University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

4-18-2012

"Poetry Was There Between Us": Women's Erotic Literature as Sites of Resistance and Integrity

Anna Maria Esquivel

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

Esquivel, Anna Maria, ""Poetry Was There Between Us": Women's Erotic Literature as Sites of Resistance and Integrity" (2012). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 484.
https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/484

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khggerty@memphis.edu.

“POETRY WAS THERE BETWEEN US”: WOMEN’S EROTIC LITERATURE AS SITES OF RESISTANCE AND INTEGRITY

by

Anna Maria Esquivel

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

The University of Memphis

May 2012

Copyright © 2012 Anna M. Esquivel
All rights reserved

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It took a village to raise this dissertation. I would like to thank its residents.

To Dr. Martin, Dr. Menson-Furr, Dr. Mickalites, and Dr. Hall for agreeing to see me through this. I couldn’t have asked for a better committee. And to Dr. Verner Mitchell for being an honorary member and providing moral support all along the way.

To Mom, Dad, Charlie, and Andrew for having radical and unwavering faith that I would make it through this. The answer, finally, is yes, I am finished. For now…

To Dr. Valentine Moulard-Leonard for her fearless philosophy, trust, and guidance. For her friendship and mentorship that opened my heart, my mind, and my world.

To Dr. Wanda Rushing for being a mentor and a friend, for some of the most fruitful conversations I had about my work, and for encouraging me as an academic, a scholar, and as a teacher.

To Sarah for her poise and patience. For sending me into fits of hysterical laughter just when I needed it. For pretending to proofread my manuscript when she knew all I needed was shameless affirmation.

To Robin for keeping me grounded—and for lunches and writing and positive thoughts. For road trips and long talks about imaginary things.

To Connie C. for walking me around Paris and for knowing when I needed love and laughter. To Connie E. for walking me every day and for knowing when I needed to go to the park.

To all of my friends in Memphis and Arkansas. They were my lifeline.

To all of my colleagues at the University of Memphis. We were all in it together, and I couldn’t have asked for a better group of people to go through this with.

ABSTRACT

Esquivel, Anna Maria. Ph.D. The University of Memphis. May 2012. “Poetry Was There Between Us”: Women’s Erotic Literature as Sites of Resistance and Integrity. Major Professor: Reginald Martin.

Erotic literature remains a blind spot in modern or contemporary literary criticism, even though sex and sexual identity is a widely accepted component of individual, social, and cultural identity. However, a careful investigation of erotic literature can provide valuable insight into how we constitute ourselves as subjects. Based on an understanding of the erotic and erotic literatures as sites of resistance, bonding, and belonging, I explore how the erotic—and consequently texts and ideology that privilege the erotic—remains a powerful site for negotiating power, constructing identity, and forming new intimacies. The primary modalities of the erotic are difference and interconnectedness. It is through this modality that erotic narratives critique the socio-historical violations and fissures of identity and subjectivity, yet simultaneously promote re-membering through the flows and processes of knowing and becoming, all while inhabiting integrity.

Connecting these definitions of eroticism with the concept of “integral space” and the politics of integrity, I argue that eroticism and erotic literature map the processes by which subjects connect and bond through difference. Beginning with the ways in which erotic literature uses silences and absences in its texts, I explore the possibility of a prediscursive body paradoxically located in the language of erotic literature. While erotic theories explore the ways in which naming and speaking the deeply private, silent spaces of oppression, trauma, and abuse are powerful acts of resistance to cultural and social oppression, works by Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde, as well as Kalamu ya Salaam and Etheridge Knight, suggest that silence, too, is a powerful force that leads to wholeness, healing, and connecting. Further, I investigate discursive and nondiscursive strategies in the erotic novel *The Proof of the Honey* by Salwa Al Neimi and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and how these literatures employ body, voice, and metaphor as part of the erotic project. Each of these texts, I argue, reclaim the erotic space where individual subjectivities can meet each other, explore sexual boundaries, transgress those boundaries safely, and challenge the social, political, and historical limitations of identity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
Introduction	Articulating the Erotic	1
1	"Difficult to Control": Eroticism, Identity, and the Postmodern Project	14
2	"I Was Body Alone": The Erotic as a Site of Resistance and Integrity	45
3	"Isn't This Counter-Revolutionary?": Discourse and Silence in African American Erotic Texts	86
4	"It's Your Own Destruction You're Singing": Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* and the Erotic Journey	116
Conclusion	Perpetual Unfolding	145
Works Cited		150

INTRODUCTION

Articulating the Erotic

Not long before I began writing, but after I had gathered enough material to think about how I would enter into this conversation about “the erotic,” a friend inquired, “Is there a ‘*the* erotic’?” This friend is also a very successful and renowned sociologist, and anyone who has ever studied sociology or read from a sociological text knows that sociologists privilege precision of language and methodology. Of course in literature, language flourishes, it metaphorizes, it plays, it obfuscates, and as a practitioner of literature I stuttered in the face of what must have been the most critical question I would have to face as I set out on this project. With as much confidence as I could muster, I said, “Yes. Of course!” She wasn’t buying it—my confidence. I wasn’t entirely sure I was buying it either. This question continues to haunt me. It is a question that I faced from most helpful audience members at conferences. Fellow panelists and I hesitated in the face of the most basic of questions that many must have when listening to academics wax poetic about “eroticism” and “desire,” such as “What is eroticism?” and “What is desire?”

Is there a “*the* erotic”? Not only was it an obvious question that must be addressed before I could even begin to put the pieces of this project together, but these questions also cut to the core of *why* I wanted to try to answer these questions. So often I wondered if I wasn’t hiding behind the word “erotic” to avoid having to answer for wanting to explore “love.” But not just “love” as an ideal—love as agency, love as power, love as a legitimate component to postmodern subjectivity. Over and over, I saw postmodern theories mention the erotic in passing, as part of a counter-discourse to those master narratives of logic and reason, but rarely in scholarship did I see literatures and theories that addressed the erotic (sensuality, sexuality, love) as *a major* component to subject formation, without it being reduced to a site of violation and oppression. So, then, is there a "*the* erotic"? When I first surmised an affirmative with such gusto to my sociologist friend, I was met with a knowing grin—a grin that I have since learned so well means "Prove it." This dissertation seeks to do just that.

