how their thinking was not only from the purview of an identity politic, but they hold an investment in being concerned with liberation of all oppressed peoples—they have a relational way of understanding the world—from neighbor to other.

The *Black Arts Movement* focused itself upon its own community and a new Black poetry was birthed from it. Whereas the Harlem Renaissance, in some regard, sought to prove its humanity to white people, the Black Arts Movement took a turn away from the west, and in doing so, developed new speech, sound, and way of interrelating. Clarke herself asserts that, "In turning away, black artists created a new lexicon of prescriptive and proscriptive blackness, which continues to influence the practice of African American culture. Both the Black Arts and Black Power movements were generative of a new political and cultural agency among African Americans. Poetry was a principal instrument of political education about the new blackness" (2).[88] Clarke's theorization of the practices that were developed through poetry and naming of how these new practices helped inform a new way of *being* Black, is what I want to underscore. The Black lesbian thinkers that I believe extended the movement's ideologies, also used poetic form to create a new way of being Black, an ontology that placed sexual difference at the center.

Black Lesbian Aesthetics takes seriously the work of Sylvia Wynter. Wynter is invested in the development of what she calls a new science of the word, a new science of human systems. Wynter's work posits that there is overrepresentation of Man—from Christian—a person who has the "ability" to inhabit the land—to Columbus's 1492 voyage, wherein rationality became the measure of subjecthood, to now, the rise of Man 1. In his essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Human," Max Hantel offers insight on Wynter's theories of man. Hantel writes, "the new worldview remapped the earth, no longer on the axis of habitability, but rationality. The space of otherness descended from

[88] Clarke, *After Mecca.*

the heavens and colonial forces organized newly 'discovered' populations of natives and Africans according to a hierarchy of reason rather than the binary system of salvation" (Hantel 63). Man 2, as Wynter describes it, becomes instituted after the rise of the biological sciences in the 18th/19th centuries (read Charles Darwin). In her essay, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism" Wynter notes, "the Indo-European, now made isomorphic (identical) with 'being human itself' (36). This identical way of being human unveils itself through selective genetic traits: man as white, thin, bourgeois, able-bodied, heterosexual, procreative—these various forms of being human, also described as "overrepresenting all of humanity though violent demarcations of colonial difference."[89] Wynter says, "the proposal I am making is that such a discipline can only emerge with an overall rewriting of knowledge, as the re-enacting of the original heresy of a Studia, reinvented as a science of human systems, from the liminal perspective of the base, new Studies, whose revelatory heresy lies in their definition of themselves away from the Chaos roles in which they had been defined…for these have revealed the connection between the way we identify ourselves and the way we act upon/know the world" (43). My project positions Black lesbian writers as those situated at the base, the liminal perspective that offers paradigms of how knowledge might be unwritten and rewritten. *Black Lesbian Aesthetics* describes how Black lesbian writing is paradigmatic of this epistemological shift that Wynter privileges. Black lesbians, through poetic innovation, have used language and art as their tools to shape themselves against and over chaos. The chaos under the category of human—their [re]production and [re]creation against the chaos.

In the forthcoming chapters, I endeavor to map constellations of being. Against human, Black lesbians have defined themselves against the chaos of patriarchy and heterosexism. This dissertation project understands *being* through Sylvia Wynter's investigation of the evolution of man. Wynter has described Man 1 as human as By tracking their attunement to the body, their privileging

[89] Quoted from Max Hantel, "What Is It Like To Be a Human," 63.

of feeling, Black lesbian thought constructs new languages about self-definition. When Lorde posits that there is no concept of beauty outside of western standards, what undergirds her knowing is that there is no other mode of recognition that is not under the gaze of whiteness.[90] Black lesbian aesthetics allows us to further see how aesthetics can [re]create and [re]produce our knowing of ourselves. By another name, this is autopoiesis. To show how, Black lesbian *is* Beautiful, is to reshape aesthetics through one's own language, in one's own image. A return of the gaze.

I argue that we can better understand the convergences between Parker, Lorde, and Clarke as an aesthetic. The Combahee River Collective traverse the contours of human in their statement in 1977 and Lorde does the same, seven years later in Berlin in 1984. Lorde made legible that aesthetics can actually function as tools that shape how you relate to yourself, community, and other; aesthetics describes a kind of literacy within political, corporeal, and spiritual cores; aesthetics facilitates relation on the grounds of a desire *to be* in relation. One's move to construct an aesthetics might be further understood an act of heresy. My project is tracking the heretical actions taken by Black lesbians to survive in an anti-queer world. Ultimately, this is about the "promise" of survival.[91] In chapter one, I begin with Pat Parker's work because she was the first out Black lesbian between this cohort of thinkers. Parker scrutinizes heterosexist concepts of masculinity through style of dress and speech. In my engagement with Parker's work, I posit that she is an outlaw—someone who has broken the laws of heterosexism and patriarchy through her practices of Black lesbianism, most evident in her poetic form and style. In chapter two, I place Audre Lorde and Hortense Spillers in relation to one another, as they both theorize the fleshiness of black female sexuality. I track black lesbian aesthetics in Lorde's work reflected in her anti-capitalist vision of intimacy and work. Lorde also came into her Black lesbianism through her relationship with Pat Parker—in that sense, Lorde

[90] Please hear Audre Lorde's seminar, "Poet As Outsider," in Berlin, Germany on May 17, 1984, https://www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/library/holdings/audrelorde/index.html.
[91] "The Shape of My Impact," Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Feminist Wire*, 2012.

travels through Parker's vestibule to come into being. In chapter three, I see Clarke's work as giving language to the project of decolonization, expanding what we know about corporeal liberation.[92] Moreover, Clarke has written extensively about aesthetics, and as the only living writer among this cohort, Clarke has committed her life and work to preserving the legacy of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde, respectively. Collectively, their teachings reflect a resistance to the coloniality of power—an awareness of the ways in which the power of coloniality is "an encompassing phenomenon, since it is one of the axes of the system of power and as such it permeates all control of sexual access, collective authority, labor, intersubjectivity and the production of knowledge within these intersubjective relations."[93]

I view the naming and practices of Black lesbianism as paradigmatic of a corporeal transformation; this metamorphosis gives birth to the possibilities of constructing new understandings of aesthetics. While in Berlin, Audre Lorde states that the Black aesthetic is an authentic voice that no longer looked to white audiences for validation of their humanity. In relation to Lorde, I understand black lesbian aesthetics as an authentic voice that no longer looked to any audience for humanness. What undergirds both assertions are that the category of human is governed by white power.[94] With this understanding in mind, my project maps constellations between three writers who were informed and inspired by the Black Power Movements. With this inspiration, I argue that their critiques, practices, and languages offer crucial insights about the possibilities of liberation in this current moment and beyond.

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[92]Cheryl Clarke published "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" in 1981 wherein she states that sexual agency is concomitant with Black lesbianism, and that one's naming as articulation and praxis, is a process of decolonization at the corporeal level. I agree with Two-Spirit Scholar, Qwo-Li Driskill, when they state that decolonization is an ongoing project, not liberation, and so, I situate Clarke in the project of decolonization, arguing that she is the first Black feminist to name decolonization in her work.

[93] María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," 191.

[94] See, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," Sylvia Wynter.

Chapter One: God Bless the [Goat]Child That's Got Her Own: The Gospel of Pat Parker

What does a Black lesbian poet write about when it would
seem that our very preservation depends on our ability to keep silent,
to not bring up the many layers of oppression.[95]

In 1943 Althea was a welder
very dark
very butch
and very proud
loved to cook, sew, and drive a car
and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman.[96]

The first epigraph above is from Black lesbian feminist, Barbara Smith's essay, "Naming the Unnamable: The Poetry of Pat Parker." Pat Parker was the first of many for Black lesbians. Not only did she give Audre Lorde the courage to live as a Black lesbian, Barbara Smith notes, "Pat's poetry is the first explicitly Black lesbian writing I remember reading. The epigraph above poses a question that Barbara Smith believes Pat Parker's writing can provide some "answers" to (39).[97] In Parker's autobiographical poem, "Goat Child," she writes, "so i settled down &/fought my way thru first grade/defending my right to wear cowboy boots even if/i was a girl which no one had bothered to tell me" (30). This poem was published in Parker's first collection of poetry, Pit Stop, in 1972, and reflects Parker's early understanding of her plurality of being. Even as a child, Parker could not be contained by the performances of gender. In her essay, "Naming the Unnamable: The Poetry of Pat Parker," Barbara Smith notes that Parker, "has always been a nonconformist, uncomfortable with roles whether sexually or racially imposed" (40). Parker is a lawless Black lesbian, unencumbered by the demands of racial, gender, and sexual performance, a spoken word poet who defied the poetic laws and standards of form, articulating a pronounced Black lesbian vernacular. An outlaw, as noun,

[95] Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, 39.
[96] Cheryl Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks: The Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980-2005,* 3.
[97] Barbara Smith, "Naming the Unnamable: The Poetry of Pat Parker," 39

is a person who has broken the law and person who is deprived of the benefit and protection of the law. In this chapter, I describe the contours of Parker's position as outlaw, beginning with a close reading of her prose, "Funny," to underscore the beginnings of Parker's outlaw[ness]. I offer relational readings of Patricia Hill Collins' work on controllable images, positing that Parker is a paradigm of what I have coined as an uncontrollable image. I trace early images of uncontrollable figures in Blues and poetry, moving from Lucille Bogan's "B.D Woman's Blues" to Janae Johnson's "Black Butch Woman." I endeavor to explore how Black lesbians have attempted at the heretical through self-definition. I end by keying in on Audre Lorde's intimate relationship with Pat Parker. Ultimately, this chapter attends to the multifarious ways that Parker addresses pleasure and sedition.

In the second opening epigraph, Cheryl Clarke's descriptors of a Black butch woman reflects a figure in society who is autonomous and sure. Althea's freedom and independence are underscored through occupation, aesthetic, and attitude. She is subversive in action, style, and romantic proclivities. Althea works on machines—she melts, sculpts, and conjoins materials so that they may be more useful. Althea is dark-skinned, masculine of center, and well-pleased.[98] She is a conglomerate of contradiction. In the thick of WWII, and amidst Jim Crow, Althea's differences should render her hopeless; however, she lives in harmony, in spite of. The paradox is magnified when the reader is told that Althea enjoys cooking, sewing, and is in relation with a woman. Her masculine and feminine attributes coalesce and depict a bricolage image of a Black butch woman. Althea is gainfully employed, happily partnered, and self-assured. Clarke poetically vacillates between traditional masculine and feminine ways of existing in the world, undoing the binary opposition between those modalities, creating space for them to coalesce within the poem. Through Althea, we see that Black butchness is hard and soft, relenting and autonomous. Unabashed, open. The figure

[98] See B. Cole and the Brown Boi Project for more on masculine of center (2011).

of Althea resurfaces in Pat Parker's work, as she recounts observing someone just as free as Althea. In Parker's prose piece, "Funny," she re-remembers the first time she saw a Black butch woman:

> Once upon a time there was a young woman. Her name was Doris or Sarah, or Sue; I never knew. She walked the streets of Sunnyside, the beaten seashells dusted her feet and she always walked alone. She wore men's clothing, long before profiteers had developed unisex wear: flannel shirts in fall, covered by an army field jacket in the winter; white T-shirts in summer, and khaki pants. Not blue jeans, which were acceptable for young women after school and on Saturdays, but beige khaki pants. Men's pants.[99]

Parker identifies this young woman through her independence and choice of clothing. She is unnamed in a familiar community. Perhaps, she is unnamed because she has no desire to form connection with those who observe her like a spectacle: "she never turned to the people sitting on their porches, never nodded her head, never said, 'how you do?' She always walked straight and purposefully, and she always walked alone" (182). Parker employs irony to describe the nuances and paradoxes of Black butch life. The young woman lives in a neighborhood, but she is not a part of their community. Although she is targeted and made to be more visible through style of dress, she makes no attempt to fit in. The young woman breaks the rules because she not only wears "men's" clothing, but she refuses to be closeted. She does not forego independence to assimilate into her respective community nor does she abide by weekend rules implemented to homogenize and control (*she wore men's clothing…not blue jeans, which were acceptable for young women after school and Saturdays, but beige khaki pants)*. She remains unnamed yet still known. Although the reader does not know if this young woman is partnered or in relation with others like Althea, Parker's emphasis on the woman walking alone operates in a bifurcated way: 1) her walking alone could signify her loneliness; 2) her walking alone could also signify choice—the power in choosing to be by one's self. Her

[99] *The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, 182.

walking alone, then, can be viewed as personal choice or pursuit; her walking alone could also [and] simultaneously be a political action. The young woman is deliberate and afraid of nothing.[100]

Parker intentionally places emphasis on the young woman's clothing because her queerness is most keenly expressed through it. She wears a uniform, an expression of a plurality, an armor of protection. The khaki pants and flannel shirt symbolize working class Black [man] and the army field jacket signals honorable citizen, even though her sexuality places her outside the bounds of citizenship.[101] Through Parker's recollection of the young woman's style of dress, one can posit that there is a pattern in how she presents herself in the world. Her uniform, or frequently worn clothing can be viewed as a personal and political statement, especially to the porch onlookers. The young woman recognizes that her uniform symbolizes a plurality that allows her identity as woman to converge with her masculine of center expression(s). The young woman is very proud, like Althea. The clothing can be viewed as armor, too, especially with Parker's mentioning of the flannel shirt and army jacket. Her line of work is unknown, but in her clothing, we see that she is prepared for battle.[102]

Pat Parker was a younger girl observing this young woman in her neighborhood, and this young woman became a model for Parker to begin to explore her own Black queerness, despite being forewarned by her parents. Parker recalls being intrigued by this Black butch woman:

> One day I asked my parents who she was, and they closed around me. My mother, who had taught me to always be nice ("if you can't say something good about a person, then say nothing at all") looked embarrassed and told, "You stay away from her—she's funny" … "Never you mind, girl. You jist do like your mama say and stay away from her. She's a disgrace. If I had a daughter like that, I'd kill her."[103]

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[100] Audre Lorde, *From a Land Where Other People Live*, 1973.
[101] See Part I, in M. Jacqui Alexander's Pedagogies of Crossing.
[102] Being prepared for battle attests to the precarity of living as a Black lesbian.
[103] *The Complete Works of Pat Parker,* 182.

Parker's mother disapproves of this young woman even though this disapproval is diametrically opposed to their usual way of life. Speak kindly or say nothing, was their familial mantra. Yet, both of Parker's parents abandon their southern hospitality because they view this young woman as a threat. The young woman is "funny," but not because she is amusing or comedic. She is funny because Parker's family views her as a trickster or deceptive figure. Her way of existing in the world as it pertains to style of dress and her quotidian [dis]engagement with the community renders her peculiar, suspicious, and even killable. Parker wonders why her parents make such a deviation from their belief system, and why her father is moved to anger: "I had seen that look, but I had never seen it directed toward a Black person who had said nothing, done nothing to my father…" (183). This exchange between Parker and her parents speak to a larger and recurring problem in Black communities.[104] Queerness, in its myriad forms, renders one's Blackness unintelligible, invisible, in question. Even though Parker's father has an amicable engagement with Black people, the sight of this Black butch woman quickens him to anger, prompts him to harm. As we see in this dialogue, Black butch women are not worthy of protection because they operate outside of what is perceived as acceptable and [hetero]normative.[105]

The remarks from Parker's parents do not dissuade her from further exploring her own sexuality. In fact, seeing the young woman was the impetus for Parker to unabashedly fall for her neighbor, Joyce. "Funny" begins with Parker's admiration of the Black butch woman, but as the prose piece unfolds, Parker recounts a summer love that changed her life forever:

> We kissed long, slow, passionate kisses, mounted each other rubbing our genitalia against one another, feeling our budding breasts…the summer I turned sixteen was the most exciting summer of my life. All my sisters had gone off to college and both my parents worked. That meant our house was

[104] See, Barbara Smith "Blacks and Gays: Healing the Great Divide" and "Quare" Studies or Almost Everything I know about Queer Studies I learned from My Grandmother" (2000) by E. Patrick Johnson.
[105] See #Sayhername and the series of Black lesbians murdered in 2017-2018 (Kerrice Lewis, Kaladaa Crowell, Brandi Mellis, Shanta Myers) and in 2014 (Britney Cosby, Crystal Jackson, Texas), and in 2006 Greenwich Village assault case.

> mine and Joyce's. We spent hours each day exploring each other's bodies—until my father came home early.[106]

Pat and Joyce were introduced to each other as neighbors and playmates. As playmates, paper dolls were the muses they used to practice intimacy between bodies. Their playdates evolved into a longing to be close, not just through routine playing, but through sexual exploration. Parker describes their touching as intentional, affectionate, and amorous. Their maturing bodies were made known to each other as they engaged without reservation in dress and action. This mutuality that Parker speaks of is a recurring trope in coming out stories and Black lesbian literature (see Lorde and Clarke). She uses pronouns, "I, we, our" to denote a mutual sharing between the sharers, as Audre Lorde spells out in her construction of the erotic. Pat and Joyce's behavior can also be described as "womanish." In her description of "womanist," Alice Walker notes: "from the black expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. Serious."[107] Pat and Joyce take control of their bodies and they are in control of their love. Their age does not preclude romantic connection nor a sense of knowing about who they are and what they are doing. These early womanist embodiments foretell the life that Pat Parker will eventually lead as a Black lesbian feminist and Black dyke poet.

"Funny" turns its attention to pathology and shame as the story comes to a close—two recurring tropes that permeate Black queerness and "coming out" of the proverbial closet.[108] Parker's father catches her and Joyce making love, and they are forbidden from seeing each other.

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[106] *The Completed Works of Pat Parker*, 184.
[107] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, xi.
[108] See C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody's Supposed To Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*, 2014.

Upon finding out about their daughter's sinful acts, Parker's parents have her examined by a doctor: "My father left and my mother watched as this physician had me disrobe and looked at my breast—not touching, just looking. Then he had me lie down and looked at my genitals. Again not touching, just looking" (185). Parker's body is examined because her parents believe that she is unhealthy. She is considered to be abnormal and unwell, the distance between the physician and her body highlight that. Parker's parents view same-sex desire as abject, sinful, and sickening. Surely, something must be wrong with their child. The pathological treatment is heightened and both girls are outed to their community shortly after the doctor visit. Parker writes, "The following day, after morning church service, my father took me to all of our neighbors' houses. I had to sit while he told each neighbor what he had caught Joyce and me doing. I didn't understand then that he was employing their aid in watching the two of us while he was at work. I thought the man had lost his mind and simply wanted to see me die from humiliation." (185). Like the young Black butch woman who lived in the neighborhood, Parker was made to be a spectacle, too. They double-down on the visit to the doctor and added supplemental surveillance from the neighbors. Parker's family was hoping that shame would eradicate the relationship between her and Joyce, and most importantly, ensure that she would not be "funny." Instead, the intended humiliation drew Joyce and Parker closer together: "Joyce and I still saw each other, still explored each other. We continued to do so until I left for college" (185). Parker made the decision to continue her romantic relationship with Joyce not only for her own satisfaction, but this was also a radical action to ensure that women like the woman in her neighborhood would "not have to walk alone" (185), even though this choice was against her family law. Since Parker was a young child, she was placed on the periphery of her family circle ("you were a mistake"/my mother told me/ever since i've been/trying to make up…I'm the fourth girl, my father was pissed…/so my sister lost her doll bed/another enemy quickly made").[109] This

[109] Pat Parker, "Goat Child" in *The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, 29.

kind of isolation informed how she would later develop her revolutionary politics that would encourage coalition and relation across racial, sexual orientation, gender, and class lines.

Bulldaggers and Black Butch Woman: The Uncontrollable Image

The figure of the Black butch woman can be further understood as a controlling image. In Patricia Hill Collins' book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, she states that controlling images of Black women date back to the era of slavery and serve as evidence of the ideological formations of Black women's oppression. Collins writes,

> The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination…According to the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional family ideal, "true" women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[110]

Collins rightfully historizes the various ways in which Black women's identities have been construed by external forces, forces that intend to misname her to justify subjugation. Womanhood is defined by one's reverence for God, one's chastity/sexual virtue, malleability, and one's ability to keep a home functioning properly: cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, etc. Paying careful attention to the historical and contemporary dominant ideologies about Black women, Collins identifies four figurations of their denigration: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel.[111] The mammy, the first controlling image applied to U.S Black women is the "faithful, obedient domestic servant…the mammy image buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed…the mammy image is one of an asexual woman…"(80-81). Different from the mammy who epitomizes the mother figure in white households, the matriarch, according to Collins, typifies the mother figure in Black households: "As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands…the

[110] Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought*, 79.
[111] For the sake of specificity and the focus of this chapter, I focus on the mammy, matriarch, and jezebel.

matriarch represented the failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to African-American women who dared to reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant…one source of the matriarch's failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior" (83-84). The jezebel, and last controlling image, is the whore or "hoochie" and is,

> central in the nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood…historical jezebels and contemporary "hoochies" represent a deviant Black female sexuality…Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men…Ironically, jezebel's excessive sexual appetite masculinizes her because she desires sex just as a man does. Moreover, jezebel can also be masculinized and once again deemed as "freaky" if she desires sex with other women.[112]

Through these three controlling images, mammy, matriarch, jezebel, a connecting thread between them is sexuality and/or the expression of it. The mammy is asexual, the matriarch is too aggressive to be desirable, the jezebel is overtly sexual and therefore worthy of exploitation/harm.

I place the bulldagger and Black butch woman in the interstitial space between the matriarch and the jezebel. The bulldagger and Black butch woman are depicted as masculine in dress, bold, and assumed to be sexually autonomous. Like the matriarch, the bulldagger and Black butch woman have chosen a life outside of marital relationships with men (although many are mothers, like Pat Parker and Audre Lorde), and like the jezebel, the bulldagger and Black butch woman is perceived to be bold in sexual expression and sexual relationships with other women. Most importantly, the bulldagger and Black butch woman are a perceived threat to her male counterparts (especially) and are often the victims of assault because of that. Although outdated in use, bulldagger was a colloquial term used in the 1920s and 1930s to describe masculine lesbians, especially in music.[113] In 1935, Blues singer Lucille Bogan asserts:

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[112] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 81, 83.

[113] Although the Bulldagger is not defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, the Urban Dictionary defines bulldagger as "A masculine identifying lesbian; usually African-American" and defines butch as "A (traditionally) masculine man or woman, and especially a masculine lesbian. Often the 'dominant' partner in a lesbian relationship, and especially of a

Comin' a time, B.D. women ain't gonna need no men
Comin' a time, B.D. women ain't gonna need no men
'Cause the way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin

B.D. women, you sure can't understand
B.D. women, you sure can't understand
They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man

B.D. women, they all done learned their plan
B.D. women, they all done learned their plan
They can lay their jive just like a natural man

B.D. women, B.D. women, you know they sure is rough
B.D. women, B.D. women, you know they sure is rough
They all drink up plenty whiskey and they sure will strut their stuff

B.D. women, you know they work and make their dough
B.D. women, you know they work and make their dough
And when they get ready to spend it, they know they have to go

Bogan begins "B.D. Woman's Blues" with a forewarning that bulldagger women are on the verge of obtaining agency, as they have forgone sustaining relationships with their male counterparts. Bogan states that maltreatment is the reason for the shift, and her use of the pronoun "us" is why some believe that Bogan, too, was queer. For Bogan, bulldaggers are beyond intelligibility, presumably because they vacillate between masculine and feminine modalities of existence. They are kind ("sweet like angels") but carry themselves like "biological" men. Even down to discourse and behavior, BD women are smooth talkers, liquor drinkers, money makers. Like the matriarch, the bulldagger has rejected a life of servitude and refuses to acquiesce to constraining definitions of gender roles. Similarly to the jezebel, the bulldagger is sexually autonomous like "a natural man" (B.D) but is known to have sexually satisfying relationships with women. The bulldagger, through Bogan's conceptualization, is financially secure, desirable to women, and confident. Although she

butch/femme lesbian relationship. However, the OED does provide a definition of butch. As a noun, butch denotes a "lesbian whose appearance and behavior are seen as traditionally masculine." As adjective, butch means "having an appearance or other qualities of a type traditionally seen as masculine. Origin, mid 19th century, and in U.S dialect is a short work for butcher's knife, "butch knife."

destabilizes notions of gender that project women as docile, pure, and pious, the bulldagger is stable because there is profound sense of self: "B.D. women, they all done learned their plan."

The Black butch woman is a later evolution of the bulldagger. Janae Johnson poetically describes the nuances of Black butch-ness in her poem, "Black Butch Woman," published in *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought* (2021). Johnson begins the poem describing the Black butch woman as strong and resilient, but also fearful because they are viewed as a threat to their Black male counterparts:

> Black Man scared of Black Butch Woman
> Be disgusted
> Be conspicuous
> Be wide-eyed & closed fist
> Be at war
> But Black butch woman be ready for war
> Be strong
> Be protector of identity
> Because Black butch woman be knowin
> Black butch woman be knowin their history
> Black butch woman have no history
> Be born & forgotten
> Be four layers of oppression
> Be in no white man history book
> Be unwritten
> Be Grammy's nightly prayer
> Be a high functioning closet[114]

For Johnson, the Black butch woman is a threat to her community. Black men view her masculinity as a threat to their existence, and echo Parker's father's remarks: "I'd kill her."[115] Knowing her killability, the Black butch woman is on guard and ready to fight—ready for war, expected to be strong. Johnson asserts that Black butch-ness is an identity that has been in question long before she wrote the poem. She remarks that Black butch women know their history even though they are left on the periphery of history, an unwritten narrative. Johnson draws attention to the four layers of

[114] Janae Johnson, "Black Butch Woman," in *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*, 116.
[115] Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, 182.

oppression that converge and make Black butch women more susceptible to harm, recognizing that the history has yet to be archived because of perpetual death. She writes, "Black butch woman stole woman from black man/Now Black Man feel endangered…Who hate him a Black butch woman/He be wide-eyed & closed fist/Ready to swing/But Black Butch Woman/always be ready/For war" (117). Johnson rightfully underscores that Black butch women are most threatening because of the intimate relationships they share with women. She calls attention to the well-known stereotype that Black butch women are deceitful, thus making them more impressionable to other women, echoing Lucille Bogan's melodies. A woman, even in her state of being an adult, is infantilized and believed to be unable to deliberately choose another woman as a lover. The belief is, why date someone masculine of center when you can just date a "natural" man? And, perhaps, it is the fine line that the Black butch woman toes between aesthetic and behavior that makes her existence paradoxical to onlookers:

> Be up for interpretation
> Be artistic expression
> Be bow ties & boat shoes
> Be baggy jeans & fitted caps
> Be fades & loc'd hair[116]

The Black butch woman as spectacle, is hard to decipher because she does not conform to prescribed notions of femininity, but also because of her aesthetic. She is identifiable as Black, butch, and woman through her loose clothing, short hair, and dread locs. These are statements of a plurality of being that could not possibly be comprehensible to those who have decided who a woman should be and how she should behave. Johnson also pushes back against perceived notions of Black butchness, too: "Be tomboy/Be sports & only sports/ Be good" (116). She does this so that the poem remains capacious. As a Black butch woman herself, she implores us to remember that Black butch women are not a monolith, although there are historical connections and shared

[116] *Mouths of Rain*, 117.

lived experiences. The importance, though, is that the Black butch woman can simultaneously be free and burdened, much like Althea, the young woman in Pat Parker's neighborhood, and Pat Parker herself.

Controlling images like the bulldagger and Black butch woman also function as a site of possibility. Although Collins places emphasis on controlling images being stereotypes that further Black women's oppression, she also insists,

> Despite the common challenges confronting African-American women as a group, individual Black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion. The existence of core themes does not mean that African-American women respond to these themes in the same way. Differences among individual Black women produce different patterns of experiential knowledge that in turn shape individual reactions to the core themes…. By deconstructing the conceptual apparatus…others aim to transgress the boundaries that frame the images themselves.[117]

Black women go beyond the limitations of controlling images through self-definition. Collins remarks that she met a 14-year-old who decided to "reshape" the controlling images, she felt "a lot of freedom" in doing so (31). Collins's attention to nuance challenges the belief that Black women and our experiences are monolithic. While the mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and jezebel are racist and sexist, these stereotypes do not occlude the opportunity and/or desire for self-definition. In fact, Collins views literature as a transformative space that evidences the type of transgression: "U.S Black women writers not only portray the range of responses that individual African-American women express concerning their objectification as Other: they also document the process of personal growth toward positive self-definitions" (103). I position the bulldagger as the interstice between the matriarch and jezebel, and the Black butch woman as a self-assured iteration of the earlier conceived Bulldagger. In Lucille Bogan's commonly known song, "B.D Woman's Blues," (1935) we see how the Bulldagger is masculine in action and style, autonomous and bold, and

[117] *Black Feminist Thought,* 31.

someone who subverts gender roles and sexist beliefs about quotidian life and romantic proclivities. Cheryl Clarke's poem that prefaced this chapter, "Of Althea and Flaxie" (1982) and Janae Johnson's "Black Butch Woman" (2021) signify that being Black and Butch has its affordances and its vulnerabilities. Collectively, between Parker's recollection of the Black butch woman who lived in her neighborhood, Lucille Bogan's bulldagger blues, and Johnson's Black butch woman, we see how aesthetics are connected to self-definition and self-empowerment, as they challenge and rupture the status quo, and open up new ways to be. In her essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," Cathy Cohen describes the bulldagger as a figure outside of heteronormativity, positing that a "reconceptualization of the politics of marginal groups allows us not only to privilege the specific lived experience of distinct communities, but also search for those interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage broader political struggles" (462). Ultimately, through tracking Parker as outlaw, and tracing the trajectory of the figure of the bulldagger and Black butch woman, I endeavor to probe into ways of being that exist beyond heteronormative relation. I view these aesthetics of Black lesbianism as evidence of heretical shifts in self-definition.

From Goat Child To Black Dyke

Parker coalesced Blackness and lesbianism through style of dress. Her investment in aesthetics began in primary school: "fought my way thru first grade/defending my right to/wear cowboy boots even if/i was a girl which no one/had bothered to tell me."[118] And, in an essay by Andreana Clay, "Intergenerational Yearnings and Other 'Acts of Perversion": Or Where Would I Be Without Lesbian Drumming," she reflects on a conversation with Parker's close friend, Judy Grahn, about Parker's Black dyke aesthetic, adding further insights about Parker's intentionality:

> What Grahn left out of this story was an important detail that Parker had, in her early days as a dyke poet, dressed in black cowboy clothes from boots to

[118] "Goat Child," *The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, 29.

> pants and shirt to hat. Coming out after a visit to a bar in Houston, Parker believed that cowboy clothing was dyke clothing, and she chose black because that was the old West's outlaw color, as distinguished from the white hats associated with law enforcement.[119]

It cannot be taken for granted that Parker's choice of clothing was a deliberate action; she wanted to be visible to other lesbians. She subverts the traditional western look not only in choosing to wear black but also choosing to wear more masculine identified clothing. As a child discovering who she is, taking authority over how she presents, Parker's early life evidence that her choice of dress was a personal and political statement, and perhaps even a fugitive act. Parker's activist stance is seen in her "defending her right to wear cowboy boots."[120] She remains principled in expressing her plurality. And, in Clay's remarks above, Parker, a Black lesbian feminist, dressed in all black, subverts Western notions of what it means to be respectable and law abiding, and she redefines what it means to be a fugitive. Outlaws are defined as lawless, rebellious, and unconventional. Parker was a Black lesbian feminist who was out during the 60s, she was a self-proclaimed Black dyke poet, a social justice warrior, a Black, working-class single mother, and someone who believed that,

> If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, 'No, you stay home tonight, you won't be welcome,' because I'm going to an all-white party where I can be gay, but not Black. Or I'm going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are antihomosexual, or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. The day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I call a revolution.[121]

For Parker, revolution is contingent upon being able to show up as we are; revolution sees differences as mobilizing.[122] Parker is an outlaw because she has broken social norms by choosing to live her life as an out Black lesbian; Parker is an outlaw because she has deliberately chosen to love white women publicly, while still remaining steadfast in her love for Black people; Parker is an

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[119] Clay, 386.
[120] "Goat Child," *The Complete Works*, 29.
[121] *Movement in Black*, Pat Parker.
[122] See Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." 1980.

outlaw because she divorced her husband and chose to live her life as a single mother. Parker's fugivity, her commitment to shifting any status quo, is precisely why it is important to examine her life as we reimagine what a revolution is and how we may ascertain it.

In Audre Lorde's discussion of aesthetics, she insists that the position of the outsider, the poet, the person who imagines and attempts to bring to fruition what has yet to come to language or tangible action, is who we should defer to so that poetry and art can "take us to a place where have not been able to go before, threatening or otherwise."[123] The radical nature of Parker's politics leads to me to describe her work through Black lesbian aesthetics. What is evidenced in the aforementioned statement about Parker wanting to enter any room as her complete self is an articulation of quotidian lesbianism, a belief that the personal is political, and a development of an identity politics, three major tenets of Black lesbian aesthetics. Parker describes that in the everydayness of her life, in the private/personal sphere, she should be able to attend a queer party without being isolated because of her Blackness, even though she recognizes that her sexual orientation and gender identity converge and make her more vulnerable to oppression from the communities she is a part of. Parker also believes that, in the public sphere, as an out Black poet, she should not have to suppress her lesbianism, in behavior or content, or have her Blackness questioned. However, she recognizes that her fight begins with being aware of the particularity of her oppression, and her fight also encompasses an end goal (futurity): the liberation of all of her "parts" or facets of her identity.

Speaking Truth: The Black and White of It

Parker's work is significant because she spoke truth to power. For example, in the introduction to Pat Parker's *Movement In Black*, Cheryl Clarke remarks: "Like Audre Lorde, Pat Parker was out there with her black body being a dyke poet, rapping on violence, black folks' ways,

[123] Lorde, in *Dream of Europe* by Mayra Rodríguez Castro, 92.

political repression, and quotidian late twentieth-century madness's" (15). And, in the recently published collection of Parker's poetry, *The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, Judy Grahn echoes Clarke:

> Parker's quest for knowledge included a respect for forms, precise diction, empathic idea and content. The voice she chose for her poetry held an unwavering moral compass that would lead members of her community audience to call her "Preacher." She was also a teacher dedicated to instructing her audience in what she had learned about life, oppression, justice, and intersectionality.[124]

Parker's lesbian feminist comrades re-remember her commitment to social justice and her commitment to her work reaching audiences across myriad lines of difference. Speaking truth to power is evident in Parker's understanding of interlocking oppressions and her demand for a better future. Her identity politics are shaped through her experiences as a working-class mother and a Black lesbian feminist. In Parker's poem "Questions," she scrutinizes oppression while also articulating her own litany for survival. The poem begins with an epigraph, "Until oppressed people are free—none of us free" and in section I, she writes,

> I.
>
> the chains are different now—
> lay on this body strange
> no metal clanging in my ears
>
> chains laying strange
> chains laying light-weight
> laying credit cards
> laying welfare forms
> laying buying time
> laying white packets of dope
> laying afros & straightened hair
> laying pimp & revolutionary
> laying mother & daughter
> laying father & son[125]

[124] *Movement in Black,* 17.

[125] *The Complete Works*, 87-88.

Parker highlights the history of racial and economic oppression. The "chains" she refers to symbolize the middle passage, and her statement that "the chains are different now—/lay on this body strange" is an awareness that Black folks are still oppressed, and still strange fruit, like Billie Holiday remarked in 1939. While the physical shackles may not be present, and while lynching has reduced in "reported" numbers, Black folks still struggle to survive. Parker states that we are economically bound by credit card debt and social services due to the lack of gainful employment and are forced to buy things on credit because tangible resources like money and food are not readily accessible. From Parker's purview, Black folks are in a cycle of postponing life, "buying time," because we don't have the proper resources to survive. She rightfully draws attention to the crack epidemic, and how drug abuse is directly connected to a lack of resources and racial discrimination. As the poem progresses, Parker's use of binary oppositions underscores the complexity of liberation. The kink in our natural hair is threatened by respectability—she implicitly connects straight hair to western conceptions of beauty. We are disconnected because revolution is undermined by exploitation (prostitution). She also addresses generational discord and oppression (mother & daughter, father & son). She implicitly asks, how can we aspire for a better life if our goals are so disjointed? In section II, Parker's analysis of gender is articulated:

II.

the chains are different now—
laying on this body strange
funny chains—no clang
chains laying strange
chains laying light-weight
chains laying dishes
chains laying laundry
chains laying grocery markets
chains laying no voice
chains laying children
chains laying *selective* jobs
chains laying less pay
chains laying girls & women
chains laying wives & women

chains laying mothers & daughters[126]

Parker analyzes the ways in which Black women are silenced and vulnerable in their roles as domestic servants and employees. Her use of binary oppositions may signal differences, but her repetition of the word "chains" demonstrates that there are truly no hierarchy of oppressions. In private and public spheres, Black women and girls, whether married/single, employed/unemployed, young/old, are oppressed. The shackles remain because the oppression is still generational.[127] She pushes back against the belief that employment, marriage, and youthfulness are symbols of protection. For Parker, no one is insulated. Mimi Limuro Van Ausdall similarly note in their essay, "The Day All of the Different Parts of Me Can Come Along": Intersectionality and U.S. Third World Feminism in the Poetry of Pat Parker" that, "While the chains here are not clanging like shackles, they are restrictive, nonetheless. Fear debt, voicelessness, a drug economy, all lock people down. At the same time, chains connect. The chains of 'revulsion' for being queer are being connected to the chains of 'no jobs.' The chains are literally interlocking" (345). And, in section three, she further articulates the complexities of Black women's oppression by discussing sexuality:

III.
the chains are still here
laying on this body strange
no metal—no clang
chains laying strange
chains laying light-weight
chains laying funny
chains laying different
chains laying dyke
chains laying bull-dagger
chains laying pervert
chains laying no jobs
chains laying more taxes
chains laying beatings
chains laying stares
chains laying myths

[126] *The Complete Works*, 87.
[127] Like Spillers states in "Interstices"— "the daughters labor now even under the outcome" (*The Black and White of It,* 155).

chains laying fear
chains laying revulsion[128]

As a Black lesbian feminist, Black dyke poet, Parker's attention to interlocking oppressions is made clear. She states that marginalization within the categories of race, sexual orientation, and gender make you more vulnerable to oppression. Being a Black dyke/bull-dagger means that your differences are seen as perversions; your differences render you "funny," like the woman in Parker's neighborhood. One's differences means that they are unemployed but still taxed—and taxed, not in the literal sense of paying government taxes, but to be required to do more because you are a Black dyke. Although the Black dyke is under the gaze, she remains to be unintelligible, non-human, therefore unworthy of protection.

In Section IV of Parker's "Questions" she continues to interrogate and examine interlocking oppressions, wondering about the origins of subjugation:

the chains are here
no metal—no clang
chains of ignorance & fear
chains here—causing pain

how do i break these chains
to whom or what
do i direct pain
    Black—white
    mother—father
    sister—brother
    straight—gay

how do i break these chains
how do i stop the pain
who do i ask—to see
what must i do—to be free[129]

The chains are generational, and the residual effects have bruised and harmed. This is the first time Parker directs her attention to who causes pain and why. Parker attempts to bring language to why

[128] *The Complete Works*, 88.
[129] *The Complete Works*, 89.

Black folks, queer folks, and womxn are oppressed. She attributes it to the oppressor's lack of awareness and their own trepidations. Parker's questioning about how to ascertain freedom for all of her parts echoes Audre Lorde's questioning in "Who Said It Was Simple": But I who am bound by mirror/as well as my bed/see causes in colour/as well as sex/and sit here wondering/which me will survive/all these liberations."[130] For both Parker and Lorde, their oppression is tied to their race, gender, and sexuality but the future they dream of requires the liberation of all of those parts. It is evident that their view of liberation evolved beyond the radical spaces they occupied in the 60s and 70s. Parker was involved in the Black Panther Party in Oakland and both she and Lorde were on the periphery of the Black Arts Movement but saw the necessity in moving beyond race and class. Parker, Lorde, and Black lesbian feminists alike developed both an analysis of interlocking oppressions and futurity where everyone would be free. Parker's vision of the future is articulated at the end of Section IV of "Questions," as she outlines the exact future she desires to come to fruition:

i have a dream
  no—
  not Martin's
though my feet moved
  down many paths.
it's a simple dream—

i have a dream
  not the dream of the vanguard
  not to turn this world—
      all over
  not the dream of the masses
not the dream of women
not to turn this world
    all
        over
it's a simple dream

In my dream—
  i can walk ghetto streets

[130] *From a Land Where Other People Live*, 1973.

& not be beaten up by my brothers

In my dream—
i can walk out a bar
& not be arrested by the pigs[131]

Parker as preacher is made known in her refrain "chains laying" and her litany for survival is reflected in her repetition: "In my dream." Since the imagination is the strongest component of undoing coloniality, Parker redesigns a world where she is treated as levelly human, rejecting walking ten steps behind and being placed on a pedestal.[132] Parker constructs a world where Black men call her sister; they find a friend in her and they gather her. In Parker's world, the public sphere is a sacred space, too. Her counterparts are relative ("brother"), not distant stranger nor assailant. In Parker's dream, authority no longer presumes her as a threat. Simplicity, for Parker, is not devoid of imagination nor substance. Her dream is simple, and she demands it in this lifetime: "now you listen! /i have a dream too/it's simple dream."[133] Parker's capitalization of I, as she articulates her simple dream, evidences her authority and fervent belief that her dreams matter, too. In "Unpacking Pat Parker: Intersections and Revolutions in 'Movement in Black," Amy Washburn notes, "What is particularly interesting is the upper case and lower-case "I's" and active verbs…this ontological/rhetorical move is explicitly political/radical for she splits the atom—the explosive nature of revealing the "I" as a multiple, as a plural…" (312). Washburn carefully tracks Parker's vacillation between lower and upper case "I's" and signals that it represents Parker's firm belief in solidarity. And, even as high priest, Parker's position as preacher does not create a boundary between her audience or followers. Parker's simple dream, her capital "I", reflects a collective dream that she aspires towards. Her personal experiences as a Black lesbian feminist working class mother inform her political ideologies. Parker is attuned to interlocking oppressions, she assesses where

[131] *The Complete Works*, 90-91
[132] Echoing the Combahee River Collective Statement.
[133] *The Complete Works*, 91

power comes from and where it collides, and she also maps out a future, a simple dream, where oppression is eradicated and solidarity in private and public domains are actualized. Parker dreams of a world where love is abundant.

In his essay, "'Anything That Gets Me In My Heart': Pat Parker's Poetry of Justice," David B. Green draws attention to the bifurcated function of Parker's poetry. Green states that there should be equal affordances to Parker's work being understood from her experiences as both activist and lover. His essay underscores how Black lesbian feminists like Parker, "utilize poetry as a political instrument" and how "throughout Parker's poetry, we bear witness to the practice of love as a process that begins with the self and extends forth to her communities…" (321). Green notes that Parker's work is a product of love that aims to broaden our understandings of ourselves: "Her poetry provides glimpses of personal matters and life experiences that she both poeticizes and politicizes…At the heart of Parker's poetry of justice are articulations of love" (321). I think that Parker's articulation of love is further supported through her praxis. Green and others describe a bifurcated analysis of Parker and her poetry, acknowledging that her work is both personal and political. Michelle Parkerson describes Parker as both tough and tender,[134] and both Cheryl Clarke and Julie Enszer assert that Parker's dyke identity was "integrally shaped by a desire for sex and a desire for freedom."[135] Collectively, all critics understand how Parker's plurality of being allowed her to traverse the softest and hardest parts of life. Where one might view racial differences as a boundary or enclosure, Parker sees it as an opening, a chasm worthy of exploration and sincere engagement.

Parker's queer approach to love is underscored in her poem, "My Lover is a Woman." In section I, she writes,

1.