Erotic at the Margins

If I am to posit that there is a "the erotic," then what should follow would be a long and careful excavation of eroticism, desire, eros, erotism, and sexuality from the annals of the philosophical cannon, from Freud to Kristeva, Bataille to Foucault, Marcuse to Deleuze. Certainly I started down that road several times, sure that no discussion of the erotic would be complete without the inclusion of these purveyors of theory. But that was not the road I was on. Two years ago, when I began my foray into this topic, I was just being introduced to Black Erotica. In an anthology of African American erotic writings, *Erotique Noire,* I came across one of Audre Lorde's most anthologized essays, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Not only was this a transformative moment for me, but as I have continued my work on the erotic, it is difficult to ignore that much contemporary scholarship on the erotic is owed to this particular essay. Lorde situates the erotic in postmodern discourse, and she insists that being situated is one of the fundamental characteristics of the erotic. Lorde did what the previous authors did not—theorized from the margin.

While *Erotique Noire* is one of many volumes in which Lorde's essay has been reproduced, that I found her first in this particular volume is important. This history of

African American literature is the history of the struggle from the margin, the fight both against and to gain entry into the center. But Lorde's words, and many of the others that shape my project, were the first not only African American works but feminist works as well that showed me how powerful the margin was. These writers and scholars invited me back to the margin, giving me permission to write from there, to begin the conversation there, and to invite others to meet me there. Lorde took the discussion of the erotic from mainstream postmodernism and rooted it at the nexus of the margins where sexuality, gender, race, and class meet. I had forgotten how much of my identity had been forged at this intersection—or maybe I had never realized it—and she reminded me.

I also found more and more people at the margins. It should be no surprise that much of my work will be informed by Black Feminism, queer theory, Chicano and Latino feminists, and a number of other theorists, writers, and scholars who may fit with any one of a number of categories—but would rather not. These writers articulated for me a type of marginality that not only "made sense," so to speak, but also made even more complex what I already understood identity to be. I situated myself, on their invitation, somewhere in the margins not too far from rural poverty but farther away from my Hispanic roots than I should have been and even closer to the margins of whiteness than where most might place me. The view from this place was difficult to process, and my reaction to this location was at first visceral and emotional rather than intellectual. It frightened me. It was as if someone had turned the lights out and I had to feel my way around this space. This new space challenged my perceptions, clarified feelings, and, ironically, illuminated much of what I had already known, even if it was forcing me to understand "knowing" differently.

I am reminded of Ed Bullins's play "The Theme is Blackness." It is a short play in which an audience, mostly white, is invited into the theater space, and then they are shut in and the lights are turned off. They sit in darkness for approximately twenty minutes. Bullins's play is an expression of the constitution of blackness as a means of emphasizing how our experiences are dissimilar; there is an underlying message of the failings of universalism. I imagine that what happens in the space of that twenty minutes is the realization of the ways in which we rely on the familiar and the discursive to articulate experience, and how these experiences are deeply entrenched in dominant ideologies. I imagine that in the space of this darkness is an opportunity, often missed, to connect with that "deep, ancient knowledge" that Lorde suggests immerses us in the chaos of our strongest desires. It is difficult to articulate from this place, but it is a project that is essential to connecting to this immanent knowledge.

When someone turned off the lights for me—Lorde, Aurora Levins Morales, Gloria Anzaldúa, Amber Hollibaugh, Etheridge Knight, and Giovanni—it was not that my eyes adjusted to the dark. It does not seem to work that way at the margins. What happens is that a fire is lit from within and begins radiating from the inside out. My body vibrates with a sensuality that guides me. Yet, I hesitate to use the word "illuminates;" the darkness is quite important. The darkness makes it difficult for me to rely on what I have always known. It defamiliarizes language—it is amazing how much language relies on sight.

However, I have to be very aware that I have too easy an access to the center, which has a tendency to appropriate these margins and differences, and to reify these spaces, fix them, and to reinscribe them into the hegemony. But the erotic allows me the fluidity with which to connect these spaces without having to collapse one into another. They can exist simultaneous without having to be reconciled. However, the erotic does ask that I put down (temporarily) those tools from the center to which I hold on so tightly—those that I had inherited (temporarily) from the center—and to use the tools available to me here at the margins. The genius of Lorde is that she never fully resigns the master's tools. Close examinations of her texts reveal a clever wielding of the Marxism that she had inherited form the Black Power movement, of an understanding of difference reminiscent of the poststructuralists who had helped her dismantle hegemonic authority. Nevertheless, Lorde and these literatures brought me face to face with my own privilege and the margins demanded that I abdicate it. My privilege disintegrated in the face of my own marginality—of being the daughter of a Southerner and a Southern Californian; of being brought up in the Arkansas Delta with a Hispanic, Catholic name; of being blonde hair, green-eyed, and conspicuously unilingual, while my cousins, also with blond hair and green eyes, called themselves Chola and teased me about my whiteness. This is what I found when the lights went out. I did not experience Lorde's blackness or Bullins's. I did not recognize Morales there at the margin of Puerto Rican and Jewish or Amber Hollibaugh at the intersection of ex-sex worker and poor, white trash. Nor did I recognize even Gloria Anzaldúa, Mexican-American. My experience was different, and they explained to me the power in that.

What I did find, though, when I began to open my eyes, were the faint lines that had been left as I walked from their marginal spaces to my own. Their works are the maps of their spaces, their connections between their identities and those of the others with whom they engage when they open their eyes and begin to use language to map their experiences. When I turned the lights back on, I found language again, but I had a different relationship to it. I found that I was situated differently from when the lights went out. I had been given access to a new way of knowing, and with this knowing I began to trace my own connections. Lorde invited me to the margins, Bullins shut off the lights, and Black Erotica taught me how to use my hands. This dissertation is, hopefully, a sketch of those connections as I begin to dialogue with these writers and scholars and to articulate the answer to the question, "Is there a *the* erotic?"

Definitions of the Erotic

There are as many "erotics" as there are people willing to engage in erotic connections. Eroticism is space of resistance at the margin where those in touch with the difference engage with what they desire internally and then connect those desires socially in ways that validate their subjectivity, their agency, and their humanity. However, it cannot be done in a social or cultural environment whose sole purpose is the maintenance of status quo and hegemony, so it is no accident that these spaces are explored, defined, and mapped in erotic literature. It is no accident that we begin the discussion with Audre Lorde and other women and men of color, who stand in a marginal space, inviting us in. And it is from the exploration of all of these various erotics that *the* erotic emerges.

What follows are the major definitions of "erotic" or "eroticism" that have informed my study:

1. Lorde: "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…Power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge" ("Uses" 53); "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings 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" (54); "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered" (55).

2. Morales: The erotic is "intimacy, which ultimately requires vulnerability and surrender…[Sex] is part of our aliveness" (118); It is "our deep pleasure in living…that bright, hot center of pleasure and trust" (119); wounded eroticism is stunted sexuality "ricocheting from intense excitement to absolute numbness, from reckless trust to impenetrable guardedness…The unsteady rhythms of fascination and disgust, obsession and revulsion through which we experience sex as evidence of what we know to be true" (117); the "place of intimate harm" (118).
3. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, from *Erotique Noire*: "Eroticism: The powerful life force within us from which spring desire and creativity and our deepest knowledge of the universe…Erotic: (adj.) concerning or arousing sexual desire or giving sexual pleasure" (DeCosta-Willis xxix).
4. Reginald Martin from *Dark Eros*: The erotic "is the urge towards Eros, itself…[it] pre-exists and post-exists all those within the powers of its boundary" (Martin xiv).
5. Oxford English Dictionary: Erotic: "adj. Of or pertaining to the passion of love; concerned with or treating of love; amatory" ("Erotic").

It was Lorde's definition that moved me, Morales's that made sense to me, and the others that made propelled me to a deeper understanding of the connections between all of these various erotics. Morales asks and answers the question, why reclaim erotic and sex specifically? It was at this moment that many of the pieces of my erotic puzzle began to come together. In fact, I had to keep coming back to this. At many points in this text, the erotic becomes a bit abstract as it is necessarily entrenched in ambiguities, irrationalities, and paradoxes. It is so because the erotic seeks to dismantle the master narratives about who we are and how we construct who we are in relation to each other which have traditionally been constructed by the voices of reason and logic. While reason and logic are not the culprits *per se*, they have been the tools used to discern, to discriminate, and to disintegrate subjectivity and identity. Of course, these tools have helped chipped away at a history of oppression and imperialism. By wielding these tools we are able to uncover those false binaries that harbor privilege and hierarchy. That has been an important step in a long process of cultural and historical recovery. However, each time these tools are wielded, I cannot help but imagine the wielder humming a mantra as she chips, chips, chips away: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 112).

Erotic Sexuality

The erotic represents the conditions for integrating our disintegrated identity, for realizing our subjectivity “in relation” to the other aspects of our lives, our worlds, and the people around us. But what is the link between the erotic and sexuality. Is the erotic just about sex? Is it about sex at all? Most of the theorists that articulate the erotic recognize that it is in sexual intimacy that we are most powerful and most vulnerable, and where we have the most at stake in our differences and in our sameness. Not only are we our most vulnerable in sex, but also in writing, in thinking, in our ideas, anything that we share with the world. Connecting to that world in a way that is both spiritual and visceral is erotic. These methods of reaching out to the world are also necessarily physical; erotic integrity and disintegration often happens bodily *and* psychically.

Understanding how sexuality has been used not only as a tool of violence but as a site of interconnectedness is a goal of literature and the theorists that follow. What these texts and, I hope, this project reveals is that sexuality in literature is not an either/or narrative. It is not either a violent and disintegrating site of abject individual or collective marginalization or the romanticized site of ultimate unification with and collapsing of one agency to another. Exploring the erotic as a critical theory or as a literary genre or narrative tool is a way to privilege the paradox of erotic sexuality as one in which individual abuses and collective abuses are two sides of the same patriarchal oppression, and is a way of both losing our ability to construct an identity outside of oppression as well as the means of finding the power to do so. Hegemony and counter-narratives often intersect in literature in moments of sexual and erotic tension, or in the spaces between the various aspects of our identities. These fissures expose the erotic as a life force, the "chaos" of the World, and it is overwhelming, disorienting, and potentially destructive, but also as ultimately healing, redemptive, creative, and connective.

A Brief Outline of the Project

In "Chapter 1: 'Difficult to Control': Eroticism, Sexuality, and the Postmodern Project," I review the literature of difference and identity in order to express how the erotic both arises from and engages with postmodern discourse and to demonstrate how the erotic is a critical tool in the negotiation of individual and social identity. Because they contest that the erotic is a potent, dynamic epistemological matrix, I argue that theorists who privilege the erotic are engaging in a methodology of identity-building and social bonding. In this chapter, I introduce Maria del Guadalupe Davidson's application of Gilles Deleuze's metaphor of "the fold" as a model of subject and identity formation at the margins. Valentine Moulard-Leonard's concept of "integral space" envisions a way of constructing identity through difference and a production of communities that draws upon Lorde's and Morales's concepts of integrity. Along with Davidson and Moulard-Leonard, Tasmine Lorraine's understanding of Deleuze's "concept" is a tool for understanding the way in which poetic language contributes to erotic subjectivity and is what makes it possible for literature to map the movements and connections of disintegrated postmodern identity. This chapter will explore the theoretical implications of understanding the erotic in terms of integrity and difference, and how those two seemingly paradoxical approaches to identity and bonding thrive in the space of the erotic.