[134] See the introduction in *Movement in Black*, 34.
[135] Julie Enszer and Cheryl Clarke, "Introduction: 'Where Would I be Without You" 283.

My lover is a woman
  & when i hold her—
    feel her warmth—
     i feel good—feel safe

then/i never think of
 my families' voices—
 never hear my sisters say—
 bulldaggers, queers, funny—
 come see us, but don't
 bring your friends—
 it's okay with us,
but don't tell mama
    it'd break her heart
 never feel my father
 turn in his grave
 never hear my mother cry
 Lord, what kind of child is this?[136]

For Parker, love is a feeling. Parker's black lesbian aesthetics are evidenced in her articulation of the erotic ("for the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing").[137] Parker unabashedly states that her lover is a woman and that they share an intimacy that is vital; an intimacy that makes Parker feel worthy and secure. In love, Parker no longer feels the brunt of her family's judgement. She does not subject herself to people and spaces that scrutinize her life. For Parker, love is a barrier of protection; a personal place of refuge; a newfound home. In Section II, Parker adds more texture to who her lover is and how this shared love is restorative:

2.
My lover's hair is blonde
  & when it rubs across my face
 it feels soft—
  feels like a thousand fingers
  touch my skin & hold me
  and i feel good.

then/i never have to think of the little boy

[136] The Complete Works, 106.
[137] *Sister Outsider* 54

who spat & called me a nigger
never think of the policeman
who kicked my body and said crawl
never think of Black bodies
hanging in trees or filled
with bullet holes
never hear my sisters say
white folks hair stinks
don't trust any of them
never feel my father
turn in his grave
never hear my mother talk
of her backache after scrubbing floors
never hear her cry—
Lord, what kind of child is this?[138]

Parker is among the first Black lesbians to speak openly about loving, intimate, and sexual relationships with white women.[139] Her lover's race is made clear through hair color, and Parker feels so protected because for her, whiteness affords affective delicacies. Her lover is not only a woman, but her lover is a white woman, and she is intentional in expressing how whiteness offers one affordance like protection, even if it is ephemeral. In love, Parker describes a tenderness that exists between her and her lover; a tenderness that affirms Parker's existence. One stroke from her partner's hair feels like a touch from "a thousand fingers." Her use of hyperbole intends to overstate their closeness and magnify the connection she has with this woman. When touched by her lover, Parker's memory is repaired. She no longer remembers the racial slur from the mouths of babes, she no longer remembers police brutality or lynching. When held by her white lover, Parker no longer cares about her family's judgment. Although her senses are magnified when in the arms of her beloved, she is desensitized to violence, from both her family and other outside forces. In Section

[138] *The Complete Works*, 106-107.
[139] Considering that Parker was a poet during the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movements (BPP), she takes a different stance than writers like Eldridge Cleaver (*Soul on Ice*) and others, who were either dishonest about their relationships with white men and women or did not publish writings that attested to their loving relationships with white people. Parker being among the first to do this, especially in the 70s, is radical. Articulating this kind of love is radical because Parker's poetry is a paradigm of how the personal is political, and how, even with love's complexities and affordances, one's commitment to justice must be unwavering. Parker's description of her partner as safety net and place of refuge is perhaps an articulation of ally-ship and a praxis of it.

III, Parker employs metaphor to further detail her lover's white attributes: "My lover's eyes are blue/& when she looks at me/i float in a warm lake/feel my muscles go weak with want/feel good—feel safe" (107). A single look from her lover awakens Parker physically—she is not only calmed from the glance but aroused. Her lover's eyes make Parker forget about "the blue/eyes that have glare at me—/moved three stools away from me/ in a bar" (107). Her lover's blue eyes makes the history of racism—the Tuskegee Airman ("syphilitic Black men as guinea pigs"), sterilized children, surveillance from white people, and respectability ("teaching me the yes sirs and mams/to keep me alive")—a forgotten past, a distant memory (107). "My lover is a woman" ends with Parker bringing to language the double-consciousness she experiences when occupying public spaces with her white lover:

> 4.
> And when we go to a gay bar
> & my people shun me because i crossed
> the line
> & her people look to see what's
> wrong with her—what defect
> drove her to me—
>
> And when we walk the streets
> of this city—forget and touch
> or hold hands and the people
> stare, glare, frown, & taunt
> at those queers—
>
> I remember—
> Every word taught to me
> Every word said to me
> Every deed done to me
> & then i hate—
> i look at my lover
> & for an instant—doubt—
>
> Then/i hold her hand tighter
> And i can hear my mother cry.
> Lord, what kind of child is this.[140]

[140] *The Complete Works*, 108.

Parker's reckoning with her interracial relationship is highlighted in the last section of "My lover is a woman." In the previous three sections, Parker draws attention to the affordances of close proximity to whiteness; she highlights protection, affirmation, fulfillment, and repair (of memory).

In her book, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian Roots of Queer Theory*, Linda Garber keys in on Parker's refrain "feels good" which she says, "refers to being intimate with her white lover, despite the disapprobation of both women's families and circles of friends" (90). Garber goes on to state that this poem reckons with the difficulty of interracial relationships; however, it is not until the last section that Parker grapples with the arduous nature of it. In this section, the conjunction "and" paired with her pronoun shift from "I" to "we," signals a shared experience of tension and liminality. The Black folks who patronize gay bars ostracize Parker because she showed up with a white lover, and her white lover is scrutinized by white gays who assume that her attraction to Blackness is evidence of some deficiency. When they walk the streets, they are not only racialized differently, but oppressed because of their queerness. Parker's awareness that she is being surveilled causes her to re-remember her history of oppression ("every word, every deed"), and she doubts if she can remain connected to her lover, despite the shared love between them. Ultimately, "My lover is a woman" displays Parker's complexity as a writer. Although one may deem her explication and celebration of interracial love as idealization, she gives credence to the tough and tender aspects of her relationship. Rather than hiding behind jargon and ambiguous lines, she unabashedly loves her partner and plainly states why she does.

Poet for the People

Pat Parker's poetry is particularly salient because her bold expression of quotidian lesbianism and Blackness. In the introduction to the expanded edition of *Movement in Black* (1999), Cheryl Clarke remarks: "Pat Parker belief in poetry as a people's art and in what young urban people now

call spoken word art."[141] Clarke states that Parker had the ability to "speak-the-truth-to-the-people" and this raw vernacular is why critics place Parker's work in conversation with the Black Aesthetic and Black Arts Movement. In *Identity Poetics*, Garber adds,

> Parker was clearly part of and influenced by the movement of Black Arts poets, many of whom did not consider the writers of the Harlem Renaissance sufficiently militant…the character of the Black Aesthetic that is most obvious in Parker's work is a reliance on black oral tradition, not just in vernacular language but in the very form of the poems. Barbara Smith explains that Parker's work is "very much in the Black oral tradition which relies on inflection, metaphor, irony, and humor to deepen our communication and make it specifically ours."[142]

The Black Arts Movement, in its turn away from the West and towards articulating quotidian Blackness, viewed the artist as an intricate figure in shifting cultural, social, and political landscapes. Although Parker was deeply influenced by the Black power movements of the 60s and 70s, her poetry can be best described through Black lesbian aesthetics. Where the former privileged most the Black nuclear family, seeing coalition as a "race" first endeavor, Black lesbian writers of this same era as Parker, Lorde, and Clarke, and many more, knew what it felt like to be on the periphery of the struggle because of differences like sexuality. So, in their respective publications, Black lesbians insisted that love had no bounds (like race, gender, sexuality), that oppression had no hierarchy, that coalition must not only be diverse in class, gender, sexuality, and race, but that it must be global, too. Black lesbians, like Parker, and their poetry, are best understood as an aesthetic primarily because their vision(s) do take us to places we have never been before, threatening and otherwise, as Lorde remarked in Germany. And, in Parker's work, we see that her vision of liberation is not a place of impossibility, but a queer future that can only come to fruition through love as praxis and an ethics of care. Parker's poem, "if it were possible" reads:

> If it were possible

---

[141] *Movement in Black*, 20.
[142] Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics*. Barbara Smith quoted from essay "Naming the Unnamable: The Poetry of Pat Parker.

to place you in my brain,
to let you roam
in and out
my thought waves—
you would never
have to ask—
why do you love me?[143]

For Parker, her love is constant. The reality and memories of her beloved are captured through the growing list she keeps that is "filled with the things that are you/things that make my heart jump—/Yet words would sound strange;/become corny in utterance" (133). Rather than keeping record of wrong doings, Parker's affection for her beloved is so strong that language can't quite capture its essence. She ends the poem in metaphor: "Now, each morning when I wake/i don't look out my window/to see if the sun is shining—/I turn to you—instead" (133). Love, for Parker is described as vital necessity, as constant, reassuring, and boundless. And Parker's ethics of care (which love also undergirds) is made clear in the last stanza of her widely cited poem, "Love Isn't." She writes,

I care for you
I care for our world
if I stop
caring about one
it would be only
a matter of time
before I stop
loving
the other.[144]

This stanza restates Parker's Black feminist politics, as she believes there are no hierarchies. And for Parker, the personal is political, and the earth and her lover are equal beneficiaries of her care and concern. In Kazim Ali's brief explication of this poem, he even notes, "there is no separation in Parker's reality between caring for the individual and being concerned with larger issues of social

[143] *The Complete Works*, 133.
[144] *The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, 191.

justice" (380).[145] And, Parker does not create any lines of demarcation between her political praxis and her personal relationships. The previous stanzas depict Parker as a vulnerable lover. Her current circumstances misalign with the dreams and desires she has for her life:

> I wish I could take you,
> travel to new lives
> kiss ninos on tourist buses
> sip tequila at sunrise
>
> Instead
> I come sad
> bring lesbians
> without lovers
> bring sick folk
> without doctors
> bring children
> without families
>
> I wish I could be
> your warmth
> your blanket
>
> All I can give
> is my love.[146]

Parker desires to manipulate temporality and offer her lover a moment of relief much different than the space they currently occupy. But, as a service worker, she offers her help to those more vulnerable, even it means neglecting her own needs. Parker wishes to insulate and encapsulate her lover—she wishes much of what she knows is not possible to give. In Parker's dreamworld, though, her love alone is sufficient: "All I can give/is my love," (191). In the future Parker imagines, her love for self is the foundation, her love for others is an extension, her love for the world is connected to all of those facets, too.

[145] Kazim Ali, "The Killer Will Remain Free: On Pat Parker and the Poetics of Madness."
[146] "love isn't" in *The Complete Works*, 190-191.

Black Lesbian Futurities

> I walked into a room and met a young poet with fire in her eyes, a beer in her hand and a smile/scowl on her face. There were poems in her mouth, on the tables, in the refrigerator, under the bed, and in the way she cast about the apartment, searching for—not answers—but rather, inexpressible questions.[147]

The quotation above reflects Audre Lorde's remembrance of her encounter with Pat Parker in 1969. She met Parker on the last night of her first trip to the west coast; this first encounter developed into a personal, professional, political, sister love, that would carry both poets through their life on Earth, and even thereafter. Although Lorde was a burgeoning Black _____ Mother Warrior Poet, it was not until she met Parker that she decided to come out as a lesbian.[148] In the foreword of Pat Parker's *Movement In Black*, Lorde captures what I think is one of the most salient facets of Parker's art: her questioning. Pat Parker's ability to use questions as the starting place of her own exploration; her ability to value the process of questioning (as questioning allows one to reckon with and sometimes dismantle the western need to already know). Questions, for Parker, meant an acknowledgement of not knowing, but still desiring to know the obvious, the explicit, the covert, and the opaque. She wanted to know; and wanting to know, is she how she came into her own identity as a Black lesbian feminist and Black dyke poet.

Pat Parker and Audre Lorde developed a friendship, as both Black lesbian feminists and Black lesbian poets. In the introduction to the letters exchanged between Pat Parker and Audre Lorde, *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker* (1974-1989), Mecca Jamilah Sullivan discusses the tender aspects of their relationship: "These moments of levity are not simply footnotes to the larger project of black lesbian feminist political praxis; they echo an understanding crucial to both Lorde's and Parker's work: that the rich terrains of intimacy are key sites of feminist praxis. The letters read, at times, as a dialogue of girlfriends…" (18). Sullivan's remarks underscore the

[147] *Movement in Black*, 32.
[148] See Judy Grahn's Introduction in Pat Parker's *Movement in Black*, 1983.

capacious, mutual affection that Parker and Lorde shared, which is also paradigmatic of the Black feminist practice—to construct and sustain a sense of belonging among Black women in very material ways.

Parker and Lorde's deep respect for one another is made evident in their poetry, as they both wrote personal pieces for each other. Pat Parker was the first to recall their shared intimacy, and, in a poem she titled, "For Audre," she writes about their love in 4 parts, beginning with,

> I.
>
> *The Black Unicorn is restless*
> *The Black Unicorn is unrelenting*
> *The Black Unicorn is not free.*
> The Black Unicorn
>
> Who is this bitch?
> I mean really
> who is this bitch?
>
> She came bopping
> into my life
>
> BOLD![149]

I posit that Parker prefaces her poem with Audre Lorde's own work, "Black Unicorn" (1978) not only to show reverence, but to emphasize Lorde's assuredness. The poem, "The Black Unicorn" is the collection's title, too, and features poems that are biographical in content. Parker, knowing Lorde intimately, is aware that Lorde's boldness was part and parcel of their sister love. Her refrain, "who is this bitch" is a Black colloquial question that signifies a knowing between the speakers (or a knowing between speaker and subject). And, as the poem unfolds, it is clear that bitch is synonymous for friend, lover, and sister. Lorde's unabashed nature pushed Parker to challenge herself; to move beyond mediocrity and flourish, like Lorde demanded in her own work: "It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is

[149] *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* 177.

to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society" (54).[150] And, in "For Audre," Parker describes Lorde's instruction as meticulous and unwavering:

> Now this woman
> sits in my house
> reads
> no devours
> my words
>
> No comment
>
> Just
> clicking and um-humming
> then has the nerve
> to say
> I write good but
> not enough
>
> *Push more*
> *take the harder road.*
>
> I know her for all
> of an hour and a half
> and she's talking at me
> like my fifth-grade teacher.
>
> *More discipline, Patricia*
>
> *Stretch yourself.*[151]

Lorde's careful consumption of Parker's work reflects a deep investment in her poetry, even at the very beginning of their relationship. The italics position Lorde as teacher—she places Parker under her tutelage without asking for permission. Yet, Lorde's insistence and Parker's quick submission in Part II of the poem evidences a reverence and connection between the two. Their relationship defies temporal logic ("I know her for all/of an hour and half") and can also be described as a type of queer mothering: "You talk to me/like my mother/with your eyes/dark pieces of coal/piece my

[150] "Uses of the Erotic," *Sister Outsider.*
[151] T*he Complete Works*, 178.

words/dare me to be/untruthful/reach beneath the surface/tell you the part/that I hold back" (179) In this second section, Parker admits that her connection with Lorde is non-verbal, not necessary to be brought to language but made intelligible with just one look. The intimacy shared between these poets is captured in their eyes—one look and Lorde can tell if Parker and her words are honest, forthright. This mothering is made queer precisely because of the eroticism that permeates the poem. In this same section, Parker remarks that, "My muse sang of you" (179) and she begins the third section of the poem writing, "After I read *The Cancer Journals*/I made love to you/touched your body—pressed/my hands deep into your flesh/and passed my warmth to you" (180). These lines capture Alexis Pauline Gumbs's belief that "we can learn to mother ourselves."[152] Mothering, for Black lesbians moves beyond the confines of nation-state, nuclear family, and blood ties. Mothering, for Parker and Lorde means that love, the erotic, sister, friend, comrade, and lover, can oscillate and coalesce. Mothering, for Lorde and Parker, is unyielding, supportive, restorative, challenging, intimate, deep, and free. Parker ends "For Audre" with the same directness she began the poem with: "I never promise/to write often/to call often/to be a presence/I promise/to call you and call you/sister" (181). Parker, aware of her inconsistency in communication (as well as her writing), above all else, knows with surety that she will remember their sister love.

Audre Lorde's articulation of their sister love is captured in her posthumous collection of published poetry, *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (1993). A bereft Audre can't quite fathom that it has been a year since Parker died: "It's almost a year and I still/can't deal with you/not being/at the end of the line" (468).[153] Lorde, re-remembers previous gaps in their communication: "not that there haven't been times before/ months passing madly sadly/we not speaking/*get off my case, will you please? /oh just lighten up*!" (468). Here, Lorde as mother is made clear; the italics are Parker's voice,

[152] See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *"We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves": The Queer Survival of Black Feminism*, 2010.
[153] "Girlfriend" in *Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*.

still impatient and playful. Lorde ends the poem in question and sadness. She wrote the poem just two years prior to her own death from cancer; her interrogation concerning their relationship and the physical distance between them are at the heart of sorrow:

> is this what it means to live
> forever when will I
> not miss picking up the receiver
> after a pregnancy of silence
> one of us born again
> with a brand-new address or poem
> miffed
> because the other doesn't jump
> at the sound
> of her beloved voice?[154]

Lorde characterizes her sister love with Parker as a closeness that was not narrowly defined by proximity. Their relationship was complex. The silence that grew between them was long and enduring like gestation, but the shared love, the deep bond that was formed over decades of transformations, still prompted Lorde to remember Parker as beloved. This dear love that both poets describe in their separate articulations of their intimacy reflect a larger imperative of Black Feminist politics. Parker and Lorde are committed to loving each other without becoming each other. Their poetry is another mandate for the future.

[154] *Collected Poems*, 468.

Chapter Two: Flesh, Body, and the Uses of the Erotic

To decolonize our sexualities and move towards a Sovereign Erotic, we must unmask the specters of conquistadors, priests, and politicians that have invaded our spirits and psyches, insist they vacate, and begin tending the open wounds colonization leaves on our flesh.[155]

The epigraph above is from Two-Spirit Scholar, Qwo-Li Driskill's essay, "Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic." Driskill borrows from Audre Lorde's teachings in, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," to build a claim for how we might undo the colonial machinations that seek to eradicate all sexual difference. Notably, Driskill connects erotic sovereignty to the fleshy body, arguing that our move to reveal the lie of coloniality facilitates healing. In this chapter, I read Audre Lorde alongside Hortense Spillers to probe into how Black feminist thinkers have thought about corporeal repair. Ultimately, I believe that Audre Lorde's teachings about the erotic and her poetry provide paradigms about how Black women can reclaim our bodies, repair our flesh, recreate and reproduce. I offer an overview of Audre Lorde's own process of unmasking coloniality, the relation between Lorde and Spillers, and I end by offering readings of Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" alongside her poetry.

Pat Parker was one impetus that led Audre Lorde to claim her Black lesbianism. This encounter helped bring to fruition Lorde's first poem that declared her love for women, but not without contestation. In 1973, Lorde published her first collection of poetry supported by a major Black Arts Movement Press, *From a Land Where Other People Live*. Notable works in this collection include "Who Said It Was Simple" and "Dear Toni," a poem she wrote to Toni Cade. Broadside press was run by Dudley Randall, a Black Arts Movement editor and publisher, who, at the time of Lorde's manuscript submission, decided that "Love Poem," needed to be excised from the poetry

[155] Qwo-Li Driskill, "Stolen From Our Bodies: The First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic," 54.

collection because of its clear articulation of lesbian copulation. In her dissertation, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves," Alexis Pauline Gumbs offers salient insights about the contours of Lorde's working relationship with Dudley Randall and his disavowal of her Black lesbianism. Gumbs writes, "Dudley Randall refused to let her include the explicitly homoerotic "Love Poem" (141), making note that, "While Lorde published and won awards with Broadside Poets, the most recognized press within the Black Arts Movement, her editor, Dudley Randall censored her homoerotic poetry, and the marketing material of the press always tried to fit her into the frame of the Black cultural nationalist mother that she was not" (147). Gumbs goes on to note, "From 1962 to 1973, Lorde was anthologized as a family poet…Dudley Randall refused to publish her 'Love Poem' about sex with another woman in *From a Land Where Other People Live* in 1973…The example of 'Love Poem' demonstrates how Lorde was limited to reproducing a patriarchal understanding of Black community in her early career as a published poet" (402). Gumbs is keen to note that the patriarchal ordering of Black nationalism necessitates that Black women perform the role of mother—narrowly defined though, as one who procreates with Black men in service of the larger Black community. This narrow function of mothering may reveal why all of Lorde's love poems describe reproductive relationships between bodies of women. Cheryl Clarke even notes, "Celibacy is not possible, given the Black Arts Movement prescription of procreation, with black women quickly becoming custodians of the revolution."[156]

Before Lorde submitted her manuscript for *From a Land Where Other People Live*, she read "Love Poem" at a women-owned bookstore in Manhattan in 1973. Lorde's declaration of her Black lesbianism in textual form in front of an affirming audience foreshadows the relationships she would later establish with other Black feminists and women of color.[157] Dudley's disavowal of Lorde's work

[156] Clarke, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, 51.
[157] Like the founding of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and her relationship with Black feminists like Barbara and Beverly Smith and women of color feminists like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, among many others.

and the liminal constructions of blackness that permeated Black nationalism was too confining for Lorde, and she even describes these constraints on the last pages of *From a Land Where Other People Live*, in "Who Said It Was Simple" where she pens, "but I who am bound by my mirror/as well as my bed/sees causes in colour/ as well as sex/ and sit here wondering/which me will survive/all these liberations."[158]

Black women have always had to reckon with how our bodies can be liberated from colonial machinations. While I am uncertain about Hortense J. Spillers's decision to use Lorde's poem, "Who Said It Was Simple" as an epigraph in her essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," I believe that this textual placement allows us to think about Spillers's articulation of the history of Black women's sexuality alongside Lorde's teachings about the erotic. I would like to begin with a brief overview of Lorde's "Who Said It Was Simple," then move to underscoring some of the main tenets in Spillers's essay, ending with erotic possibilities from the purview of Lorde's teachings.

Which me will survive?

Audre Lorde remarks on the white gaze in her poem, "Who Said It Was Simple," which Spillers prefaces her essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" with. Written in 1973, Lorde reflects on anger, isolation, and futurity—both the foreclosure and possibility of it:

> There are so many roots to the tree of anger
> that sometimes the branches shatter
> before they bear.
>
> Sitting in Nedicks
> the women rally before they march
> discussing the problematic girls
> they hire to make them free.

Additionally, Barbara Christian has reflected upon Lorde's audacity to live as a Black lesbian and the ways in which Black feminists, like Christian, saw Lorde's work and her living as models for their own radical transformation. In her essay, "Remembering Audre Lorde," Christian notes, "Her insistence on speaking as her entire self, whatever the consequences, became a model for many women who had begun to realize that when the words 'black liberation' were spoken they were not referring to us, precisely because we were women" (22).

[158] *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 92.

An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.
But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
sees causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.[159]

The last seven lines of the poem are a distillation of what Lorde poured out in the previous lines, and an answer to the source of her anger and implicit despair: "But I who am bound by my mirror/as well as my bed/sees causes in colour/as well as sex/ and sit here wondering/which me will survive/all these liberations."[160] Lorde remarks that she is bound because of who she sees in the mirror and who she intimately lays with. Her Blackness—the shape of her nose, the kink of her hair, the curve of her lips and hips. Her lesbianism—who she loves and makes love with, the sensuous tactility of tongue on flesh—the insatiable body—are facets of her being that society bounds her by/to. To be bound is to be confined, encumbered, limited, and sometimes legally restrained. Lorde does not bind herself, she is made to be bound because the aforementioned "women who rally" (line 5), the "feminists," lack the range, the verb(s), the material and discursive articulations, the vision, to see her in her fullness, or to even see her at all. Knowing this to be true, Lorde sits in a physical seat at this restaurant, but metaphorically, she sits in a state of hopelessness because she is tired, and the beginning of the poem exemplifies this.

The roots to the tree she writes about are unable to bear fruit because the branches are weak. There is irony in "feminists" (*read white feminists*) hiring Black women as the mules (to also care for their children and domestic spaces) for their movement, using our labor to supplement the optics of

[159] *Collected Poems*, 92.
[160] *Collected Poems*, 92.

coalition building. Black women organize and stand in the center of violence, while white women are given the credit for being leaders of change. Lorde, as both writer and spectator, is well aware of the ways in which Black women have been pawns in the game of white women's "progressivism"—(like the 19th amendment), she has observed and been privy to how our freedom has always been subsidiary to their own. Lorde knows that our Blackness and femininity are always already read as "problematic" and therefore predetermines our disposability, invisibility, and lack of protection: "In a very real sense, black American women remain invisible to various public discourse, and the state of invisibility for them has its precedent in an analogy on any patriarchal symbolic mode that we might wish to name."[161] So, even when we are hired—or in other words, even when our labor is the driving force, the conduit to *everyone's* freedom—we are still ancillary, *small*, and even negligible, in the face of *their* progressive agenda(s). The homogeneity that is concomitant with white feminism leaves no room for difference, racial or otherwise. Lorde illustrates the constraints that Black women are under through juxtaposition. Nature as metaphor, describes how Black women's bodies/the base (tree) do not bear fruit because the roots(veins) have not been nourished and sustained—the branches(limbs) have not been given space to grow. And the fragmentation of liberation for Lorde as a Black lesbian is illustrated again in the last three lines of the poem as she sits, "wondering/which me will survive/all these liberations," illustrating how dismemberment is generational. Lorde is Black lesbian mother warrior poet—all parts of one whole, but made to be separated, broken apart, and fractionated because the "progressive" movement is not capacious enough to envision freedom as the simultaneous liberation of every self. Lorde conjures images of dismemberment in this poem to describe the constraints of gender-imposed patriarchy, made possible by enslavement and its afterlife.[162]

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[161] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," 153.

[162] In "Who Said It Was Simple" Lorde retells the story of slavery's afterlife in the poem, she keys in on the Jim Crow era, while setting the story in NYC.

Words and their efficacy

In 1984 Hortense Spillers published a seminal essay about the nuances of Black female sexuality titled, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words." An interstice, when defined as a noun is a space that intervenes between closely spaced things. An interstice can also signify a break or gap in something generally continuous. Synonyms for interstice include, but are not limited to, gap, aperture, space, breach, hole. Drama portrays the life or character of a story, which usually involves conflicts and emotions through actions and dialogue. Drama is a series of events, a state, or situation that involves interesting or intense conflict. These words bear definition because as Spillers reminds us in this essay, that with words and their efficacy, we are to be damned or saved by them.[163] To think of this essay as a thing (noun), making an intervention into discourses about sexuality, I find an ironical element in the placement of the adjective "small" before the noun "drama." The word small, denotes a thing that is negligible, minor, or inconsequential; however, when situated alongside "drama," the words as a pair carry an intensifying presence, a resonance. Drama, regardless of association to theater or literature, is impactful—something to be looked at and taken in. And words create meaning-making, and thus powerful. To read the complete title, then, is to understand that this essay, if quantifiable, is one thing, creating an opening, cracking into historical discourses of which Black women have been largely left out of. Spillers seems to foretell what critics might think about sexuality—that it is indeed materially and discursively small, negligible, and insignificant; yet, she knows that even "small" can be both substantial and pronounced, and thus drama-filled, or even drama(tic).

In "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Spillers asserts that sexuality is an unarticulated nuance, especially when Black women are the topic of discussion. Spillers suggests that this lack of engagement and nuance have a foundational presence, the trans-Atlantic slave trade. She writes,

[163] See, "Interstices," 159.

"Their enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor now even under the outcome. Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us, nor, alone, the primacy receptacle of a highly profitable generative act" (155). Racialized sexuality, then, the particularities of Black women's sexuality has yet to be coherently expressed, and Spillers' attention to the misconceptions, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations of Black women as sexual beings is brilliant. The narrative goes that Black and Brown women were overtly sexual, and that our sexual prowess was endemic because of our brown skin.[164] Yet, as Spillers suggests, there is a grave difference between being objectified to the point of non-humanness, being raped, and having the autonomy as a human to choose and consent. To be relegated to a marketplace—that is for one's flesh to be seen as competitive among its counterparts—to be relegated to a thing that can be sold—is to exist as merely an object, a good, a material thing to be used, sold, resold, and disposed of at the will of that which owns you. And that is where the nuance lies. The Black woman is non-human, sexual object, and sellable good, simultaneously, all at once. The simultaneity of the aforementioned signifiers have remained so powerful over the years, that even after the "ending" of slavery, Spillers notes that daughters still struggle in its afterlife. Spillers notes that even when sexuality is discussed, the discourses remain marginal: "…less than a handful of very recent texts by black feminist and lesbian writers, black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and when by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues" (153). Spillers beckons us to find balance.

[164] In the 19th century, Sarah Baartman was stolen from South Africa by a British doctor, who named her "Hottentot Venus." This doctor forced Sarah to parade around at "freak shows" in London and Paris, inviting large crowds to objectify her body because she had a large buttocks.

The question of power, the spaces and places and people it permeates are at the crux of "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words." Spillers remarks that power undergirds discourses about sexuality, specifically stating, "…the world divides decisively between the haves/have-nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who, by choice or accident of birth, benefit from the dominative mode, and those who do not. Sexuality describes another type of discourse that splits the world between the 'West and The Rest of Us'" (158). If sexuality can involve having the capacity for sexual feelings, describe one's sexual preference or orientation, and/or be the expression of sexual activity or sexual receptivity, then what Spillers's suggests is that power creates a boundary between those who are granted choice and those who are choiceless. The absence of choice, the *passing dream* of it,[165] has been the reality for Black women because our angle of entrance into the history of sexuality is drastically different from our white counterparts—an entrance that encompassed exploitation, death, and murder. And this triad is not ahistorical, it lives through and because of the coloniality of power. If enslavement and colonization were predicated off of the firm belief that Black and Brown folks' racial difference relegated them to commodity, object, and/or non-human, then the coloniality of power, the structures that mirror, reify, and reaffirm that moment in history, come to shape the ways in which we denigrate the Black body even still. Colonization is not a one-time event, and as Spillers remarks, Black women's sexuality has been over-imagined to the point of suspension. She writes, "The black-female-as-whore forms an iconographic equation with black-female-vagina-less, but in different clothes, we might say. From the point of view of the dominant mythology, it seems that sexual experience among black people (or sex between black and any other) is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning…" (164). These images of Black female sexual inferiority and absence are intentional acts that aim and succeed at ensuring European bourgeois dominance. I think what remains to be interesting is how a body can be read as hypersexualized and

[165] Borrowing from line 5 of "A Litany for Survival" by Audre Lorde, *Collected Poems*, 255.

exotic; yet, once the body is under the gaze of whiteness, its value is determined through and by its proximity to whiteness—and therefore, the body does not belong to the body itself.

I read Spillers's choice to preface her essay with words from a Black lesbian feminist because of Black lesbians' long history of engaging sexual difference.[166] Because an interstice begins as a small rupture, we might be able to imagine, then, that interstices, in its plural form, beckons us to also think about Black feminists' multiple discourses about sexual politics. Through language, Black lesbian feminists fissure compulsory heterosexuality. The thing about causing a crack or rupture into an already solid or solidified space is that the breaking into can shatter what is over time. I want to suggest here that this dialectic of sexuality that Spillers addresses in her essay is the tool that she wishes to use to dismantle the master's house. She writes,

> At any rate, sexuality is the locus of great drama—perhaps the fundamental one—and, as we know, wherever there are actors, there are scripts, scenes, gestures, and reenactments, both enunciated and tacit. Across the terrain of feminist thought, the drama of sexuality is a dialectic with at least one missing configuration of terms. Whatever my mother, niece, and I might say and do about our sexuality (the terms of kinship are also meant collectively) remains an unarticulated nuance in various forms of public discourse as though we were figments of the great invisible empire of womankind. In a very real sense, black American women remain invisible to various public discourse, and the state of invisibility for them has its precedent in an analogy on any patriarchal symbolic mode that we might wish to name.[167]

Spillers's asserts that sexuality as a dialectic, is both center and foundational because there is a patriarchal ordering of things. There are particular signifiers and symbols that control who the actors are, how/what props are used, where the stage is, and who gets to be in attendance—what gets reified, perpetuated—both implicitly and explicitly. I want to suggest that sexuality's missing configuration lies in the dialectic of racialized sexuality. Spillers remarks about three generations of Black women—her mother, herself, and her niece, to create an image of the historical trajectory of material and discursive silences, obscurities, and absences. And while, yes, patriarchy, and its

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[166] Please see "Part 1: Uses of The Erotic" in *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought.*
[167] "Interstices" 153.

formation at the dawn of modernity[168] is one reason she attributes to such invisibility, I also want to draw attention to feminism—the continuity of it—from the preface with Lorde's poem, to the aforementioned block quotation, and the essay in its entirety. Spillers states that sexuality, across feminist landscapes, has been rendered invisible, too. And it is possible that the way in which patriarchy inserts itself into the scene Lorde describes in the second stanza of "Who Said It Was Simple," where the "women who rally before they march/discussing the problematic girls/ they hire to make them free" (lines 5-7), get served before the *brother* waiting ahead of them, because they "neither notice nor reject the slighter pleasures of their slavery" (lines 10-11)—is the same patriarchy that occludes discourses about sexuality in feminist movements.[169] It is unfortunate and maybe less ironic, that patriarchy finds a way to imbue spaces and movements that are said to be working against its machinations. Perhaps, that is why Spillers suggests that sexuality is at the center of a great drama.

Feminism is a nexus for Spillers that has the ability and power to shift the narrative. She states that the discourse of sexuality must be taken up as a feminist project—a project that can actually consider and thoroughly engage racialized gender and sexuality. Black Feminists have already been doing the work, hence why she prefaces her essay with words from a Black lesbian feminist. Sexuality is not a discourse that any of us can afford to ignore nor make subsidiary any longer. In fact, Spillers and many other Black feminists are aware that the lack of material and discursive attention and engagement makes one complicit in one's own demise—entrapped, allowing the dominant mode of thinking to prevail because some have refused to bring language to a facet of being that is actually integral to our existence. Spillers writes, "The aim, though obvious, might be restated: to restore to women's historical movement its complexity of issues and supply the

[168] Please see Imani Perry's, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*.
[169] Quoted from Lorde's, "Who Said It Was Simple," *Collected Poems*, 92.

right verb to the subject searching for it, feminists are called upon to initiate a corrected and revised view of women of color on the frontiers of symbolic action...As I see it, the goal is not an articulating of sexuality so much as it is a global restoration and dispersal of power. In such an act of restoration, sexuality becomes one of several active predicates. So much depends on it" (174-175). This restoration of sexuality, this decolonial turn, is a shift that Black lesbian feminists were among the first to make.[170]

It is of no coincidence that Spillers prefaces her essay with Audre Lorde's words, words that specifically address the intersectionality of her race, gender, and sexuality, and the plurality of it. These prefatory remarks from Lorde's "Who Said It Was Simple" in Spillers's essay suggests that Black lesbian feminists are not only individuals connected to a larger collective but are a paradigm of the ways in which we may imagine a new life, a new way of being. Through poetic innovation, Black lesbians have constructed futurities where Black women's sexuality is their own—sexuality that has the privilege of choice, sexuality that belongs to a body that owns itself, sexuality that is an embodiment— sexuality with verbs, adjectives, and nuances, a sexuality that is sovereign.

The year of 1973 marks a heretical shift in Lorde's self-definition. The chasms created by the demands of Black nationalism and heterosexuality evolved into erotic possibilities for Lorde. Language is turned over once Lorde decides to live her life as a Black lesbian, and her most cited essay to-date, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" emerged from that new embodiment. Lorde's novel teachings about the erotic and its uses demonstrate that mutuality can undergird our political and intimate relationships; and, that recreation and reproduction can exist beyond the constraints of heteronormativity.

[170] Please see *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* and *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Feminist Thought*.

Inward and Outward with the Erotic

Audre Lorde went to Vermont in the late summer of 1978. While there, she was working on what would become "Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic As Power"—a prose piece she presented at the Berkshire Women's History conference on August 25, 1978. Prior to Lorde's trip to Vermont, she attended the Fourth Black Feminist retreat that Combahee River Collective founder, Barbara Smith, organized. While at this particular retreat, Lorde felt out of place with the group of women who attended—many attendees were younger than her, and their views about the personal and political were starkly different. While Lorde valued the emotional connection between Black Feminists, thought highly of their political activism, and revered their strong desire to institutionalize Black Feminism, Lorde was disappointed about the lack of integration of "physical activity" (read sex) into their political conversations. The lack of fluidity and balance further pushed Lorde onto the periphery—she was indeed *sister outsider* still, in a space cultivated for Black women. In Audre Lorde's biography, scholar Alexis De Veaux writes,

> Lorde also made note of two particular 'assumptions' she felt at odds with during their discussions: that it was inappropriate to have a male lover, and inappropriate for women in the group to be lovers except within the context of a serious relationship. In contrast to their purism, and as she had lived her life, both of these 'assumptions' were foreign to her; both precluded exercising the sexual fluidity she had practiced in the past and the sexual spontaneity with women she desired and cultivated presently, at and away from home.[171]

De Veaux highlights the discord between Lorde's personal and socio-political politics and that of the group she shared space with at the Black Feminist retreat. I imagine that Lorde felt out of place because at the time of this retreat, she was thinking through the particularities of the erotic, and although she eventually stated it is not *relegated to the bedroom alone* a key dimension of the erotic is sexual and intimate engagement. The women in attendance at the retreat seemed to hierarchize their

[171] De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 219.

beliefs, making political action take precedence.[172] It is plausible that Lorde's construction of the erotic was largely influenced by her time spent at the Fourth Black Feminist retreat and also influenced her perspectives about and articulation of difference as a mobilizing force.

Lorde made it to Vermont after the Black Feminist retreat. She told Adrienne Rich about the draft, "Tar Beach" which explicitly details an intimate relationship between Lorde and a black woman she named "Afrekete." The young couple met in a recreated 1950s Harlem that Lorde creatively constructed—a space where love between Black lesbians could survive and thrive. De Veaux highlights a key moment in the text that illustrates a synchronous, sexually charged, deeply intimate, and restorative moment between the two lovers—themes that Lorde would frequently return to and rely upon in "Uses of The Erotic" and her poetry: "We had come together like the elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange."[173] The eroticism that pervades this quotation could have been the same energy that Lorde carried with her while drafting what would become "Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic As Power."

The brief trajectory of Lorde's sojourn before the Berkshire Women's History conference is an integral part of understanding how she approached constructing the essay for the folks who would attend the conference, and the readers thereafter. Lorde's paper at this conference was novel due to the absence of discourse and presentations that specifically address the history of lesbian sexuality. Lorde's paper about the erotic would be the first of its kind, and even in this current moment, that truth remains. In Farah Griffin's essay, "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," she notes that Lorde's essay, "…was among the first to encourage women, particularly women of color and lesbian women, to

[172] De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 219.
[173] Quoted in *Warrior Poet*, 220 from Audre Lorde's "Tar Beach" in *Conditions* 2:2, 1979, p. 47.

claim and celebrate the erotic as 'a resource'...it is important to note that she precedes many feminist theorists in linking the erotic to power and resistance" (526). Griffin goes on to note that the celebration and use of the erotic can present difficulty because of the historical trauma Black women's bodies have endured since slavery. However, Lorde constructs the erotic as a lacuna, an interstice, a rupture, that can lead us to a place elsewhere—not just as a conduit to freedom, but a realized place that is an embodiment—operative in the spiritual, the sexual, the personal, and the political.

One of the most salient facets of the erotic is Lorde's insistence that it must be *felt first hand.* When I first read "Uses of The Erotic," many years ago, I was unaware of what Lorde meant when she wrote the prose piece. It wasn't until 2016, after taking a philosophy course about epistemology, that I began the process of excavation, a process that began internally. During this particular class, we discussed knowledge being an embodiment. Our professor challenged us to think about how knowledge itself was/is constructed, and how it comes to be constructed when Black Feminists and Black women are at the center; we were in search of the nuances. In search of the nuances, that process that began three years ago has developed into language; yet, the process of comprehension and feeling, regarding Lorde's work about the erotic is an eternal pursuit.

The erotic is an internal knowing. It begins at the corporeal level, and when revered, protected, and invested in, the erotic has the ability to transform, subvert, repair, reproduce, and sustain. But these various manifestations of the erotic are contingent upon the relationship that we have with ourselves. Audre Lorde's description of the erotic mirrors that particular kind of knowing:

> THERE ARE MANY kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling...The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our

> lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society...[174]

Lorde opens up "Uses of the Erotic" with a pronounced assertion that the erotic is internal. She uses words like "within," "in," "deep," and "rooted" to underscore the value of interiority, especially since Lorde critiques how the western ordering of things pushes us to be externally driven. Our discovery of the erotic and our firm belief that it is salient creates a sensory gratification—an internal feeling of fulfillment and pleasure that are predicated off of our investment in self. Self-care, in its literal sense, is not an act of indulgence. Instead, it signifies a recognition and respect for the erotic as a source of power—a source of power that shifts the ways in which we orient ourselves in the world—a source of power that allows us to demand the most from ourselves, first, especially in the face of a society that largely affirms the exact opposite—mediocrity, detachment, asceticism. Lorde is aware that our connection to self has been ignored, repressed, subsidiary, and even under attack. The machinations of colonization that Lorde address creates a bifurcation and binary opposition between mind and body, body and flesh, feeling and knowing. Yet, the erotic is the site and/or locus of repair and restoration. Lorde's insistence that we begin our excavation of the erotic with our excavation of and reverence for ourselves, internally, is her way of advocating for a restoration of self that she knows has been dismembered by corruption, oppression, death, and distortion. Through her advocacy in these opening pages, she maps out a blueprint—a futurity and present place for us to become something outside of and in spite of the logics of colonization.

The erotic is a bodily knowledge: "Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, 'It feels right to me,' acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding...For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing."[175] The

[174] "Uses of The Erotic," 53-54.
[175] "Uses of the Erotic" 54, 56.

primacy of the internal is the basis for understanding the erotic and all of its potentialities, and using it in service of ourselves and others. To assert that feeling is knowledge in and of itself is to construct a completely different narrative about the production of knowledge. I am wary of validating the erotic by placing it in opposition to something else; however, it is important to note what Lorde says herself in "Poetry is Not a Luxury": the white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us...whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (38). Referencing Descartes, and Philosophy writ large, the white fathers/masters/colonizers constructed an exclusionary knowledge-based system that sought and still seeks dominance.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Kristie Dotson offer crucial insights about myriad forms of epistemic oppression, engendered by the coloniality of power. Torres writes,

> 'Cogito, ergo sum', 'I think therefore I am', however, introduced, what was for Heidegger a more fundamental notion than the cogito itself: the very concept of Being. 'I THINK, therefore I am' turned for him into 'I think, therefore I AM.' The question of Being appears in the second part of the Cartesian formulation—the I AM... Now in light of what has been said about the *ego conquiro* and the misanthropic doubt that remains unquestioned in Descartes's formulation, it possible to point out what both Descartes and Heidegger missed in their philosophical views. If the *ego cogito* was built upon the foundations of the *ego conquiro*, the 'I think, therefore I am' presupposes two unacknowledged dimensions. Beneath the 'I think' we can read 'others do not think,' and behind the 'I am' it is possible to locate the philosophical justification for the idea that 'others are not' or do not have being. In this way we are led to uncover the complexity of the Cartesian formulation. From 'I think, therefore I am' we are led to the more complex and both philosophically and historically accurate expression:
> 'I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are-not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable).'[176]

Torres provides an explication of the well-known Cartesian phrase and philosophy, "I think, therefore I am," and asserts that this particular statement creates a demarcation between those who are creators and possessors of knowledge and those who are not. He goes on later in this essay to suggest that these are questions of Being—an ontological question and assertion that knowledge is a

[176] "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the development of a concept," 252.

determining factor for judging humanness. If I am human, I am rational, I am worthy of life. Conversely, those who are not human are irrational and unworthy of life. Those who conquest and those are conquered; or, the have and the have nots, the *West and the Rest of Us*.[177] In Kristie Dotson's essay, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," she insightfully states: "epistemic oppression refers to persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production. Epistemic exclusion, here, will be understood as an unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers. Epistemic agency, in this analysis, refers to the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given community of knowers in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources" (115). It is important to note that for Dotson and Torres alike, knowledge is both a site of power and disempowerment. To have agency is to be empowered—to have the power to enact change, to be responsible for exerting power. So, as Dotson suggests, to be epistemically oppressed is to be vulnerable at the hands of those who are liberated, affirmed, or emboldened, at the epistemic level. One is unable to be a producer of knowledge or revered as a knower because of the systems in place, such as racism/sexism/homophobia/heterosexism/imperialism, occludes access, visibility, and agency. As Dotson clearly states, one is excluded, unable to contribute, and therefore unable to articulate one's needs or modify the resources in place. To be epistemically oppressed, then, is to be perpetually disavowed, silenced, and disposed of.