"Chapter 2: 'I Was Body Alone': The Erotic as a Site of Resistance and Integrity," explores in more detail theories of the erotic and the ways in which literature works as a tool for articulating erotic intersubjectivity. This chapter explores the qualities of the erotic that make it not only a site of individual and social vulnerability, but also a very powerful site of resistance and possibility. I argue that power dynamics are an integral part of connecting through eroticism, and the ways in which difference plays a particularly crucial role in these power dynamics are further engaged. To ground this exploration of erotic power and erotic literature's articulations of this power, I rely on Salwa Al Neimi's erotic novel *The Proof of the Honey*, which intimately weaves sexual identity and with poetic expressivity. The novel shows the ways in which poetic language, and literature in general, can map the intensities of our creative identities as we succumb to the power of the erotic and begin to heal our sexual and cultural traumas by finding ways to recreate the intimacies of sexual unions and sociopolitical alliances.

Situating the exploration of erotic subjectivity at the intersection of sexuality, gender, and race, "Chapter 3: 'Isn't This Counter-Revolutionary?': Discourse and Silence in African American Erotic Texts" explores the ways in which African American erotic literature maps the movement between various aspects of sexual identity at the nexus of race and gender. The poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Kalamu ya Salaam, Etheridge Knight, and Audre Lorde are touchstones for my argument as these literatures are sites that resist discursive sexuality while reconstructing identity in the space of erotic intimacy. Because these authors insist on the integration of the psychic and physical spaces that are available during sexual communion, sex and sexuality are explored as thematic methodologies in these texts. The poems communicate erotic integrity through the words themselves but also in the nondiscursive spaces and moments carved out during the creative, expressive process.

Nondiscursive moments are a crucial mode of the articulation of the blues narrative. In "Chapter 4: 'It's Your Own Destruction You're Singing': Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* and the Erotic Journey," I explore the function of the blues as an articulation of erotic subjectivity. Integral to this argument is another Deleuzian concept articulated by Moulard-Leonard called "the refrain." The juxtaposition of silences and blues discourse creates pivotal moments in the erotic journey of the protagonist, Ursula Corregidora. Beginning from a space of sexual and psychological trauma, Jones's narrative, like Al Neimi's, constructs a map of the connections between the psychic and physical spaces of abuse experienced by Ursa. By constructing the text as one might articulate a refrain, Jones creates spaces of resistance in which Ursa can connect to the immanent knowledges of her and her loved ones and at the same time resist the dominant narratives that have had so much paralyzing power over her.

Formulating an Erotic Theory

It has been suggested that it is nearly impossible for theorists to posit a theory that was capable of incorporating the ambiguities and contingencies of difference across the various postmodern articulations of identity, because difference cannot be articulated in the abstract (Marcano 61). This project sets forth an examination of eroticism and "the erotic" that might help to formulate a way in which we could, in fact, begin to articulate difference, not from a theoretical stand point *per se*, but by tracing the lines of difference as they are communicated in literary texts, during the actual unfolding of the human narrative. I am certainly not suggesting that the only viable way to articulate theories of difference is to abandon theory or philosophy altogether. In fact, the theories of many philosophers and critics are invaluable to my own articulation of difference as it is manifested in sexuality and erotic literature. However, it is very telling that most of these theorists ground their theories and philosophies in the world of creative and non-traditional texts, whether it is prose, poetry, music, painting, or ethnographies.

While my position is not to argue for or against a gendered erotic as Lorde's definition would suggest, it is clear that she seeks to locate the erotic both as a life force—something that we are all capable of connecting with, and something that connects us but also privileges our own particular experience of it. She and other theorists throughout the text also situate the erotic in a feminine space. While I complicate this gendering of the erotic, I also take it for granted. The reason that erotic literature is so helpful in articulating the erotic is because it is a narrative that is universal in its particularities. It is storytelling and creating narratives that drive our subjectivities, but the erotic is a way to connect these subjectivities to each other. It is gendered insofar as it is the gendered, embodied, subject whose identity arises out of a concrete historical situation and is shaped by certain social and cultural forces. It is out of this paradox of particularized, historically affected identity that the ability to universalize an erotic condition arises.

In her chapter "The Difference that Difference Makes: Black Feminism and Philosophy," Donna-Dale L. Marcano articulates the postmodern paradox: "despite the body no longer being conceived as an obstacle to knowledge, the postmodern body, shattered by multiplicity, shape-shifting, and indeterminacy, also obscures the located, limited, inescapably partial, and always personally invested nature of human story making" (64). Reconnecting with and through the body and through visceral and immanent knowledge and storytelling is an underlying theme of this project. Finding ways to articulate what is nondiscursive and what defamiliarizes language and our fixed perceptions of each other is elemental to understanding how the erotic manifests in the construction of our identities. *The* erotic is this connective force, a healing space that exists in the fissures of the various dismantled aspects of our identity. It allows us to hold those pieces of identity together, even if temporarily, without foreclosing on the possibilities of reimagining ourselves in the context of new experiences, as part of a larger social discursive community, and in relation to one another.

CHAPTER 1

“Difficult to Control”: Eroticism, Identity, and the Postmodern Project

The desire to establish autonomy and agency for traditionally marginalized and subjugated groups and communities has lead to multivocal, multi-subjective understandings of the way identity functions in social and cultural spheres. Postmodern theory in its early inceptions held a strong opposition to norms and community, unity and consensus, which, Terry Eagleton warned, was politically catastrophic (15-16). He argues that “we have shifted from a national culture with a single set of rules to a motley assortment of sub-cultures, each one at an angle to the others” (17). We have a made room for the voices of the marginal and the peripheral and opened the door for subjective pluralism, but Eagleton cautions that in a world of multiple subjectivities, where the margin is so quickly ready to be appropriated by postmodernity, “what is central can alter over night” (20). But, as Eagleton suggests, “if this feels like a vacuum” of human history, “it may also present an opportunity. We need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our kind of world are bound to be multiple rather than monolithic” (21).