So, when Audre Lorde brilliantly brings up the well-known phrase, "I think, therefore I am," and situates it next to her own words, "I feel, therefore I can be free," she establishes her own system of knowledge, even in the face of a model that we all have been told to conform to and are really at the mercy of. To suggest that knowledge is feeling based, to assert that knowledge is internal, to firmly believe that knowledge is deep and female, is to decolonize knowledge, and make

[177] "Interstices," 158.

it available to those it initially intended to eradicate—the liminal perspective. To revisit the quotation from Lorde's prose piece, "Poetry is Not Luxury," "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free,"[178] one can comprehend that our feelings, that inner knowing of self, is a kind of liberation. The tone in the word "told" is a tone of dominance. To be whispered to subverts the logic of dominance by asserting that a particular type of softness and delicacy, the low-voice, the reverberations of the Black mother, her language, her voice—has a place here, too. And that place, that whisper, becomes a new way to comprehend and re-understand how we come to construct and theorize knowledge altogether. Our feelings set us free. In her description of the differences between the Black mother and white father, Lorde writes,

> The idioms of *Black mother* and *white father* are not so much a question of our general society but a contradiction within each of us. Within each of ourselves there is that which is dark, which is female, which is hidden and not allowed. The cultures that we, and most certainly you, have been raised in underline what is white and male…I use the phrase *Black mother* to indicate the poet in each of us—the hidden, chaotic, and real—what we have been taught to distrust and despise within ourselves. Similarly, we were taught to despise whatever is Black and female. I use mother very specifically in opposition to the paternal function…A mother is not simply woman. A mother is the part of ourselves where we retreat for sustenance.[179]

The goal, then, is to aspire towards acute and full sensations of feeling, in ourselves, in our work, in our engagement with each other. If colonization, the coloniality of power, and every other angle of oppression such as imperialism, misogynoir, heterosexism, heteropatriarchy, classism, etc., seek to suppress our ways of knowing and being, the erotic, then, not only evidences a corporeal sovereignty, but it is also in fact, an ontology and epistemology. The erotic as an ontology and epistemology describes a practice of being with one's self, a practice of knowing one's self—it presents a way of relating to our work and how we might be in relation with each other.

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[178] *Sister Outsider*, 38.
[179] Quoted from *AUDRE LORDE: dream of europe*, edited by Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro, 31.

The draft of "Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power" is as essential as the published piece. The erotic can be described as a convergence between the spiritual, the psychic, the emotional, and the political; a connection between and within mind and body, feeling and knowing. The erotic is spiritual, sacred; involves deep intimacy, at the sexual and non-sexual level; it is the relation with ourselves, our relations with others, our creative energy—it expands our capacity to give and receive love. The erotic is generosity and reciprocity converged. For Lorde, the erotic is reproduction and recreative. The erotic is restorative. The erotic is praxis. In the draft of "Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power, Lorde describes the erotic, its facets and functions:

> The erotic has always been for me a charged little ventured into area [of power] in which I could find, as well as flee from, those greatest possibilities within myself and others.
>
> The erotic exercise, from fully felt dance to deeply complete sexual contact which feels like the highest or strongest form of this force about which I speak, functions in any one or combination of three ways for me. All are important and vital to my work, as they are about feeling myself most keenly. In the sharing of this movement, the dancing, the erotic wells of motion and music—the synchronization of our response to what starts as external rhythum and then begins to be repeated in our blood and heart beat and to which we begin to respond in more and more similar ways; the expression of that response within each of us brings us closer together. It is as if we are winding ourselves up into a rythumm, the exercise which within ourselves makes us stronger within ourselves and more aware of each other. It is a sharing of joy.
>
> For me, the erotic is a continuum, from the touch of the sheet under my heels in a morning bed upon wakening to the sharing of sexual orgasm. It is a touching of what is deepest within me, feeling, in concert with myself or together with another. In examining the roots and manners of sensual energy as it aplys to my work...

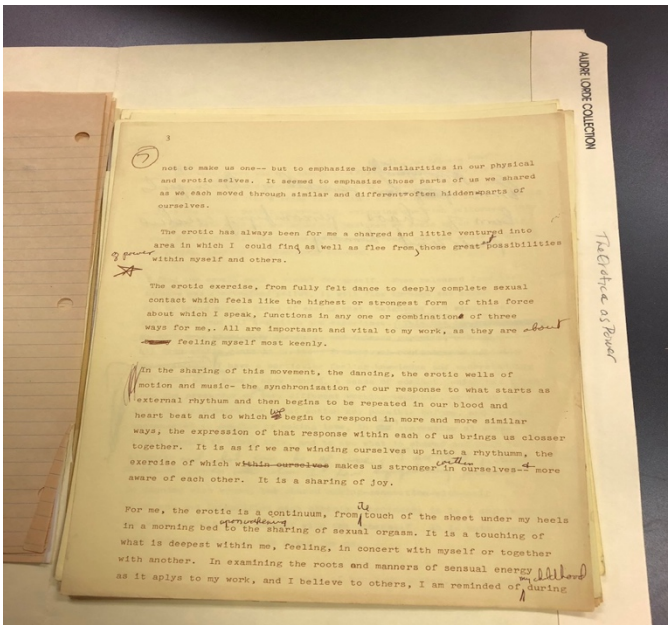

Figure 4: Draft of "The Erotic As Power," Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 18, Folder 105. Image courtesy of Spelman College Women's Research and Resource Center.

Lorde explains that the erotic for her is charged, internal, and powerful. She also states that the erotic is an exercise. Exercise, as a noun, describes an activity that requires physical effort, that can be carried out to improve or sustain one's health. Exercising is also a process that is carried out for a specific purpose, wherein one is especially concerned with improvement in a specified area or skill. Exercise is also the act of bringing action to fruition/realizing action. Exercise is a regular or repeated use of one's bodily organs. Exercise involves an exertion of the body for the sake of developing and maintaining physical fitness. As it pertains to performance, exercise is something to be practiced in order to develop, improve, or display a specific capability or skill. To describe the erotic as an exercise is to suggest that it must be worked on, it is to be practiced, it is an activity that when tended to, improves our well-being. In the draft of "Uses of The Erotic" Lorde herself states the "erotic is fresh and fun, vital—in the sense of vitamins, lifegiving—part of my life—sustaining system.[180] So, in this sense, the erotic is medicinal, too. I think Lorde's emphasis on the erotic as

[180] Spelman College Women's Research and Resource Center, Box 18, Folder 105.

exercise and noun underscores that it is a gesture towards wholeness and good health—it is a repeated practice that is essential for sustaining life. However, like exercise, there are ebbs and flows. Yet, investment in the practice, and the driving desire to do the work is what is most salient—one must practice for its uses to be utilized. Exercise as a verb becomes another angle of entry to understanding the erotic as praxis. As a transitive verb, exercise means to use or apply or to engage in physical activity to sustain and improve health and fitness. The erotic, as Lorde describes it, is about embodiment. And, in the draft to this prose piece, Lorde's insistence on praxis at the level of the corporeal means that for the erotic to have use, one must be committed to doing the work. The erotic is not meant to be static; instead, it functions best through one's commitment to shift and change, which implicitly challenges the homogeneity that permeates the western ordering of things.

The Poetic Contours of Reproduction and Recreation

Audre Lorde's poem, "Recreation," is a paradigm of the erotic exercise. In Lorde's collection of poems, *Black Unicorn* (1978), she wrote the following lines:

> Coming together
> it is easier to work
> after our bodies
> meet
> paper and pen
> neither care nor profit
> whether we write or not
> but as your body moves
> under my hands
> charged and waiting
> we cut the leash
> you create me against your thighs
> hilly with images
> moving through our word countries
> my body
> writes into your flesh
> the poem
> you make of me
>
> Touching you I catch midnight
> as moon fires set in my throat
> I love you flesh into blossom

I made you
and take you made
into me.[181]

Taken as /ˌrekrēˈāSH(ə)n/, that is, an activity done for enjoyment when one is no longer working, or a revitalization of strength and spirit post-work; or, pleasure, relaxation, fun, enjoyment, diversion, distraction; and, restoration, dalliance, or frolicking, Lorde describes copulation as play. The draft of "Recreation," which is originally titled "Creation," provides another pronunciation of the title, and affords another salient comprehension of this poem:

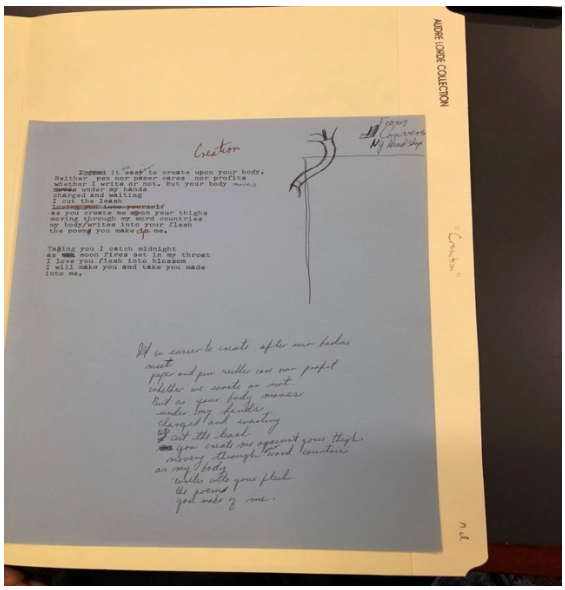

Figure 5: Draft of "Creation," Series 2, Subseries 4, Folder 017.
Image courtesy of Spelman College Women's Research and Resource Center.

I find it is easier to create upon your body.
Neither pen nor paper cares nor profits
whether I write or not. But your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting
I cut the leash
loving you into yourself
as you create me on your thighs
moving through my word countries
my body writes into your flesh

[181] *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 296.

the poems you make in me.
Taking you I catch midnight
as the moon fires set in my throat
I love you flesh into blossom
I will make you and take you made
into me.

It is easier to create after our bodies
meet
paper and pen neither care nor profit
whether we write or not.
But as your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting
we cut the leash
you create me against your thighs
moving through our word countries
as my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.[182]

Lorde's draft of "Creation" creates the possibility to pronounce the poem as, 'ree-kree-**ey**-sh*uh* n,' too. I posit that Lorde decided against hyphenating "Recreation/Re-creation" so that we see/comprehend/read the poem as both activities all at once—simultaneous. Copulation, for Lorde, is both dalliance and a process of rebirth. In "Creation" we can see Lorde grappling with how to articulate this sexual encounter. Her movement between pronouns "I", "we", "my" "our" suggests a movement from individual dominance to a sharing of power. Initially, the first stanza reads, "**I** find it is easier to create upon **your** body/neither care nor profit whether **I** write or not/…. **I** cut the leash" (lines 1-5). She rewrites this stanza and says, "It is easier to work/ after our bodies/meet/paper and pen/ neither care nor profit/whether we write or not/...we cut the leash" (lines 2-7). It is almost as if in real time, Lorde is holding herself accountable for the "pillars" she created in her construction of the erotic—that this source of power must be shared: "The erotic

[182] My own transcription of Lorde's "Creation."

functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding…" (*Sister Outsider* 56). With this quotation in mind and in conjunction with Lorde's editing, we see the death of the ego—the eradication of self-conceit, and the birth of mutuality and reciprocity—a power dynamic that was once individual becomes a shared power between Lorde and her lover. The editing can also be seen as the personification of exercise and the ways in which we sometimes shift how we exercise, either through removal or additional implementation, and this understanding, too, exemplifies the porosity/fluidity/flexibility of the erotic.

This belief in the erotic as a deep sharing between one's self and another can be further understood in her published version, "Recreation." When Lorde writes that "Coming together/it is easier to work/after our bodies/meet/paper and pen/neither care nor profit/whether we write or not" (lines 1-6), she creates an anti-capitalist narrative about copulation that is about synchronization, play, and work. To *come* together in its literal senses is to share space with another or to be in coalition; to climax at the same time; to become conjoined. Coming together is a triple entendre, in this case. In one reading, Lorde asserts that coming together with another makes work less challenging, and what undergirds the first line of this poem is Lorde's investment in coalition. In Lorde's firm belief that difference is a mobilizing force she writes, "The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56). This *bridge work* that Lorde speaks of is a major facet of coalition building across differences and is an integral part of Black Feminist and Women of Color Feminist praxis. Lorde distanced herself from separatist ideologies because she

understood that partiality could not be a part of the futurity she fervently worked to make space for. In "Recreation" then, what Lorde suggests is that the work, although arduous, can become easier when the efforts are collective—when differences do not become insurmountable barriers that estrange us from each other, but instead become the impetus for connection.

In the draft of "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde describes the erotic as an exercise, and she explicitly states that the highest or strongest form of the erotic is "deeply complete sexual contact." In this same draft, Lorde states that the erotic operates on a continuum for her, "from the touch of the sheet under my heels in a morning bed upon wakening to the sharing of sexual orgasm." With these two quotations in mind, "Recreation" can be explicated and understand as a process of recreation and reproduction. When Lorde writes, "coming together," she is talking about the conjoining of two bodies entering each other, and how the erotic charge shared between them allows for synchronized orgasms to transpire. In the same stanza, Lorde's hands traverse her lover's body as she is positioned on top of and in between her lover's legs: "but as your body moves/under my hands/charged and waiting/we cut the leash/you create me against your thighs/hilly with images/moving through our word countries/my body/writes into your flesh/the poem you make of me" (lines 8-18). She constructs the picture of a missionary position, but there is no clear articulation of dominance; instead, they create upon and inside of each other. Lorde states that she becomes re-birthed or reborn between her lover's thighs. She then goes on to state that in their corporeal convergence, flesh and body become one, and a poem is birthed. Biblically speaking, we have read about the power of two coming together and the power that can come from that kind of sharing. In Mark 10:8, it reads, "and the two shall become one flesh; so they are no longer two, but one flesh" and in Matthew 18:19 it reads, "again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them." I think that Lorde was intentional in constructing a poem that provides space for us to think about reproduction beyond the confines

of heterosexuality, and she even undoes or subverts conventional, religious, and societal perceptions about who can come/cum together. In the first chapter of *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and The Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander writes,

> Women's sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideology of an originary nuclear heterosexual family that perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation. And because loyalty to the nation as citizen is perennially colonized within reproduction and heterosexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely, a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship, or no responsibility at all.[183]

Alexander states that one's erotic freedom, most specifically, the erotic freedom of the lesbian, is a threat to the nation because this particular body does not conform to procreating in service of the state. With this in mind, one can see Lorde's insistence that as Black lesbian, she has the power to engage in reproductive relationships with other women that are not the alternative to the norm (of heterosexual procreativity), but altogether different. Within and through the poetic, Lorde maps out a futurity that does not relegate reproduction to heterosexuality; instead, she penetrates, she is penetrated, she recreates, she births, and is rebirthed, through lesbian copulation. Lorde returns to this belief of having this kind of power in her other work as well. For example, in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, she writes, "I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving" (7). In "Love Poem," she also writes, "And I knew when I entered her I was/high wind in her forests hollow" (lines 6-7), and in "On a Night of The Full Moon" she says, "Thus I hold you/frank in my heart's eye/in my skin's knowing/as my fingers conceive your flesh" (lines 11-16).[184] These examples demonstrate how the erotic is a continuum that affords Lorde and her lovers the space to traverse between and beyond masculine and feminine modalities of being, dominant

[183] *Pedagogies of Crossing,* 22.
[184] Please see Lorde's *Collected Poems*, pages 127 and 172, respectively.

and submissive performativity, and receptively generous exchanges of sexual and erotic energy. Not only is the orgasm and copulation for Lorde simultaneously personal and political, through the lens of decoloniality, what we see reflected in Lorde's poetics and her life are sincere and fervent efforts to dismantle the master's house utilizing new tools that she has constructed. In this sense, the master's house is represented in imperialism, capitalism, american exceptionalism, dismemberment, extraction, exploitation, and homogeneity. Thus, "Recreation" is a poem that demonstrates how we can work in service of ourselves and each other; how we can reproduce and recreate outside the confines of sexuality; how women can *come* together and the end result be the birth of their work or a recreated self; how we can come together in spite of and in celebration of our differences.

Conclusion

Black Feminists have the longest history of engaging racialized sexuality. Audre Lorde's work demonstrates the ways in which her interrogation of sexuality is an anti-capitalist meditation, and her work also highlights the importance of situating the erotic in the context of sexual engagement. Hortense Spillers's "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," underscores the historical trajectory of racialized sexuality and the ways in which sexuality has been rendered invisible when Black women are at the center. Lorde's poeticization of the erotic is both an internal and external gesture towards wholeness. Lorde insists that the erotic must be felt first-hand before it can be shared with another. The draft of "Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic As Power" demonstrates how the erotic, in Lorde's description of it, places sexual engagement at the center. Oftentimes, in discourses about the erotic, sexual engagement is subsidiary because it has been taken too literally that the erotic is "not relegated to the bedroom alone"[185] and should not be connected to the pornographic. At the time of Lorde writing this particular essay, in feminist circles, S/M and pornography were deemed as both violent and exploitative. It is possible that Lorde did not want the erotic to be subsumed under

[185] *Sister Outsider*, 57.

those conversations nor misunderstood as exotism, or sensation without feeling. In fact, the draft reveals that sexual engagement is the highest form of the erotic for Lorde.

In this chapter, I attend to the nuances of the erotic, and its ability to engender a corporeal agency that is both reproductive and recreative. That Lorde places the fleshy body at the nexus of her poetry when she describes copulation and coalition building across difference and because Spillers sees Lorde's poetry as a starting place for her discourse about Black female sexuality, led me to reading these Black feminist thinkers alongside one another. I am attempting to explore the affordances of the erotic and its uses. In his discussion of Lorde's teachings about the erotic, Jafari S. Allen writes,

> I am concerned with using the erotic as an embodied human resource, composed of our personal histories and (sexual, social) desires, toward deepening and enlivening individuals' experiences…Although deeply personal, the erotic is also intersubjective…and therefore political. I employ erotic subjectivity as a way to pose the relationship between individual everyday acts of refusal and the intention to build political communities or foment movement. An ongoing process, erotic subjectivity may therefore be used strategically, or tactically. Out of this we may create a counterpublic in which new forms of affective and erotic relations, and rules of public and private engagement, not only inform all our choices, as Lorde suggests, but in fact condition new choices and new politics.[186]

Allen's description of the erotic as an "ongoing process" relates to Lorde's definition of the erotic as an exercise, erotic exercise as praxis. The flexibility and porosity of the erotic makes it capacious enough to attend to and undergird our intimate relations and the coalitions we build, whether intimate, political, familial, or social. Allen also describes Lorde's erotic as "hermeneutical," and I would argue that because the erotic functions as a modality of interpretation, both written and spoken, Lorde's poetry serves as its own hermeneutic for the uses of the erotic—her prose and poetry dovetail. When Lorde's poetics and teachings of the erotic are read in relation to one another, she describes how Black women's flesh is recreative and reproductive. And as Black feminist scholar

[186] Quoted from "Black/Queer/Diaspora At The Current Conjuncture" by Jafari S. Allen, 231.

L.H Stallings notes, "Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic' is a massive and communal theoretical dialogue that reimagines the erotic away from Western designs, spiritually reaffirming it for women and people of color especially" (8).[187]

[187] Quoted from *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* by L.H. Stallings, 8.

Chapter Three: Notes on Decolonial Futurities: Cheryl Clarke and the Black Lesbian Body

That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.[188]

It is this imagination that is the strongest part of our decolonial struggles.[189]

Cheryl Clarke is a Black lesbian feminist poet educator essayist. Born in Washington D.C in 1945, coming of age at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, coming out and into her lesbianism in the midst of The Black Power Movements—one might say that she was born to become all that we have witnessed through and within her work—an activist, a scholar, a voice of dissent, and most specifically, a Black lesbian feminist. In 1981, Cheryl Clarke published "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" in the feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. This piece made a significant intervention in discourses about lesbianism and Blackness, as Clarke positions herself as interlocutor between two seemingly diametrically opposed identities and ontologies. In this essay, Clarke spells out the intersections between race and gender, challenges compulsory heterosexuality, descriptively positions lesbianism on a continuum, wherein how one chooses to define themselves is not relegated to the bedroom alone. Instead, she asserts that "lesbian" can be political, personal, philosophical, ideological markers of being that are liberatory in deployment and function. She insists that lesbianism at its core and at its best is multiplicitous and porous—not meant to be impermeable, myopic, or a unilateral descriptor for same-sex desire. Clarke also addresses the nuances of colonization and declares that, "the lesbian has decolonized her body" (25). Not only is Clarke the first Black feminist to use the term "decolonized" in 1981, her theorization of corporeal liberation in her essays, prose, and poetry underscore how salient futurity was to her—futurity in terms of her survival as a Black lesbian; her

[188] Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," 36.
[189] Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee), "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques,"

thriving, her loving, her living—a futurity that she demanded happen in this lifetime. Clarke's writing, then, is an archive of antidotes—healing words that, "make us possible, those of us who would live without permission, and still not asking for it...because to be a black woman loving black women in capitalism is an ocean-deep thing, is a far-to-cross thing, is still too often an unsurvivable thing, a blue thing, but you make it a shore" (14), as Alexis Pauline Gumbs asserts in the preface to Clarke's *Living As A Lesbian*. Clarke's work is honored in the last chapter of my project because she lived to write for those of *us* at the *shoreline*. Furthermore, her writing is a gesture towards wholeness, an articulation of the Black lesbian experience—an experience that had been buried so deep, but we all knew the stories were there. She excavated and gave language to her own story, living as a lesbian following, "the black feminist dictate of saying the least said and telling the least told."[190] This chapter contains four sections: What's in a name?; Parts of the same whole (Black arts/Black lesbian aesthetics); Black Feminism, Decolonial Turns, and Disidentification; The Black Lesbian Has Decolonized Her Body. In section one, I address the religious implications in naming from the perspective of Catholicism because of Clarke's religious upbringing. I draw connections between the salience of naming, Clarke being influenced by speakers like Martin Luther King Jr., and the ways in which those religious and political orientations shaped Clarke's decision to name herself lesbian. Through a close reading and deep meditation on Clarke's seven sentence paragraph from her essay, "New Notes on Lesbianism," I argue that Clarke takes on the role of high priest, not only to subvert and rupture, but to create a new realm of possibility and life for Black lesbians—those that name themselves. I demonstrate that naming is no trivial endeavor nor is it confined to orthodoxy. Section two discusses the implicit and explicit connections between the Black Arts Movement and their cultural ideology, "The Black Aesthetic." I coin the term the "Black lesbian aesthetics" as a way to

[190] Here, reference *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* and Clarke's scholarship on Audre Lorde and Angelina Weld Grimke in her book, *The Days of Good Looks*.

concretize the literary movement created by the Black lesbian writers discussed in my project. I draw upon Evie Shockley's text *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* and her assertion that we must not solely name but describe what we mean when we use the terms that we do.[191] I highlight Clarke's early influences like Amiri Baraka and James Baldwin to illustrate the ways in which her exposure to and engagement with these writers and activists helped her (Lorde and Parker alike), develop the necessary skills for her work. Although there are instances where the Black Arts Movement espoused misogynistic, homophobic and myopic perspectives in their politics about liberation, rather than seeing them as wholly antagonistic, I argue that the Black Arts Movement, the writers and artists that emerged from it, also created a new language and politics of Blackness. At the crux of my project is Black Feminism, so section 3 addresses the historicization of Black Feminism, and the ways in which Black Feminists have shaped political, personal, and social discourses concerning racialized gender and sexuality. I outline how Black Feminists have always thought about decolonization, even if and when the term was not specifically used, and I argue that Black Feminism converges with other fields of thought and theoretical conventions like decoloniality and disidentification. This chapter ends with an explication of Clarke's poem "marimba" and a meditation on Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez's theorization of decolonial love. I ultimately argue that Clarke's work as a Black lesbian feminist is particularly salient because of her investment in futurity and her firm belief that a world beyond the devastation of colonization, heteropatriarchy, heterosexism, and imperialism can be brought to fruition in this lifetime. Her writing, then, becomes a living testament to how we might ascertain liberation—it begins and ends in the poetic.

[191] In Evie Shockley's discussion of the black aesthetic, she writes, "what is called for is a redefinition of the term, one that makes it descriptive rather than prescriptive" in *Renegade Poetics*, 7.

What's in a name?

In the Catholic religion, children are given the names of saints, angels, biblical, figures, or named after Christian virtues or feats. For Catholic parents who have long subscribed to biblical law, they give their children Catholic names at birth, and then, at the baptism, the priest will ask what name the parents have chosen for their children. Whether the child is named at birth or baptism, it is common practice that their first or middle name is attached to a biblical figure or biblical event. When a child is baptized, they become the son or daughter of God, sharing a close and direct relationship, an heir of heaven through this newfound and permanent relationship to Christ. Baptism, in the Catholic religion, is deemed as a conduit to other holy sacraments— it is in fact deemed as a rite of passage, necessary for the child to live a whole and complete life as they mature. In Catholicism, giving someone a name is a sacred act that connects them to God. It is not done capriciously but carried out with joyful seriousness and prayer. A name indicates that there is connection, relation, and continuity between the supernatural and natural life, and between earthly and eternal life. Thus, making a name one of the most salient moments of a child's new life. A name is a signifier for holiness, allowing the child to actively participate in the plan that God has set out for their life; without it, one can implicitly posit that they may live a life of misfortune and incompleteness, feel a lack of resolve, or live a life with no direction. Therefore, those who choose the name must do so with integrity, seriousness, and honor. A name connects the child to an existence beyond the visible universe; a name allows one to transcend laws of nature; a name, in these instances, is a marker of transcendence—a conduit to a place here and elsewhere.

In 1983, Cheryl Clarke, born and raised Catholic, switches roles between parental figure and high priest, and names herself, lesbian. In her essay, "New Notes on Lesbianism," she writes,

> I name myself "lesbian" because this culture oppresses, silences, and destroys lesbians, even lesbians who don't call themselves "lesbians." I name myself "lesbian" because I want to be visible to other Black lesbians. I name myself "lesbian" because I do not subscribe to predatory/institutionalized heterosexuality. I name myself "lesbian" because I want to be with women (and they don't all have to call themselves "lesbians"). I name myself "lesbian" because it is part of my vision. I name myself "lesbian" because being woman-identified has kept me sane. I call myself "Black," too, because Black is a part of my aesthetic, my politics, my vision, my sanity.[192]

At first glance, this seven-sentence paragraph appears to be a list of some sort. As a transitive verb, a list can mean to place (one's self) in a specified category—to make a list of, to include on a list. And, as a noun, a list can be defined as a simple series of words or numerals, such as the names of persons or objects, a number of connected items or names written or printed in consecutive order, typically one below the other. As a noun, a list can also be defined as a deviation from the vertical. Taken as a transitive verb, perhaps Clarke's list operates as an intentional compilation of reasons that explicitly and cogently explain and defend her reason to name herself lesbian. She has made her own list and included her own self on it. Thoughtfully and carefully, her 6 sentence list places her in one category: lesbian, so that she may be included in the list of lesbians, if there was ever one. Taken as a noun, Clarke presents a simple list of reasons, free of jargon, and clearly demarcated by punctuation: periods. She writes a total number of 6 reasons that are all connected to one name: lesbian. She writes these reasons consecutively, one below the other, as if she is writing in response to previous, present, or future inquiries about her choice of name. Perhaps these reasons are connected to questions she has heard, still hears, or will eventually here. Since synonyms for "list" include record, catalog, register, file, or index, her list, especially in published format, is an archive of some sort that those in question or with question(s) can reference and return to. Lastly, and perhaps one of the most salient definitions of list is that in its deployment as a noun, it can mean a deviation from

[192] Clarke, "New Notes on Lesbianism," in *The Days of Good Looks*, 85-86.

the vertical. Vertical. Straight. Upstanding. Upright. Plumb. Clarke's list can be read as a divergence from the straight up and down-ness of heterosexuality—a departure from the standard—a submergence into the heretical. Clarke herself states, "the reason I became a lesbian is because I wanted to live an unorthodox, unconventional life as a woman."[193]

The use of refrain while listing makes Clarke's seven sentence paragraph psalmic. Refrain is defined as a statement that is often repeated or a recurring phrase or verse, usually located at the end of each stanza or breaking of a poem or song. A synonym for chorus, refrain, in Clarke's use of it, allows lesbian to function as a litany, too. If litany describes a form of prayer, containing a series of invocations and supplications, if litany describes, too, a resonant or repetitive chant, then this paragraph can be read as a conjuring—sacred words that connect communities across difference, and at the same time, if only for a moment, a homogenizing act like what we see or hear in a chorus. Taking in just the first four words, "I name myself lesbian," if repeated as a personal prayer or to a congregation, the repetition creates space for a resonance and a remembrance. Perhaps, at age sixteen in 1963, when Clarke accompanied her parents to the March on Washington to hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, his invocations, supplications, and repeated phrase, "I have a dream," resonated even twenty years later when she wrote this particular essay. If said out loud to an audience, Clarke is positioned as a leader, invoking and supplicating through words, and alternating responses between herself and the congregation of listeners. If the audience consecutively repeats, "I name myself lesbian," Clarke joins in, listing her reasons why—they perform in tandem, in rhythm.

The paragraph, read as compressed repetition, demonstrates how frequent use can change one's attitude towards a word, for good or bad; however, in the essay, she wishes for the former

[193] Unpublished 2018 Interview with Briona Simone Jones.

and not the latter. Clarke even states, "The term 'lesbian' has been denigrated, degraded, and made synonymous with disease."[194] In the seven-sentence compressed list, Clarke uses quotation marks to allow words like "lesbian" and "Black" to shift from epithets to humanized signifiers. The first sentence of the paragraph is the longest and most descriptive: "I name myself 'lesbian' because this culture oppresses, silences, and destroys lesbians, even lesbians who don't call themselves 'lesbians'" (85). The move to quotation marks signifies that there is some knowing that "lesbian" has been used to denigrate and subjugate, yet her movement away from quotation marks (in the same sentences) demonstrates a reclamation, a redefinition, and redeployment. Perhaps, what Clarke suggests is that it is not the word in and of itself that is inherently "bad," it is instead "those people over there" who misuse and abuse it. Rather than eradicating the word, let it be subverted for good use. This first sentence serves as a base—a first layer that opens up as the sentence elongates and is distilled once it ends. She then moves to more simple, succinct lines and reasons: "I name myself 'lesbian' because I want to be visible to other lesbians. I name myself 'lesbian' because I do not subscribe to predatory/institutionalized heterosexuality. I name myself 'lesbian' because I want to be with other women (and they don't have to call themselves 'lesbians')" (86). The parenthetical use here is particularly salient because it operates as an insulation. She offers up a tenderness to "those" women who may not have otherwise been included in this list because they do not call themselves lesbians. Without the parenthesis, the sentence loses its emphasis and is no longer distinct but rather a sequence of words in the longer sentence. Clarke is speaking to someone or addressing something she has heard in the past; the parenthesis acts to re-emphasize, but more importantly, acts as a marker for capaciousness—a space opener, a gesture that is *unbounded*, *unbought*, and *unbossed*.

Clarke ends this paragraph with what some might deem as a divergence, but what I read

[194] "New Notes on Lesbianism" in *Days of Good Looks*, 83.

as a convergence and/or distillation: "I call myself 'Black,' too, because Black is my perspective, my aesthetic, my politics, my vision, my sanity" (86). A distillation is a process of purification, it is an extraction of essential meaning and it highlights the most important aspects of something. This last sentence, as a distillation, can be read as Clarke purifying the word "lesbian" as she relates it to Blackness. In fact, in the last sentence, her reasons for calling herself Black are the same reasons she calls herself lesbian. Whereas the paragraph is a long list, the last sentence is a list as well. The final sentence is a compressed list, a list that distills all the listing that came before it. The word lesbian becomes clean, and the word Black, too. Aware that these two words are expected to be separate and hierarchical, formulaically, Clarke rejects that notion. They are indeed two parts of the same whole.

Parts of the same whole: Black arts and Black lesbian aesthetics

Clarke's statement is a manifesto. An unabashed proclamation, a public declaration—a self-definition. She is not named. She does the naming. She is the name agent, the sole proprietor who actively names herself, defines herself for herself, leaving no room to be *crushed into* anyone's *fantasies*. And in 1983, years after coming out as a lesbian, Clarke's positionality is clear—naming herself lesbian publicly and in print is as salient to her as her Blackness. In the introduction to *The Days of Good Looks: The Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980 to 2005*, she writes, "The Black Power and The Black Arts Movement gave me the skills; gay and lesbian politics gave me the voice" (ix). One of the skills that Clarke developed and sharpened was that of writing poetry and prose. The Black Arts Movement took a turn away from the West, constructing an expression of quotidian Blackness and collective freedom. Black Arts writers like Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka, saw their art and writing as ways to articulate their visions for a radicalized liberation. Writing as mobilization.

In his examination of Black poetry, Stephen Henderson writes, "the chief difference

between poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black poetry of the sixties comes in the full exploration and appropriation of the street experience and the formulation of an aesthetic and an ideology based in part upon it" (xii).[195] I would add that perhaps the *chief difference between* some of the *Black poetry of the sixties* and the poetry by Black lesbian writers influenced by that same era comes in the full exploration and discursive formation of the Black lesbian experience, and the f*ormulation of an aesthetic and ideology based in part of it*—Black lesbian aesthetics. I see Black lesbian aesthetics evidenced in Clarke's statement that lesbians, "acted on our faith in ourselves to develop a culture of black lesbian-feminist politics and practice" (128).[196] In Clarke's prose, she is actively committed to addressing the coloniality of power, and views lesbianism—her ability to live and thrive as one—as an act of decolonization, beginning for her, as well as other Black lesbians, with the corporeal. Her statement that, "The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship—roles notwithstanding" (25),[197] underscores how decolonization manifests on the body, and is also intimately tied to relationality. Black lesbian aesthetics is an articulation of plurality. An articulation of plurality is a verbal, written, or aesthetic expression of one's decolonial way of being.[198]

Examining Clarke's use of repetition and her descriptive, politically charged paragraph, it is evident that a convergence is taking place: her influence from the sixties in terms of writing conjoins with her lived experience as a Black lesbian, and the articulation of that experience and the politics born from it. As Clarke repeats, "I name" she lists six different reasons that can be

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[195] Please see his book, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech & Black Music As Poetic References.*
[196] Please see Cheryl Clarke's *Living As A Lesbian.*
[197] Please see Cheryl Clarke's *The Days of Good Looks.*
[198] By decolonial way of being, I mean a selfhood that delinks itself from eurocentric histories that masks itself as universal concepts/understandings, i.e. patriarchy/heterosexuality. What Clarke offers Black lesbian aesthetics is her investment in a decolonial project and futurity, most exemplified in who she loves, how she writes, and who she creates kinship and coalition with.

attributed to why lesbian is an important signifier for her. She names herself lesbian because it is subversive; she names herself lesbian because it forges space for queer kinships to be formed and sustained; lesbian combats compulsory heterosexuality; lesbian is a language of love, an intimacy, an ethics of care, a way to be with/in women. She names herself lesbian because it is one of the many conduits to freedom; naming herself lesbian is a self-care, restorative praxis—an antidote. And, in the end, her lesbianism and her Blackness are two parts of one whole, incomplete without the other.

In Clarke's discussion of the salience of her lesbianism and Blackness, she says,

> Well, I think I have exceeded survival, frankly. You know, I think I have thrived. I have thrived more as a lesbian than I would have if I hadn't chosen to. So, I think, well, so I would say, I owe it to my lesbian politics. If you mean what person or persons, I would say lesbian communities, that's what I would say. AndI would say lesbian audiences in terms of my work and in terms of my writing. I would say that Blackness, for me, was a politics that helped me grapple with lesbianism because it gave me a framework, particularly around the issue of writing. I was talking about the Black Arts Movement earlier and the BAM demonstrated for me how you have to seize upon or capitalize upon the means of literary production in order to get your politics out there or your writing out there.Your poetry, your books. So, I would say, I have more than survived.[199]

Clarke attributes her ability to thrive in a heterosexist, patriarchal society to lesbian communities and audiences who affirmed her voice as a writer. She also demonstrates that her lesbian politics was a process of building upon an already established movement.[200] *In After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, Clarke expounds on the influences of the Black Arts Movement and the construction of her Black lesbian-feminist politics. She writes,

> As black lesbian-feminists, we had learned (within the various social justice movements of the nineteen sixties) to invent our political identities and histories,articulate a 'belonging,' connection and solidarity with lesbians of all colors as well as black communities; construct a 'utopian

[199] Unpublished interview with Briona Simone Jones in 2018.
[200] In fact, she also remarks that Barbara Smith and Smith's feminist retreats are what also helped her develop a Black feminist politic that could coalesce with her already formed, yet still nascent, lesbian politics.

> narrative'; adapt a cultural logicthat intersected with gender, sexuality, and class politics; and enunciate an anti- heterosexist analysis of white, male, and capitalist domination...Black lesbian feminist literacy of sexuality exposes the sexist and heterosexist (homophobic) commitments of the Black Arts Movement practitioners, and simultaneously payshomage to the Black Arts Movement's revolutionary literacy.[201]

What Clarke demonstrates here is an ethics of care. Though she acknowledges and critiques the Black Arts Movement's patriarchal and myopic view of liberation, rather than eradicating the importance of the Movement's work, she underscores that the Movement influenced her writing and other writers alike, providing them with a framework to construct a capacious vision for liberation, a vision that they (Black men) too, would be a part of. So often, critique is utilized to render one's intellectual production as useless, invisible, or a thing to only be "piggybacked" off of, rather than a real meditation, a sincere acknowledgment, a reverence for and remembrance of one's contributions to knowledge production.This simultaneity that Clarke speaks of is something that Black Feminists and others remain deeply connected to as they construct their own visions of futurity: critique to the point of disposability is not an option.[202] Instead, generosity, the restoration of that logic is threaded throughout their Black Feminist politics.

A radical politics emerged through self-definition. This notion of self-definition, the process of it, was particularly important in the Black Arts Movement. Yet, self-definition in the BAM movements had its limitations for folks like Clarke, who saw not only her blackness as a key facet of her identity. In her discussion of the Black Arts Movement, Evie Shockley provides agenerative critique:

> two additional and closely related problems engendered by the Movement's politics concern the sexism and heterosexism attendant to its (black) nationalist ideology. To the extent that the nationalist agenda typically relies upon gender norms and hierarchies in

[201] Quoted from *After Mecca*, 122 and 131.
[202] Please see Anna Julia-Cooper, *A Voice From The South,* Kristie Dotson's essay, "Radical Love," Lorde's "Learning from the 60s", Pat Parker's, "Movement in Black," Yomaira C. Figueroa Vásquez's, *Decolonizing Diasporas* "Reparations," and Beverly Guy- Sheftall's Introduction to *Words of Fire.*

> organizing the ('domestic') nation as a 'home' and its people as a 'family,' it should not be surprising that black nationalism figured the black man as the focal point of racist oppression and the frontline warrior in the fight against racism. But such nationalist imperatives placed women in the position of having to choose between race and gender as the source of their oppression—as if the two are mutually exclusive.[203]

Shockley goes on to state that the illusory dichotomy between gender and race, concerning the Black Aesthetic, impacted both form and content. In both instances, the portrayal of men and women in poems as well as "formal tropes that were designated 'black,' accommodated heterosexual masculinity (5).[204] Clarke's form and content deviate from those boundaries, and in fact, challenges and extrapolates some of the ideologies born from BAM artists. If the Black Arts Movement, "emerged out of a charged political context in which radicalized young black people insisted on the interconnectedness of culture and politics" (3),[205] I posit that Black lesbian poets like Cheryl Clarke, influenced by the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movements (aesthetic and spiritual sisters), insisted upon the *plurality of being*—wherein the interconnectedness of culture and politics were not confined by heterosexist and masculinist ideologies. And by the *plurality of being*, I am referring to the existence of multiple ways of being that are not set in opposition to one another or positioned as binary—ways of being that are parts of the same whole of one's self. Black Feminism, then, is the space that allowed for the extrapolation of the ideologies and influences from the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movements to transpire, and this is expansive understanding of liberation is reflected in Cheryl Clarke's work: "the ritual rejection of all manner of patriarchal narratives was as crucial to black feminists as the rejection of the 'Western [white] aesthetic' was to Black Movement practitioners" (122).[206]

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[203] *Renegade Poetics*, 5.
[204] *Renegade Poetics*, 5.
[205] Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca.*
[206] Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca.*

Black Feminism, Decolonial Turns, and Disidentification

Black women have the longest history of engaging racialized gender. This engagement can be dated back to the early 19th century—from Maria Stewart's address to the "Daughters of Africa" (1831), to Sojourner Truth's famously quoted refrain, "Ain't I A Woman" (1851), to Anna Julia Cooper's confrontation with the race and gender problem (1892), to Angela Davis's seminal essay written while incarcerated (1971)—the list goes on. Black women before the name Black Feminist and after, have remained deeply invested in identity politics, developing coalitions across difference, and eradicating all forms of oppression. In her description of the features of Black feminism, Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes,

> while black feminism is not a monolithic, static ideology, and there is considerable diversity among African American feminists, certain premises are constant: 1) Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources; 2) This 'triple jeopardy' has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men; 3) Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously; 4) There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other 'isms' which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism; 5) Black women's commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.[207]

Guy-Sheftall's breakdown of the particularities of Black feminism demonstrates how Black feminists are focused on the interconnectedness of oppressions, and when constructing their own vision for liberation, are invested in how their lived experiences help construct their politics, which further enables them to identify the myriad ways liberation can be actualized. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* includes the Combahee River Collective Statement, wherein the Black Feminist writers state, "a combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically, we addressed ourselves to

[207] *Words of Fire*, 2.

heterosexism… (234). I underscore Guy-Sheftall's commentary on Black feminism because it is cogent, and I juxtapose her words to the Combahee River Collective Statement to demonstrate how Black Feminism has a long history of being invested in ending heterosexism, and to underscore how Black lesbians who identify as Black feminists have remained central in that mission. In a 2018 interview, Guy-Sheftall states,

> I would say that when I think about Black Feminist Studies, Black lesbians are at the center of that. If I think about Combahee, if I were to stand up and try to trace the development of Black Feminist Theory, Combahee would be central. And they were primarily Black lesbian writers. And when I say writers, I don't just mean novelists and poets. I would include essayists and theorists. So, I would say without Black lesbian thinkers and writers, it would be very hard to talk about Black Feminist Theory. How can you talk about Black Feminism without talking about Combahee? That was the first document that we had that concretized intersectional feminist theory—that is, an attendance to race, class, gender, and especially sexuality. Even when I say that intersectionality preceded Kimberle Crenshaw and goes back to the 19th century, it didn't have a discourse about sexuality. So, we'd have to think of Combahee as a manifesto, a theoretical piece. And of course, Cheryl Clarke was a part of that, and Audre. So, in terms of the statement itself, we'd have to begin with Combahee. And I am not sure if most of those women had not been lesbians that we would even have a Combahee statement. So, we have to give them a huge amount of credit for the evolution of Black Feminist theory.[208]

Guy-Sheftall's comments articulate how Black feminism, as a theoretically grounded and praxis centered movement, is capacious and widely represented across various identities. Black feminists are abolitionists. Black feminists are lesbians. Black feminists are activists. Black feminists are essayists, poets, theorists, and novelists. Black feminists are dynamic. While the intent here is not to "essentialize" Black Feminism, the purpose is to show how Black Feminism is essential and to demonstrate how many others have been influenced by the long history of literary, political, and personal production from Black feminist thinkers. From conversations about racialized gender, dismantling patriarchy, confronting the coloniality of power, building

[208] Transcript from unpublished interview with Briona Simone Jones in 2018.

coalitions across difference, ending hierarchies of oppression, to sexual politics, Black Feminism has remained an exemplar.