Certainly, a surge of theories have examined the subject from particular standpoints of experience and identity. These standpoints rose out of an opportunity to be heard or recognized in academic discourse, and the outpour was unprecedented. These theories and theorists brought to the forefront of the conversation issues of experience and difference. At the margins of academia came the voices of Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Ann duCille, Aurora Levins Morales, Gloria Anzaldúa, Joy Harjo, Uma Narayan, to name a few. However, the rise of these theories situated in political communities has been met with apprehension. There is concern that theories that privilege difference and multiplicity also require shared experience as a condition for establishing authority in questions of individual and social identity. These theorists are often accused of employing paradigms that rely on a type of essentialism or at least establish new dominant, even if multivocal, norms. In any case, there has been a tendency for gatekeepers of universalism and humanism to be concerned over the implications of incorporating the experience of difference as a means of shaping theoretical and political theories.

Nevertheless, many contemporary critics have called for sites or spaces of understanding and relating that can account for multiple experiences without privileging those experiences above others and without universalizing experience and identity, as has been the larger condition of patriarchal and imperialistic historical narratives.[1] These are sites of ongoing struggle and resistance in which subjectivity is constantly regenerated and resignified to constitute a larger matrix. In other words, as much as difference and unique individual and collective experiences are often integral to the subjectivities posited in these contemporary theories of identity, so is the desire to find ways of connecting those subjectivities. In many, if not most, of these theories some notion of the erotic or eroticism is engaged as a potentially powerful site, but also a site riddled with historical baggage, colonial implications, and the tendency to be exploited by discursive hegemonies. However, each of these theories names the erotic as a crucial aspect of subjectivity that employs difference and integrity to perpetually destabilize the sociopolitical regulation of identity.

Bell Hooks has written extensively of the relationships between the postmodern margin and center, in which the erotic identity plays an important role. Hooks critiques the vulnerability of the subject in the groundlessness of the postmodern, particularly in the face of the "repressive state" that took advantage of the political hopelessness and listlessness by "directing the critical voice primarily to a specialized audience" and rooting that critical voice in the "very master narratives that they challenged" ("Postmodern" 2480). Hooks has specifically addressed the tendency to theorize *about* the margin, and about those whose subjectivity primarily arises from existing at the margins of cultural and social discourse, using the very language that renders these theories inaccessible to those who are marginalized.[2] This has resulted in a type of romanticizing of alterity by the "center" and the construction of marginalized groups as sites of difference, rather than actual agents in the construction of their subjectivity.[3]

---

[1] Bell Hooks, Terry Eagleton, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, among others.

Nevertheless, the isolating and alienating postmodern critique of identity that scattered subjectivity across a disorganized and disenfranchised cultural program has led to a postmodern situation in which "many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by a shared circumstance" (Hooks 2481). This has left many marginalized groups looking for new counter-hegemonic discourses that both engage in the theoretical discussions while simultaneously trying to construct ways of resisting the hegemonic tendencies of theory-at-large (2480). Arguably, constructing theories that consider the variations of difference and experience that shape the cultural program is difficult even with the benefits of the poststructural tools that postmodernism has inherited. Nevertheless, these theories look for ways to connect these fragmented theories and attempt to theorize in a way that is both inclusive and at the same time situated in the complexities of difference. Where Lorde addresses the individual struggle to find community with oneself and another, Hooks is resituating the struggle to find similar connections between communities. Hooks sees an opportunity for resistance to alienating, totalizing modernity on a much larger scale positing a "radical postmodernism" that "calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition" (2481). The struggle for understanding, then, might then be traced to the lines of communication between the center and the margin or in the very construction of a paradigm that constructs the margin and the center.

---

[2] While Patricia Hill Collins addresses this broadly in the first section of her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*, this issue is addressed much more directly by Aurora Levins Morales in *Medicine Stories* in the chapter "Certified Organic Intellectual: On Not Being Postmodern" (67-71).

[3] Maria del Guadalupe Davidson's "Rethinking Black Feminist Subjectivity" discusses at length Black women as the center's constructed site of difference, but for a critical connection between constructing experience as a function of difference and the tendency of contemporary theory to dismiss claims of experience in favor of "universality," see Diane Perpich's "Black Feminism, Poststructuralism, and the Contested Character of Experience." This chapter sufficiently complicates the argument and examines the subtle intersections in these seemingly competing paradigms.

Difference and Identity

Much of the struggle for those who speak from the margins comes from the desire to articulate an epistemology that resists the traditional model of knowledge, which is monolithic and universal. These traditional models treat difference as an aspect of subjectivity that needs to be overcome or transcended as a way to reestablish connections among the various discourses of subjectivity. Hegemonic discourse has constructed difference as deviance and the body as depraved, and immanent knowledge has been silenced in favor of the transcendent logic of dominant ideologies. This has lead to a deep rift between our own subjectivity and the ways in which we generate knowledge in our daily lives. Morales writes,

> Oppression buries the actual lives of the real and contradictory people in the crude generalization of bigotry and punishes us for not matching the caricature, refusing all evidence of who we actually are in defiance of its tidy categories. It is a blunt instrument, used for bashing, not only our dangerous complexities, but also the ancient and permanent fact of our involvement with each other. (75)

Historical oppression creates the fissures between subjects and knowledges in order to keep us separate in our difference, and postmodern theories have revealed these rifts, exposing the mechanisms of historical and social discourse in the construction of the subject by uncovering the binary oppositions that plague the traditional theoretical narratives. The project for understanding subjectivity now requires making sense of subjectivity in the context of fragmented identity and dominant systems of power that thrive on disconnecting us from ourselves and each other; it requires examining knowledges that are constructed from specific and particular experiences and in conjunction with historical and social forces. Not only have these theories been posed by Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks, and Audre Lorde as part of the "coming to voice" of African American women in the academy, but it has also been a project of other women of color, as well as other radical feminists and queer theorists, both men and women and transgendered, who have taken up the call to establish connections through our differences. These theorists posit that difference is a primary source of power within us.

In Lorde’s and Morales’ work, difference functions as both a source of power and as a site of vulnerability. Difference makes us vulnerable because it situates us in a particular experience. This particularity can easily be reconstituted by poststructuralism as a static notion of identity, embedded in experience, which has been rendered untrustworthy by postmodern discourse because it betrays a connotation of essentialism or authenticity (Perpich 25). Nevertheless, that particular experience is not independent of historical and social forces producing categorical differences. Diane Perpich explains that “identity categories are in an important sense *products* of human interaction. They are not in the exclusive control of those who wear them or those who wield them; they are intersubjectively produced…the agent is an active creator but by no means the decisive interpreter of the narrative” of identity (28). The power of difference is that it revisits the authority of the subject insofar as the subject is an agent in the construction of identity; while the subject is constructed intersubjectively, difference acts as a mode of resisting socially constructed categories by challenging dominant narratives (29). Difference as a function of intersubjectivity allows us to look at knowledges produced at the particular and socially-situated level as “unfinished” (Collins 290); the epistemology of difference requires a variety of knowledges that are produced at the intersections of experiences and oppressions and at a social and historical nexus. The erotic, I argue, is then the condition for connecting these knowledges in strategic, political, and intimate alliances with one another. In the work of Collins, Anzaldúa, Hooks, and Hollibaugh, this is the function of difference in the erotic matrix.

The mystification of the intersubjectivity of identity and difference that occurs at the social level is the denial of the “testament to our own senses” (Lorde, “Difference”

202). This mystification alienates emotions, feelings, and bodily sense from the production of knowledge through the distortion and division of difference. It is because we are most vulnerable and most powerful in our differences that they can be used as bridges or barriers to ourselves and others. By disconnecting us from our ability to claim our differences and to be aware of them as strengths, the cultural-industrial system then reifies those differences for use for further divisions. Society creates a hierarchy of differences, and those whose differences are reinforced or considered positive are privileged while all others are considered “surplus.” Lorde writes: “Which differences are positive and which negative are determined for us by a society that has already been established, and so must seek to perpetuate itself…Each of these imposed definitions has a place not in human growth and progress but in human separation, for they represent the dehumanization of difference” (202). In fact, real individual and social differences are important. They exist as a fact of experience. Lorde explains,

> It is not the differences between us that tear us apart, destroying the commonalities we share. Rather, it is our refusal to examine the distortions which arise from their misnaming, and from the illegitimate usage of those difference which can be made when we do not claim them or define them for ourselves…the distortions are endemic in our society and we pour energy needed for exposing differences into pretending these difference do not exist, thereby encouraging false and treacherous connections. Or we pretend the differences are insurmountable barriers, which encourages a voluntary isolation. (202)

Lorde calls this the dehumanization of difference—distortions arise from their misnaming or in pretending they do not exist. We do not develop tools for using our own differences as springboards for creative change; we speak of deviance instead of difference. Deviance is a deviation from something—a norm is implied. Difference starts from within each multiple, plural points of a subject. Difference arises from an intersubjectivity defined not against *an other*, but with *another*.

In his book *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Kevin Floyd explains that sexual difference is one of the most profoundly divisive aspects of identity:

> Accounts [of the normalization of heterosexuality] included not only dominant ideologies…but also a range of critical knowledges that fall under the heading of social theory, knowledges that did not simply, innocuously exclude any account of sexuality but excluded it in such a way that a widespread social tendency to universalize heterosexuality by particularizing homosexuality was enforced. (5)

The reification of sexual difference works first by shutting off our senses so that we remain unable to distinguish difference and then using it as a force of oppression or as a homogenizer in order to appropriate that difference for the market. However, Floyd notes that it is the very particularization of difference that makes it a worrisome and often deemphasized aspect of identity: “Marxian tendency to deprioritize questions of sexuality when those questions were acknowledged at all, to subordinate these questions to other, more ‘total’ concern—to present sexuality, in other words, not only as ‘merely cultural’ but as always already localized and particularized” (5). Because difference, specifically sexual difference, arises in part out of a particular and concrete subjectivity, theories that seek to construct an underlying universal conceptualization of experience often dread the actualization of difference. Many theories, in some way or another, champion transcending differences as a way to establish connections. In other words, we must find the ways in which we are the same so that we can connect. In order to bond with each other in communities and in society, differences must be shunned. In fact, this is where poststructuralism has provided us with some unique insight into the way that this system works, even if the deconstruction of these discrete systems is as far as many of the poststructuralists were willing to go. By collapsing the individual into a system of manufactured culture and divorcing the individual from the desire for connecting and bonding, these dominant systems then are able to mystify difference. In this way, the differences we see in ourselves and others become alien and foreign against the backdrop of the "humanizing" forces of sameness and homogeneity that make identity only ever particular and discrete and therefore a threat to regulatory systems.

Lorde and other scholars who based the critical examination of difference in situated knowledge often took on not just the hegemonic forces of dominant culture, but also those theorists who were engaged in the fight for the margin as well, particularly feminist and postcolonial theorists. Lorde, Morales, Collins, Hollibaugh, Hooks, and Anzaldúa took on feminism specifically, illuminating the intersection of race, sexuality, culture as blind spot of feminist theory's emphasis on gender. Broadly, these scholars criticized feminism for using the "master's tools" to dismantle gender and expose the complexities of gender, while simultaneously leaving sexual, racial, and cultural differences to be re-cognized or transcended by those very discursive practices (Marcano 57). They accused feminism of relying on a rather simplistic analogy between gender, race, and sexual difference in order to include those aspects of identity for use with gender methodology. Lorde argued that "the failure…to recognize difference as a crucial strength is failure to reach beyond first patriarchal lesson" ("Master's Tools" 112). The result was both an open criticism of these tactics of mainstream feminist theory, but also an invitation on behalf of "the margin" for these feminists engage in a discourse of difference.[4]