I turn to José Esteban Muñoz's text*, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* to think about his influences while constructing and coining his theory of disidentification, and disidentification's salience as a lens through which we can better see the nuances of resistance. In 1999, Muñoz writes, "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). In his discussion of *identities-in-difference,* championing Audre Lorde for her novel theorization of difference, Muñoz also states,

> This term is one of the many figurations that I borrow from Third World feminists and radical women of color, especially Chicana theorists, who have greatly contributed to discourses that expand and radicalize identity. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, in their individual writings and in their groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, have pushed forward the idea of a radical feminist of color identity that shrewdly reconfigures identity for a progressive political agenda...*This Bridge Called My Back* serves as a valuable example of disidentification as a political strategy...*Bridge* has enabled the discourse of gender studies to move beyond politics of identification and counteridentification, helping us arrive at a politics of disidentification.[209]

Muñoz also credits Black Feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw and her theory of intersectionality, as it has aided him in theorizing about the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality:

> *Disidentifications* is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social...The optic that I wish to fashion is meant to be, to borrow a phrase from critical legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *intersectional.* Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is meant to account for convergences of black and feminist critical issues within a paradigm that factors in both of these components and replaces what she has referred to

[209] *Disidentifications*, 6, 22.

> as monocausal paradigms that can only consider blackness at the expense of feminism or vice versa. These monocausal protocols are established through the reproduction of normative accounts of woman that always imply a white feminist subject and equally normativizing accounts of blackness that assume maleness.[210]

Muñoz thoughtfully credits his influencers, Women of Color Feminists and Black Feminists alike, as they have laid the foundation for him to think through how identities in difference manage to subvert majoritarian structures, not by completely opposing it (counteridentification) or conforming to its norms, values, ideologies, and behaviors (identification), but instead, how to work on, against, and through dominant ideologies. I find that his use of the term "borrow" and his engagement and meditation with these theories demonstrate a citation practice that is rooted in an ethics of care. To borrow, as a transitive verb is to adopt into one language from another. A synonym for "lend," Muñoz acknowledges that disidentification is a theory that is deeply grounded and influenced by the work created by Black Feminists and Women of Color Feminists—as he knows and states in the text, all too often, their work is understudied and rendered invisible, both discursively and intellectually. His theory, then, also becomes a useful lens that enables us to identify and name some of the radical shifts Black lesbians were taking and still take in their writing.

These shifts that I speak of have been named and radically theorized by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. In 2005, Maldonado-Torres came to think of the concept, "decolonial turn" and in 2007 ("On the Coloniality of Being") as well as in 2018 ("The Decolonial Turn"), he further expounds on this idea and other concepts connected to it.[211] In his essay, "On the Coloniality of Being: contributions to the development of a concept," he states that the

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[210] *Disidentifications*, 8.

[211] It is important to note that in this essay, Maldonado-Torres states that this particular concept, as well as his ever-growing theoretical understanding has been influenced by Women of Color feminists like Gloria Anzaldua, and Emma Perez, Chela Sandoval, and Maria Lugones, among others.

decolonial turn refers to a shift in knowledge production and provides an introduction to, "questions about the effects of colonization in modern subjectivities and modern forms of life as well as contributions of racialized and colonized subjectivities to the production of knowledge and critical thinking (262)."[212]

And, in 2018, Maldonado-Torres further expounds on his concept, decolonial turn, and states,

> The concept "decolonial turn" has been used to indicate the theoretical, artistic, and political relevance of a wide variety of positions in multiple geographical fields of inquiry...against coloniality, the decolonial turn refers, on the one hand, to an epistemic, practical, aesthetic, emotional, and oftentimes spiritual repositioning of the modern/colonial subject by virtue of which modernity, and not the colonized subject herself and himself, appears as a problem. On the other hand, the decolonial turn refers to decolonization or decoloniality as a project that aspires to create a world with symbols, relations of power, forms of being, and ways of knowing beyond modernity/coloniality. That is, the decolonial turn introduces decoloniality fundamentally as an imperative, a need for survival...the decolonial turn suggests a change of attitude in the face of modernity and in the face of common sense, expectations, and definitions posed by modernity...the decolonial turn in its most basic form [is] thinking of modernity as a problem and paying attention to the meaning of colonization as a possible way out or answer to the problem.[213]

The decolonial turn enables those of us who exist on the underside of modernity to rethink our positionality as a presumed "problem" *(damne*), and shift our perspectives theoretically, epistemologically, artistically, spiritually, politically, and personally against the coloniality of power that would have rendered us powerless and occluded the possibility of such a shift.[214] This

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[212] Maldonado-Torres does state that this decolonial turn, its inception, is with W.E B Dubois; however, I have to add that Dubois is building off of the work of Black women abolitionists like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and others. I also strongly believe that these early abolitionists, their literary production, read as heretical moves, are where we see the first manifestations of the decolonial turn.

[213] "The Decolonial Turn," 111-113, 122. Also, by decoloniality, Maldonado-Torres states, "different from postcolonial, decoloniality makes reference, not only or primarily to the plight of formally colonized territories that obtained their independence in the twentieth century, but more precisely, to the insurgent positionality of subjects and to the possibilities of decolonization… decoloniality, refers to a process of undoing colonial reality and its multiple hierarchies of power as a whole" (111, 120) at the structural and subjective levels.

[214] Please see Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" (2000).

decolonial shift presents modernity and its connections to colonization as an inherent problem, as well as the structures, ideologies, and norms created from it. Torres writes, "More concretely, the decolonial turn expresses itself in the appearance of suspicions and questions that propose— more than the disenchantment with any tradition, or with the idea of tradition as such—a real scandal in regard to the emergence and expansion of modernity/coloniality and the multiple ways it justifies and naturalizes technologies of death and domination" (113). The decolonial turn is a lens through which we can see that our plight was not a one-time event, but an ever-growing, ever-present process that has been sustained since 1492. The decolonial turn, then, also becomes a practice that we can adopt which allows us to reshape our ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies beyond the purview of coloniality. I see the decolonial turn as embodying a duality. In one instance, it reveals the scandal of colonization and exposes the presence of coloniality and its relationship to modernity. On the other hand, and probably the most salient, taking the decolonial turn reinscribes a sense of agency that allows our spiritual, emotional, political, intellectual, personal selves to be restored, and for what is birthed from that restoration to be in alignment with our highest of good. At its best, the decolonial turn creates a rupture that is full of possibility—a rupture that allows us to reimagine and reclaim futurities, relationships, and worlds otherwise, outside of and beyond modernity and coloniality.[215]

I offer a provocation to consider the connections between Black Feminism, Disidentification, and the decolonial turn because as theoretical and conceptual conventions and praxis centered movements, all three are focused on ways to radically transform the world we live in by demanding that those of us who are still oppressed have a rightful place in determining how

[215] And by coloniality, I borrow Maldonado-Torres's remarks that "coloniality refers rather to the relations of power, and to conceptions of being and knowing that produce a world divided between legitimate human subjects, on the one hand, and others considered not only exploitable or dependent, but fundamentally dispensable, possessing no value, and denoting only negative or exotic meaning in the various orders of social life, on the other" ("On the Coloniality of Being), 242.

our ascension should be actualized. All three concepts and theories find that oppression is interconnected, not monocausal; view identity as multiplicitous; deem colonization as an inherent problem— a process, not a one-time event; and, understand that liberation must be capacious. As interconnected theories and concepts, it becomes easier to see how much of the early 19th century activism and resistance can be traced back to Black women and be read as a decolonial turn or a disidentification.[216] Thus, if these ideas can be thought of as operating in tandem (in partnership and in conjunction), and thought of as extensions of each other, how we view oppression, and how we aspire towards liberation is illuminated. In one instance, disidentification and Munoz's construction of it is rooted in performance studies—and, he attends to the ways in which the political force of performance/performativity can radically and drastically shift our worlds, even in-spite-of and in-light-of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity. In another instance, Maldonado-Torres's deep meditation on the decolonial turn is rooted in his understandings about race, Philosophy, Latin American Studies, but also deeply influenced by Women of Color Feminists, who are also deeply influenced by Black Feminists.[217] Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us that in order for issues to be addressed and properly examined, we need names that allow us to create frames/frameworks. I see disidentification and the decolonial turn as names and frameworks that allow us to further see and engage with the radical work that Black Feminists have done and continue to do. Black Feminism, as theory, as praxis, as movement, is extrapolated

[216] Namely, abolitionists.

[217] Maldonado-Torres traces the decolonial turn back to the first wave of revolutions of independence at the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, namely the Haitian Revolution but also U.S American Revolution. The second wave of the decolonial turn is traced back to the end of the second world war, which engendered a wave of decolonization in places like Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. At the same time, domestically, The Civil Rights Movement and US Third World Feminism Movements of the 1970s-1980s, and the emergence of post-colonial theory are a part of the second wave. (And, I would add the Black Arts Movement and Black Movements (BPP included) shifted the political and personal landscape for Black folks; the Compton Cafeteria Riots (1966) and Stonewall (1969) are what started the Gay Liberation Movements, and deeply impacted feminism, as well as Black women and Women of Colors' move to disidentify). Torres assigns the third wave of the decolonial turn to the end of the Cold War (1991) and the 500-year celebration of the "discovery" of the Americas.

when we consider the ideas and practices that are birthed from that movement as also being in conversation with thinkers like Maldonado-Torres and Muñoz. So for instance, when Sojourner Truth, in a room full of eyes that cancelled her out, exposed that gender is racialized and suffering is made more extreme because of that, spoke anyways, or when the Combahee River Collective demanded that sexuality become a primary object of study among the other forms of oppression, we see that these statements and actions have been repeated throughout history, and can also be contextualized as a disidentification or a decolonial turn. The Combahee Collective write, "the most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of an integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (232).[218] The Combahee Collective Statement is the first time that we see an integrated analysis of systems of oppression. They turn away from antiquated and separatist notions of liberation, eradicating the move to rank oppressions, and instead, construct a statement that can really be positioned as an exemplar of futurity. Audre Lorde reminds us that there are no new ideas under the sun, only new ways of making them felt, and that sole truth underscores the connections I aim to draw between the formations of these novel and radical ideas and movements.

The Black lesbian has decolonized her body

In 1986, Clarke publishes the poem "marimba," where she writes about how one is able to *disidentify* in a colonial landscape. She writes,

> awake on the edge of sleep
> after brief absence
> you next to me inking my dreams
> asleep on the edge of waking
> i stumble among blind hunters left to

[218] See *Words of Fire*.

feel for their prey
pressed
strength fading
i plunge past their groping blows to yours
and drowsily refuse to lift my legs open
over the edge of the bed
until i am told
of the darkness of her stairwell
of how she smelled you
and came for you there
black camisole
fingers flexed
how you opened your skirt
pushed her on her back
stooped and spread your legs
for her mouth
lips dripping for it.

i hear a marimba player chanting
her slave song in Portuguese

lick me and cover me
I am, I am in love with you.[219]

I read this poem as both a scene of subjection (through Clarke's conjuring of slavery), as well as Clarke's remembrance of an experience with a lover.[220] The presence of liminality and binary oppositions are prevalent in the poem as Clarke recounts being in between waking and dreaming or consciousness and unconsciousness, hunter and prey, slave and master. These binary oppositions also reveal the various ways in which power shifts throughout the poem. In the first half of the poem, when Clarke is asleep and on the edge of waking, it appears that she is having a nightmare, which transpires because she imagines that she is being sexually violated. She states that she is stumbling among blind hunters who are feeling for their prey. As an adjective, to be blind is to be unable to see because of an injury, or a disease; to be blind is to have a lack perception, awareness, or discernment. Hunter, as a noun, is someone who searches for

[219] *Living as a Lesbian*, 115.
[220] Cheryl Clarke will be referenced as Speaker 1.

something; a person who hunts wild animals. And prey is considered to be a victim, unable to resist attack; helpless; an animal taken by a predator for consumption. One antonym to prey is predator. I think that Clarke's language in these lines are intentional. In her nightmare, she imagines that she is the prey, taken without will, and absent of protection.[221] I read the blind hunters as colonizers. Recounting the sexual violence against Indigenous peoples and Black slaves, these colonizers are unable to see the humanity of another because they are stricken with disease. Indigenous life and Black life have been deemed as markers of carnality— bodies preyed upon, used at leisure, and disposed of. Clarke invokes carnality in the first few lines of the poems to express how bestiality was a bi-product of colonization and coloniality. The blind hunters denote colonial invasion and the quotidian nature of their sexual exploitation. After these blind hunters feel for prey, Clarke states that even though her strength is dissipating, she manages to plunge past their groping blows. These groping blows can be best defined as the fondling and feeling for sexual pleasure against someone's will. The groping being described as a "blow" suggests the intense, brutal, forceful, violent nature of the colonizer/violator's actions towards the colonized. What Clarke suggests in the aforementioned lines are that her dreams are bricolage images of some unfavorable past.

However, a second reading of this poem describes a re-memory of a moment shared between lovers. While awake, on the edge of sleep, and presumably about to doze off into sleep, Speaker 1's dreams are inked from memories of past sexual encounters with her lover, encounters so intense that she almost awakens ("you next to me inking my dreams/asleep on the

[221] In his essay, "The Decolonial Turn," Nelson Maldonado-Torres states that one of the most lethal aspects of coloniality is its belief that certain peoples are inferior in comparison to what is deemed as "normal." He states that the modern world is constructed with those lines of differentiation in mind and also reproduced: "Their desires, aspirations, and conceptions of what it is to be human are defined beforehand by structures, cultures, and symbols that consider aspects such as indigeneity and blackness, among other markers of damnation, as signs of wretchedness and animality" (111).

edge of waking"). To ink is to imprint, to mark, to sign, to blacken or darken. Clarke imagines that her lover's presence whether physical or spiritual, is so intense, that it leaves a mark of remembrance even in her dreaming/sleeping state. Speaker 1 stumbles, "among blindhunters left to/feel for their prey." In this second reading, the blind hunters can be read as Clarke's lover's previous suitors; or, past lovers who are searching for her (prey). If read as the voyeuristic nature of her lover's sexual encounters, then to become prey, or to allow one's self to be preyed upon is a willful submission.

Clarke's poem takes a turn towards liberation, both in the sense of a historically traumatic past and in her sexual conquest(s). Speaker 1 manages to "plunge past their groping blows to yours," and the moments of contact Speaker 1 references are either the blows she has taken by virtue of her sexual exploitation via colonization, or the tactile sensations she and her previous lovers shared. She is not subdued, though. Instead, reclamation transpires when Clarke claims agency over her body and makes the decision to partake in a copulatory moment with Speaker 2, her lover. Although reluctant to willfully submit, or *lift* her *legs open,* Speaker 1 recalls that in her absence, her lover gave herself away to another. To preclude a possible recurrence, Speaker 1 willfully submits at the end of the poem. As this scene of subjection and copulation are being replayed, "a marimba player is chanting/her slave song in Portuguese." The marimba is an interesting choice of instrument by Clarke because its roots are tied to West and Central Africa. Ironically, the woman in the poem chants, not sings, which is paradigmatic of the shift from horror to beauty. Clarke transforms the moment here and ends the poem in sacrifice, undoing genocide and its usurpation of pleasure.

Cheryl Clarke's poem, "marimba" presents the discursive and material possibilities of what could be because it complicates the dominant narratives about gender, sexuality, and race. The dominant narratives about whose gender is recognized and thus who is deemed as fully

human is challenged in this poem. She constructs the poem as a double narrative: one that tends to the historical legacy of slavery, its past and present remnants and traumas, and another narrative about the triumph. The triumph I speak of is Clarke's ability to subvert this historical legacy into a remembrance of pleasure and joy. While we must remember slavery because a part of the colonial project is to make us forget, we are not beholden to it. Clarke ends the poem by saying, "lick me and cover me. /i am, i am in love with you." These lines are a culmination of what Clarke set up from the very beginning of the poem. The racialization of gender functions to rearrange the ways in which people of color move throughout the world. The gender constructions that were re-conceptualized and re-instituted after 1492 do not allow for people of color to have autonomy over our own bodies nor form connections with bodies of other people. However, it is clear that these women submit themselves onto each other, doing so without trepidation. To be licked and covered is a reincarnation of sorts. The lovers are made anew.

In Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, he describes disidentification as survival strategies that, "the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). This definition by Muñoz elucidates the type of subversion that permeates "marimba." If disidentification can be described as a practice wherein, "instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (11-12), this poem by Cheryl Clarke reflects just that. At the beginning of the poem, there is a colonial presence that Clarke refuses to be subdued by, and her acknowledgement of a pervasive colonial

presence provides her with the opportunity to implement strategies that work on and against that particular knowing. She transforms the narrative from within the poem and does so through subversion. Recognizing that colonial invasion brought with it notions of gender, sexuality, and race, and how racialized bodies were said to be outside of the category of gender, "marimba" aims to disavow and debunk that truth, and instead, offer a different narrative about love—a same-sex love shared between two women who willfully submit themselves onto each other. Maldonado-Torres's theories of decolonization are useful when thinking through another way that heretical moves are made in Clarke's poem. Torres breaks free from genre by theorizing about possibilities beyond western philosophical ways of knowing. For him, "the precise meaning of decolonization is the restoration of the logic of the gift…receptive generosity involves a break away from racial dynamics as well as from conceptions of gender and sexuality that inhibit generous interaction among subjects" (260).[222] He finds that decolonization and the discourses around it are a gift, a gift that involves a desire for reciprocal, ethical exchange, not extraction. I find that Clarke's poem epitomizes these notions. She takes what he describes as a decolonial turn, a shift in knowledge production, one that sees "value in the contributions of racialized and colonized subjects to the production of knowledge and critical thinking" (261). Although Clarke may not have been thinking about her poetry as being connected to the theories of decolonization that Torres puts forth, these two writers collectively partake in undoing dominant narratives, and in doing so, conceptualize race, gender, and sexuality in new ways that work towards liberation.

Memory and imagination are also crucial sites of inquiry in Cheryl Clarke's "marimba." The poem itself is an act of remembrance that Clarke reflects on after being abroad listening to a woman playing the marimba. That particular moment, the re-memory of it, was the impetus

[222] See "On the coloniality of Being."

behind her writing. The poem, at once a remembrance of a previous encounter; at another, the poem itself is a remembrance of a violent colonial past, and an imagining of a different, counter narrative. In Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez's book, *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (2020), she writes a chapter entitled "Reparations" where, through the explication of texts by Equatoguinean and Latinx Caribbean writers, she argues that literature can provide a space to imagine and reimagine both immaterial and material forms of decolonial reparations that neither inscribe nor reinscribe the coloniality of power. She positions decolonial love at the center of decolonial reparations. Figueroa-Vásquez argues that, "decolonial love is a practice that bears witness to the past while looking towards a transformative and reparative future by unraveling coloniality, the matrix of power that is manifested in our contemporary conceptions of power, gender, and bodies" (121). She goes on to state that a reparation of the imagination can exist in literary poetics, too.[223] I find that Figueroa-Vásquez's theorization of reparations being immaterial is a radical statement that shifts the contemporary conversations and discourses about this particular topic. Her call for immaterial reparations provides space for discourses to be had about how one may go about repairing injuries that cannot be remedied with tangible goods or money. Reparations also needs to take place on the body—a corporeal reparation, a reparation of the mind. Going even further, Figueroa-Vásquez's assertion that decolonial love is the nexus of such a grand gesture makes her theorization of reparations expansive and sincere. Drawing on Chela Sandoval's earlier remarks about decolonial love which state that decolonial love is about an attraction and relation, "carved out of and in spite of difference,"[224] Figueroa-Vásquez says that "decolonial love serves as a rupture in systems of coloniality and ongoing settler colonialism which

[223] Please see *Decolonizing Diasporas*, 122.
[224] Sandoval, *Methodology of The Oppressed* 187.

fragment humans by creating hierarchies of difference" (120). For Figueroa-Vásquez and the texts she explicates in this essay, reparations also transcend the forms of financial gain, apologies, legislation, and/or promises. Instead, decolonial reparations and decolonial love can also take place at the individual and communal level. In an interview, Junot Diaz says that the central question of his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is about the possibilities of decolonial love: "is it possible to overcome the horrible legacy of slavery and find decolonial love?"[225] If this is the question at hand, Cheryl Clarke's poem, "marimba" suggests that yes, such a thing is possible. She begins the poem with a scene of subjection and a colonial invasion—this invasion seeks to destroy and violate her from the very beginning of the poem. But, "marimba" is also about an intimate encounter between two women that end in copulation and reincarnation. Not only does Clarke's re-remembrance of the ills of slavery challenge the colonial and settler logic to forget the past, but her imagination is also repaired in the same poem because it ends in triumph or in other words, it ends in decolonial love. As the characters in the texts that Figueroa-Vásquez explicates are repaired and made anew after transgressions, Clarke's memory is repaired and made anew after the transgressions of colonialism. Figueroa-Vásquez's novel ideas about reparations taking place in immaterial ways makes space for a corporeal reparation and allows us to further understand what Black lesbian writers were also doing when they wrote poetics that explicitly challenged heterosexism and heteropatriarchy. Black lesbians articulate full, deep, and intimate connections between women—or by another name, practice decolonial love.