However, in these critical discourses that engage difference as a crucial component of subjectivity, the concept of the universal has not disappeared. There is certainly still an effort to find matrices of shared truths and inclusive common pursuits, but the effort begins with partiality and a sense of the incompleteness of difference. The journey to wholeness begins with a situated subjectivity, even if that subjectivity so situated is contingent on the social and historical discourse in which they are located. Examining gender, race, sexuality, and culture as moveable, dynamic aspects of identity sheds light on the mutable nature of these categories, exposing the hierarchies, hegemonies, and political and social power dynamics as obfuscations to those dynamics. In fact, Black feminist scholarship and queer theories have played an important role in exposing the dynamism of even the most monolithic of theories, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. This was largely accomplished by particularizing the subjective experience. Emerging theory in the particular and individual experiences of the oppressed was an important way to bring theory back into the lives of the individual—not as a way of upending the individual as an agent but of re-establishing the daily, living consequences of theories on the self and the body. Whatever political maneuver some theorists saw in this, or whatever alienating factor they tried to expose in these theories, what was important for theorists positing alternatives to mainstream postmodern discourse was to be inclusive and to infuse into scholarship a breadth of experiences and a diversity of voices. If there was a universal, these theories from the margins believed it would be found through engagement with difference, for “Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged” (Lorde, “Master’s Tools” 112).

---

[4] See Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daily" in *Sister Outsider* and Bell Hooks's "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*.

Lorde’s work on difference underscores the primary element of the erotic project: it is precisely because in difference we are both vulnerable and powerful that it is difference that will invariably be what connects us via the erotic. This project is simultaneously a healing project because it requires that we resensitize ourselves to our differences, instead of participating in the mystifying tactics that the patriarchy uses to keep us looking beyond our difference for a totalizing, hegemonic normativity. “Unclaimed,” Lorde writes, “our differences are used against us in the service of separation and confusion, for we view them only in opposition to each other” (“Difference” 202). When we send them away, to the outside of ourselves, our differences are then tools of oppression and power. For Lorde the erotic is about claiming our difference because that is self love and integrity; by claiming our difference, we are integrating our marginalized fragments of our “self” with our experience. However, because difference is also predicated on intersubjectivity and on the understanding of the self in relation to another as well is in a social, cultural, and historical context, identity is always already an unstable category, one that constantly renegotiated in the context of a dynamic relationship to oneself and the world. Isolation and indifference then are imperialistic tools that keeps subjectivity predicated on division (rather than difference) and individualism (rather than integration). Lorde warns that

> You will be paid well not to feel, not to scrutinize the function of your differences and their meaning, until it will be too late to feel at all. You will be paid in insularity, in poisonous creature comforts, false securities, in the spurious belief that the midnight knock will always be upon somebody else's door. But there is no separate survival. ("Difference" 204)

This is no small order, though, trying to articulate a paradigm that allows subjectivity to be at once particular and holistic, both uniquely individual and accountable to the collective, without engaging in some form of dialectical assimilation and collapsing the subjectivity of one into an other, or in some way giving in to the trappings of transcendent abstraction.

Discursive Sexuality and the Prediscursive Body

Fundamental to understanding the ways in which subjectivity works as a condition of the erotic, however, is recognizing the differences between the fissures and divisions created by patriarchal oppression and the borders of discrete, but connected, characteristics of the unique subject navigating through the various aspects of her life and agency. Understanding these new aspects of identity and subjectivity requires a paradigm of eroticism that begins with an incorporation of the body, fully present. Instead of universalizing, it is important to discuss the how the body is lived and how identity and subjectivity is constructed from the point of the body in a way that neither forecloses on shared experiences nor relies solely on shared experience as a condition of intersubjectivity. This process requires that we heal our bodies and our relationships to our materiality instead of relying on transcending the body in order to invest in a universal plane of subject-seeking. What Lorde and Morales are trying to make clear is that we need to access another type of knowledge, one that we inhabit as part of the "context of our humanity" (Morales 4). The body is integral to generating this type of knowledge. Integrating difference both in relation to ourselves and as part of our social functioning means having an understanding between the reason of the mind and the reason of the erotic without subsuming one into the other. However, in order to understand how those differences can remain distinct and yet still connect without a dialectical assimilation, one must understand integrity as a function of the erotic.

The body itself manifests as an interplay of boundaries, openings, and surfaces that defines the sociohistorical discursive identity. In many ways the body helps make our difference visible. However, in theories of the erotic, the body is quite an active player not just in the expression of identity, but in the creation of knowledge itself, neither entirely independent of discursive reality, but neither entirely subsumed by it. In fact one critical characteristic of erotic literature is that the body is not subordinated to anything. It maintains its own agency in a sense—elemental to erotic subjectivity, it seeks integrity. The body is neither privilege or subverted, nor is it metaphorized to the point of abstraction; it is the physical manifestation of intersubjectivity, lived difference, and erotic action and expression. However, it, too, exists in relation to psychic depths of subjectivity, and critical to the integrity of this relationship is mapping the communication between the two.

The body in erotic subjectivity is not only a site of resistance but also the disintegrator, mediator, and distributor of power; the place at which we, again, are most vulnerable and most powerful. Discussing the migratory mapping and remapping between margin and center requires an engaged sexuality. This defies the institutional sexuality that Michel Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality*. What we see in Foucault's rendition of discursivity is a systemic categorization of fluid sexualities. Again, hegemony's tactic is to construct disparate facets of identity and to isolate individuals from the immanent forces of bonding and connecting. Sex and sexuality, long considered a site of superfluous, private identity, has also been considered a delegitimized site of subjectivity. Floyd, indicating the intersection between Marxist critique and Foucault's discursive hegemony, also suggests that this is a function of a societal "misnaming" of the sexual as somehow outside of the sociopolitical sphere. He states that "any representation of sexuality in isolation from these other dimensions of the social, any representation of sexuality as always already localized, particularized, or privatized, is a misrepresentation of the social as well as the sexual" (8). Indeed the body as a site of identity has been fraught with contradictions and cautions about what constitutes identity construction and if, in fact, identity is indicative of a singular, authentic corporeality. While it is not my intention here to give an in depth look at the construction of sexuality and gender as discussed by Judith Butler and Foucault,[5] I do find it helpful to point to Butler's critique of Foucault's positing of discursive sexuality.