[225] From *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 29; Diaz quoted in 2012 interview with Moya.

Conclusion

Cheryl Clarke offers us a decolonial future. Her life work has been dedicated to subverting and eradicating all systems of oppression—namely imperialism, heterosexism and heteropatriarchy—while at the same time, she is a representative for those of us who live at the *shoreline*, *crucial* and *alone* (Lorde 1978) because we name ourselves lesbian. Clarke's prose and poetics are connected sources of power that enable readers to envision a world otherwise. In these other worlds, Clarke believes that Black lesbians can name themselves without judgement or death. In these other worlds, Blackness is not a marker of fatality or inferiority. In these worlds otherwise, decolonization is not only an aspiration but a lived reality and experience. In these worlds otherwise, a name builds coalitions across differences, not barriers to surmount or markers of seclusion. In these worlds otherwise, loving women and loving Black women especially, is not an exception to the rule but habitual praxis. In these worlds otherwise, difference is not immobilizing. In these worlds otherwise, love is abundant and reciprocal.

CODA: Our Dead Behind Us

In the previous chapters, I meditate on the work of three authors, Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke, to describe what I have coined as Black lesbian aesthetics. When the Combahee River Collective was formed in 1974, at the tail end of the Black Arts Movement, Black lesbian writers who were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movements, published essays, novels, speeches, prose, and poetry because they desired to be the authors of their own histories. Self-definition meant creating languages, practices, and forming kinships, both domestic and transnational, that reflected a particular kind of plurality that was historically rendered invisible or subsidiary to collective struggle. Plurality, that is, moving beyond a concept of singularity around Blackness, has been a historical fight;[226] yet, Black lesbian feminist writers articulated a queer kind of love and kinship that my project has endeavored to underscore. From the Black Arts Movement, Black lesbians understood the value of getting their intellectual thought out into the world. I have named the proliferation of literature that was published after the CRC was formed an aesthetic to track what I believe are shared articulations and visions of liberation. Through Audre Lorde's teachings about poetry and aesthetics during her visiting professorship in Berlin, I understand that Black lesbian aesthetics seeks to obfuscate, trouble, and eradicate the concept of human, and instead, propose alternatives for being. Being in community, being in love, being in struggle together, for Black lesbians, has meant that the differences among us can be useful if acknowledged and revered.

Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke were comrades. Their professional connections have been captured in images, interviews, and their published works. Collectively, what all three writers offer us are critical insights about the body, its practices, and our relations to each other.

[226] From Anna Julia Cooper to the Gay Liberation Movements of the 60s,70s, and 80s, to the current movements for Black lives.

Cheryl's critique of the coloniality of power stands alongside her poetics of corporeal freedom. Lorde's uses of the erotic is an anti-capitalist meditation. Through her, the connection between flesh and body are restored—Black women's bodily autonomy, its afterlife, is given narrative. For Audre Lorde, production is not in service of the state; reproduction is made possible by the careful attention we give our work and life pursuits—romantic, platonic, political, and otherwise. Reproduction is also made possible through queer copulation. Pat Parker subverts and expands what it means to be an outlaw. Through style of dress, through her own sermon, masculinity's patriarchal ordering of things is challenged. Parker's physical body reflects the utility of contradiction. In speech, she sermonizes her poetry, and in dress, wearing all black is a symbol of her lawlessness. Her fugivity in appearance and speech reflects her awareness that she cannot be confined by gender performances nor orthodoxy. Parker's proximity to whiteness is complicated, though. Alongside her critique of white supremacy, in her intimate, or rather internal dealings with whiteness, she alludes to a kind of protection that accompanies that kind of relation. Through each writer, we understand the difficulty of relationality; yet, liberation, the imperative nature of it, has forced them to move through difference.

Early Sightings of Autopoiesis?

When Barbara Smith first wrote "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" in 1977, improving the material conditions that make work possible were central to her call to action. Smith discusses the ways in which the politics and practices of literature are interwoven, underscoring that who we cite, remember, and care for are personal and political choices. Smith writes, "The conditions that coalesce into the impossibilities of this essay have as much to do with politics as with the practice of literature…For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered" (21). Smith published this essay the same year that the Combahee River Collective

Statement was birthed. After politically mobilizing, Smith, with assistance from Black Feminists and Women of Color Feminists like Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Beverly Smith, among many others formed Kitchen Table Press in 1981. In her recollection of Kitchen Table Press's formation, Smith writes,

> In October 1980, Audre Lorde said to me during a phone conversation, "We really need to do something about publishing." I enthusiastically agreed and got together a group of interested women to meet in Boston on Halloween weekend, when Audre and other women from New York were in town to do a Black women's poetry reading. It was at that meeting that Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was born…. A year later we were officially founded. We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grass roots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class privilege to do the work we need to do… On the most basic level, Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us.[227]

Kitchen Table Press went on to publish the first anthology that centered Black feminism, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, the first anthology that gathered the voices of third-world women, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, the first anthology about Black Women's Studies, *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, and Audre Lorde's seminal essay about coalition building across difference, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities*. Additionally, Cheryl Clarke notes, "My 1982 poem, 'Of Althea and Flaxie,' from my first book of poems, *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women*, published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press…I still want to thank Cherríe Moraga, the late Gloria Anzaldua, Barbara Smith, and Elly Bulkin for publishing my early writing and involving me in the lesbian-feminist movement" (ix).[228] Clarke states that the publication of her first book, made possible by Kitchen Table, "established a mythology genealogy of black lesbian love and solidified my reputation as a black lesbian poet (ix).

[227] Barbara Smith, "A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," 11.
[228] Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, ix.

In speaking of Kitchen Table's generational salience, Alexis Pauline Gumbs recalls in her dissertation, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves," that Kitchen Table was a "transformative model…an alternative site for the means of literary production." (445). When I was first introduced to "autopoiesis," definitively, I understood the word as a self-creating self-organizing system—a system that is capable of reproduction—a living system that is capable of maintaining itself by not only creating its own parts but capable of renewal. I developed a deeper understanding of autopoiesis through the work of Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Max Hantel offers crucial insights about Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis in his essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Human." Hantel writes, "Autopoiesis repositions the observer, the object of observation and the experience of truth, imagining a circular and self-perpetuating relationship in which 'seeing for oneself' is not simply to adjudicate reality but to experience it and make sense of it through the same domain of the seeable and sayable that defines 'oneself' and is, in turn, partially created by 'oneself' (62). Hantel goes on to note that autopoiesis evidence how "liminal subjects" (Wynter) can "conjugate alternative imaginaries that open a relationship to a world-otherwise" (62). My research on Black lesbian life and the contours of Black lesbian literature has been a decade long pursuit. I chose to underscore the relationship between Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke because their relations between each other were foundational to their Black lesbianism. They served as vestibules to each other, and Cheryl, among the last living of this cohort of writers, has cared for their work even in their physical absence. Seeing Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke, among other writers named in my project, as part of a particular lineage that outgrew the margins they were placed in has now led me to further understand this coming together as a paradigm of autopoiesis. These Black lesbian writers were attempting at the heretical by forming coalitions across difference, creating the conditions for their work to exist, which would also mean creating conditions for living. I developed the concept of Black lesbian aesthetics to underscore how

praxis is the juncture between aesthetics and politics. Black lesbian practice shows us how to create the material conditions for survival and liberation.

I place Cheryl Clarke's work at the end of my project to emphasize her role as caretaker of both Parker and Lorde after their death, and to underscore her salience to Black lesbian communities. I also end my project with a brief history of *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*, which was made possible because of my relationship with Cheryl, to illuminate another paradigm of an autopoietic moment—Cheryl offered a vestibule for me to travel through, a vestibule that connected me to other Black lesbians. *MOR* attempts to gather multiple histories of Black lesbian writing, not only attending to the call to action that Barbara Smith names in her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," but to also continue the work of my foremothers—the work of renewal, the work of sustaining, the work of recognition, the work of remembering.

A New Science of The Word

Wynter's, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism" affirms that, "The proposal I am making is that such a discipline can only emerge with an overall rewriting of knowledge, as the re-enacting of the original heresy of a *Studia,* reinvented as a science of human systems, from the liminal perspective...whose revelatory heresy lies in their definition of themselves away from the Chaos roles in which they have been defined…" (43). Wynter's call has guided both my dissertation and recently published book, *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*. I worked on and through both projects concomitantly. Whereas my dissertation, *Black Lesbian Aesthetics*, evidences an aesthetic movement that was birthed after the formation of the Combahee River Collective, *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*, proves that an actual Black Lesbian Radical Tradition exist. Black lesbians have one of the longest histories of defining themselves against the chaos that Wynter underscores above. And so, both projects are an offering that seeks to reveal the salient languages and practices of a body of people who have been situated at the threshold.

The Brief History of *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*

One of *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought's (MOR)* creation stories was my understanding of the poem, "Recreation" by Audre Lorde; my awareness that Black lesbians attempt to thwart capitalism through literary form sexual practice, queer kinship, pleasure, and creation. Knowing this, while pursuing my MA and PhD (2013-2021), I began assigning their work alongside the mandated, varied editions of the *Norton Anthology* and other canonical texts. While I was required to teach from certain texts and underscore the same historical narratives and lived experiences, these chasms were filled with my attempts to queer the canon. I assigned works like *Rachel*, "Suzie Q," Succulent *Heretic*, *No Language Is Neutral*, the *Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* among others, and the dialogue between my students and myself really shaped what I describe as the profundity of Black lesbian thought. In "Recreation," Lorde says that her work and the love she makes are essential to her living, not connected to profitability but necessity...that approach to *MOR* made its inception possible. Creating that distance between production for capital and production for *being* was central to me, and I think Black lesbians teach us how to scrutinize our input and output, assessing the modalities that make both possible. I was unaware that my excerpts and PDFs would someday be archived in one artifact. I desired to nuance Blackness and Black Feminism. Historically, Black lesbians have named themselves third world women, connecting their struggles and visions for worlds otherwise to the Caribbean, the African diaspora, and North America. I view this kind of bridge work as one route to aspire towards and/or be under the tutelage of, and I think *MOR* is one exemplar of those shared histories and connections.

Two interviews I conducted in 2018 with Cheryl Clarke, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, also shaped the creation of *MOR*. To be quite honest, I was in search of validation. Black lesbians in my community were maligned and killed, and in the academy, rendered invisible. Cheryl affirmed in our interview that, "without Black lesbians, we wouldn't have choices," and that statement from her

continued to reverberate through me, and shape why I revere this work. In "A Litany for Survival," Lorde is contemporaneous with Cheryl: "For those of us who cannot indulge/the passing dream of choice." I think my impetus to pay homage to the oeuvre of Black lesbian thought is because they have made life possible for all of us. There is this bifurcated approach to their praxis. It is even evident generationally. In one instance, Black lesbians scrutinize the empire (Lorde's, "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," Grimké's *Rachel*, Parker's, "Don't let the fascists speak," Hansberry's "Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*: An American Commentary"), while concomitantly, seeking to build the world anew. There is no arrival, but we do get to choose who we are and how we show up. And so, *MOR* is really a thank you card and love letter. Thank you, Angelina, for writing even in isolation so that *our dreams wouldn't reflect the death of yours*. Black lesbians insist that what Ashon Crawley has named as "otherwise possibility"— this notion, this knowing, imbues their work. Through Black lesbians, we develop the language and movement for alternatives to the coloniality of power.

I took two courses during the first years of my graduate studies. In one course, we researched the condition of being human and womxn of color feminisms, in the other course, we studied Black Feminist epistemology. These courses gave me the lens to understand how this category of human must be scrutinized and how Black women experience a particular kind of oppression, an oppression designed to render ourselves and our work unintelligible. With these new ways of knowing, I began to track how Black lesbians were dehumanized, and how from that dehumanization, they were moved to create political theories, queer kinships, new languages, practices and forms of intimacy that were not reliant on acknowledgement nor recognition from nation-state (*Pedagogies of Crossing*, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, and CRC statement).

In studying the genealogy of the Black Lesbian Radical Tradition, from folks like Angelina Weld Grimké, Mamie Burrill, Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, doris davenport, to Cathy

Cohen, Bettina Love, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, there were recurring patterns between these thinkers and the five parts of *MOR* reflects an attempt to archive these historical, spatial, and embodied discourses, so that we can learn from their varied and sometimes homogenous languages. I truly believe Audre Lorde when she said that there are no new ideas, there are only new ways of making them felt, and so, I am building upon the work of *The Black Woman*, *Words of*, *Afrekete*, and *does your mama know*—texts that I believe demonstrate how Black women have sought and still seek to set the record straight about their own conditions of being, or as Toni Cade put it, "If we women are to get basic, then surely the first job is to find out what liberation for ourselves means, what work it entails, what benefits it will yield." *MOR* endeavors to trace the trajectories of liberation, from self to community, through Black lesbian thought.

I think that Lorde's poetics of the erotic, how she insists that the erotic is praxis, something to be exercised, needed to be archived again. Celebrating the erotic, to mark one's pleasure, means that "my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed for-bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered."[229] This mantra was a measure for me, and I wanted to map the genealogy of thinkers who aspired toward that kind of satisfaction and wholeness. In the love we make and the work we do, what does the personal and collective energy toward achieving something, climax or finished product, look like? **Part I** attempts to add color, texture, flavor, and language to the uses of the erotic.

The underside of marking one's pleasure is this awareness that Black women die because they exist. **Part II** honors the life of the CRC statement, tracing at one instance, some of the most radical thinkers of the 70s and 80s, but also tracing a genealogical refrain, "Ain't I A Woman" from Sojourner Truth in chapter I of *WOF* to Kai Davis in part II of *MOR*. I am attempting to reckon

[229] "Uses of The Erotic" 55.

with and highlight how Black lesbian thinkers have responded to their death. What frames do they construct for us to see their response to imperialism and erasure? What are the ways through?

Through Black lesbian writing, I understand that one's choice to be visible in this space is a process of metamorphosis. Coming out of whatever you were born bound to; stepping into whoever you want to be. Black lesbian writers have described this movement from enclosure to being in myriad ways, so **Part III**, is a snapshot of the discourse between the Caribbean and North America, from the pre-Harlem Renaissance to Black Lives Matter. When you shift what else shifts with you? For some writers, it's love, for others, it's language.

Spiritual practices have always anchored Black folks. **Part IV** seeks to foreground the poetics of the sacred practices that Black lesbians have made available. I was raised Baptist and believed that words had the power to heal broken flesh. Through deep study, I learned that Black lesbian writers were the authors of their own salvation and had actually constructed sacred practices that were available to the wayward. Recognizing that the fall of empire, past, present, and future, necessitates praxis through connection to the divine, **Part IV** endeavors to reveal the myriad appearances of devotion, from bedroom to church pew, from land to water.

I think that Black folks' survival remains precarious because our death necessitates the life of empire. Black lesbians have known this home truth for generations. Concomitantly, they have also created alternative modes of care and kinship. Their language about survival, how life is made possible by caring for ourselves and each other is underscored in **Part V**. There is an aesthetic and rhythmic quality that imbues the language of futurity mapped out by these writers. They not only respond to and subvert colonial machinations, their ways of knowing provide the necessary sustenance for the long duration of a yet-to-be realized future.

Dionne Brand notes that one of the major propositions of poetry is that it can turn language over. Audre has said this in *Sister Outsider*, too. I center poetry in *MOR* because I want readers to

experience the myriad ways Black lesbians have been the authors of their own experiences, subverting and recreating sound, syllable, and praxis.

One of the more difficult tasks that involved constructing the anthology was my awareness of Black Lesbian Thought as something uncontainable, or fungible, if you will. I believe that their ways of being, knowing, and feeling, are heretical practices worthy of deep study. In Sylvia Wynter's "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," she writes, "The proposal I am making is that such a discipline can only emerge with an overall rewriting of knowledge, as the re-enacting of the original heresy of a *Studia,* reinvented as a science of human systems, from the liminal perspective...whose revelatory heresy lies in their definition of themselves away from the Chaos roles in which they have been defined…" (43). I believe that Black Lesbians have one of the longest and sustained histories of defining themselves away from the chaos Wynter speaks of. What makes their work particular is that their vision of futurity involves everyone, not just those who name themselves lesbian. This work against homogeny, this work towards plurality, is where the salience lies for me. And so, when I thought of the haptic, especially from the purview of Spillers's work, I also remembered that alongside this history of Black women's enslavement, Black lesbians were developing the languages and practices for how one might rediscover sensation and feeling; and, in this rediscovery, Black lesbians have constructed new knowledges, interpretations, and ways of being. *MOR* is just a snapshot of these kinds of heretical movements.

Black lesbianism is not a new phenomenon. I hope that *MOR* underscores that this long history of intellectual production by Black lesbian writers can be further understood as a literary movement. Akasha (Gloria) T. Hull documented that in *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, Catherine McKinley and Joyce Delaney documented that in *Afrekete* in the 90s. Grimké and Alice Moore are not addendums to the Harlem Renaissance, their work was integral to that artistic movement, and the same can be said about the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movements, and the work of

Pat, Cheryl, and Audre. And, as it pertains to continuity, I want readers to know that, for example, the figure of the bulldagger or butch can be traced generationally—from Lucille Bogan to Pat Parker, to Janae Johnson. I view these archived stories in *MOR* as constellations that hopefully engender a curiosity that will lead you to these writers' oeuvre.

There are no new ideas, there are only new ways of making previous ideas perceptible. I inherited this work. I spent time in Alice Walker's, Angelina Weld Grimké's, Audre Lorde's papers, I read books that are no longer in print, I studied footnotes, and conducted interviews because I desired to honor the legacy of this work. I was not invested in discovering what people have not yet seen; I was most indebted to bringing to bear what has already been. And this approach took care and time. This slow movement and slow reading are practices that allowed me to study this large oeuvre of Black Lesbian Thought. And so, I think the work continues by doing it. Teaching it, reading it, sharing it, learning from it, growing because of it, are all approaches that help ensure the life of the work.

I believe that Black lesbians continue to emerge and will continue to appear in each epoch and discourse through language, sound and visual arts because there is something that we need to know, see, feel, or hear. My hope is that we continue to prepare ourselves to receive these messages. I think it's less about what Black lesbian thought has to offer and more so a question of how we can become more attuned to their languages and practices? And, in harmony, what new world can we build? The answer to this question will exceed my time on earth but I believe it's a worthy provocation.

Future Directions

My dissertation project argued that Black lesbian writers have a bifurcated approach in their work that allows them to address both pleasure and sedition. Completing a dissertation while compiling and publishing an anthology that gathers three centuries of Black lesbian writing provided

me with a profound insight about the contours of this literature. In the Summer of 2018, I sat with Audre Lorde's work for 45 days. In a folder titled, "Miscellaneous Poems and Drawings," I located three images that Lorde constructed by hand. Black feminist critic Tina Campt recently published an article titled, "Black visuality and the practice of refusal," which offers crucial insights about how Lorde's art can be framed. In the essay, Campt notes, "'practicing refusal' names the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as well as what it means to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles…black visuality…constitutes a practice of refusal" (80). Campt offers two insightful definitions that make Lorde's art more legible. Phonic substance is "the sound inherent to an image; one that defines or creates it, that is neither contingent upon nor necessarily preceding it; not simply a sound played over, behind or in relation to an image; one that emanates from the image itself" (81). Refusal, as Campt defines it, is

> a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e., a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.[230]

I understand Lorde's images as a triptych because they were grouped together in one folder, and when placed together, articulate a narrative of a repeated history of fascism and imperialism, while concomitantly, expressing and encouraging how a life might be made possible in spite of empire, and perhaps, after its fall. The colors that Lorde uses in her images have sonic resonances that compliment her messages about calamity and futurity. While Lorde has frequently named herself Black Lesbian Mother Warrior Poet, especially while in North America, when Lorde teaches abroad in Germany, "artist" is another articulated embodiment.[231] Lorde's work has always been anti-

[230] Campt, 83.
[231] Please see, *AUDRE LORDE: Dream of Europe,* edited by Mayra A. Rodriguez Castro.

imperialist, and I think her art will evidence a more pronounced articulation of her politics. I look forward to examining the artistic and poetic contours of Lorde's work that lead us to more capacious and radical practices of pleasure and sedition.

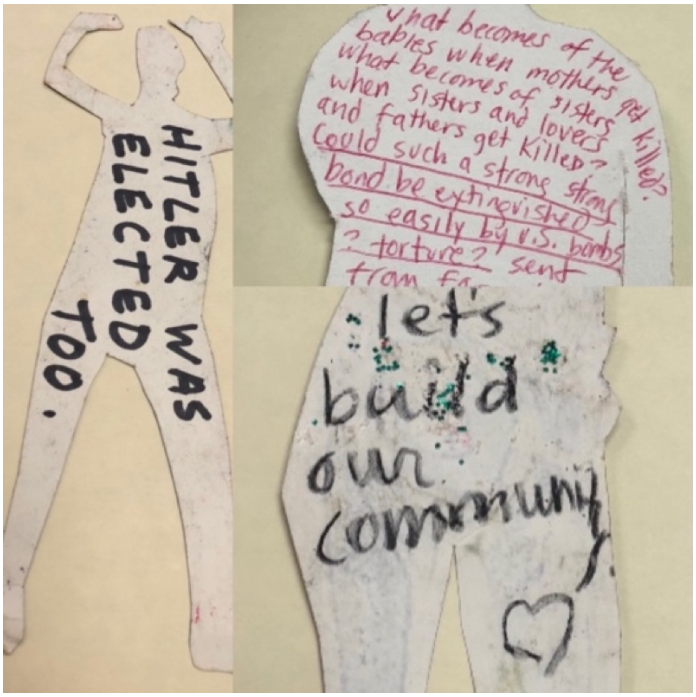

Figure 6: Hitler was elected too. What becomes of the babies when mothers get killed? When sisters and lovers and fathers get killed? Could such a strong strong bond be extinguished so easily by U.S bombs? and torture? Sent from far…let's build community.
Images courtesy of Spelman College Women's Research and Resource Center, Box 19, Folder 12.

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