The main tension between Butler and Foucault, as Butler outlines in *Gender Trouble*, is Butler's understanding of the systemic discursive practices of cultural inscription on the body. While she agrees that there is a discursive function at work in the construction of gender, she suspects that Foucault is positing a separate category of “sex” that is an antecedent to gender. She understands this cultural inscription as creating not a sex/gender binary as much as a corporeal/discursive binary, or a prediscursive/discursive binary. She explains:

---

[5] Butler (*Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*) and Foucault (*History of Sexuality, Volumes 1 and 2)* do fine jobs of it themselves, and I refer readers to those texts for a much livelier and more elevated discussion than I can do justice.

> The sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of “the body” that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance. This ‘body’ often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as “external” to that body…“the body” is figured in mute facticity, anticipating some meaning that can be attributed only by a transcendent consciousness or, rather, the act that radically disembodies that consciousness…Even within Foucault’s essay on the very theme of genealogy, the body is figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription. (Butler 2491)

Ultimately Butler questions a “static” and immutable prediscursive body, a corporeality that must be transcended or destroyed in order to “produce the speaking subject and its significations. This is a body, described through the language of surface and force, wakened through a ‘single drama’ of domination, inscription, and creation” (2494). For Butler, the body exists differently. The body itself is both variable and mutable—it is lived and contextual (Salih 21). The body remains a key figure in discursivity because it represents variable boundaries which, too, are recuperated by the dominant discursive powers of social propriety. For Butler, sex “is always already gender: the body does not antedate or ‘cause’ gender, but it is an effect of genders which can only be taken up with existing cultural norms, laws, and taboos which constrain that taking up or ‘choice’” (21).

The paradox of discursive sexuality, however, in terms of Foucault’s argument, is not that sexuality has been in any way repressed by the discursive systems of culture, but in fact has been proliferated. But as the discourse on sex was proliferated so was the systemic categorization of sexual identity and sexual difference. In her article “A New Entity in the History of Sexuality: The Respectable Same-Sex Couple,” Mariana Valverde adds that

> Sexuality [in the West] came to be regarded as that which is most secret and therefore most authentic about “the self,” the key, in other words, to personal identity… it is not inappropriate, when making a large-scale generalization, to say, in line with Foucault’s famous thesis, that the regulation of the self has been increasingly dominated by the notion of “identity.” What you did with various body parts came to be regarded, throughout the course of the twentieth century, mainly as a clue about what kind of person you were. (155-156)

The proliferation of sexualities and sexual identities by the cultural machines in order to be particularized, categorized, marginalized, and regulated parallels the mechanisms by which difference came to be proliferated and marginalized. Difference becomes deviance, and the dominant ideologies produce more deviances in order to protect the normalized “center.” Ironically, an attempt to destroy the corporeal solidified and fixated the body as a site of false choices which then worked to establish a dynamic sociopolitical identity. In her reading of Patricia Hill Collins and Foucault, Camisha Russell explains that, indeed and paradoxically,

> Power is not exclusively or primarily restrictive, repressive, or limiting but rather creative, constructive, and productive. This new form of control operates through the creation and proliferation of medically or socially pathological types. When individuals are classified according to these types, though they are certainly subject to control, their sexuality is not limited in the sense of some preexisting reality that is then repressed. The truth of sexuality is not reveled or observed in these figures but actually made. (Russell 207)

Therefore discursive sexualities are manufactured outside of individual experience or prediscursive knowledges. In fact, "Foucault argues that the figures that appear in the discourse on sexuality and claim to represent discovered truths about sexuality are better understood as manufactured 'truths' about sexuality that serve to create sexuality itself" (Russell 208).

The issues about who constructs truth and who has access to it are epistemological issues that are directly related to corporeality. There is a clear connection between issues of sociocultural discursivity and the abuse and misuse of bodies. Bodies constructed for profit, and the isolation of the body from any knowledge produced by connecting with the body as a critical element of daily experience and meaning-making, is what keeps identity and the body separate; therefore, any issues of difference and identity rest firmly in the clutches of dominant ideology. It is at this point that these systems, whether overtly or not, rely on the erotic as an element of human experience.

Erotic subjectivity freely expressed creates a condition for undermining these hegemonic divisions between subject and subjectivity. On the other hand, sexual identity, perverted, dismantled, and disseminated, relegates the body to a discursive object functioning as a commodity.

Sexuality is a particularly potent site for the discussion of the ways in which we reify or resist power for several reasons. First, sex and sexuality have been widely discussed as an area of discursivity. Sexuality has been a deeply problematic subject for gender and race theory. As the lines of power have been drawn, gender and race theorists have shown how particularly important it is for those who have been marginalized to articulate the ways in which they have been represented as sexualized beings by dominant culture. This is why many third-wave feminists have explored sexuality as the nexus of their marginalization. The oppressive matrix and the moment of intersectionality often lead one to a critical examination of sexuality. The reclamation of sexual agency is more than just how one is represented; it is also emblematic of a subject's stake in her physicality and her place in the world.

Lorde states that "in order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" ("Uses" 53). Sexuality is a site of resistance that is absorbed into hegemonic discourse through its proliferation by categorizing it, naming it as a perversion, and then politicizing it, legislating it, and making it economical. Governing bodies recognized the power of the sexuality. What has threatened colonizing narratives are precisely those elements of postmodernism that allowed for the fluidity of subjectivity and, therefore, allowed non-western, non-male, non-heterosexual subjects to claim a position in history. Monolithic Western hegemony has desperately tried to control pleasure and sexuality, but “variety, multiplicity, eroticism are difficult to control” (Christian 2263). Because they are difficult to fix and control, they can also become sites of resistance and spaces in which subjectivity can be renegotiated in a fluid and dynamic way.

Theoretical Methodology

The scope of my project is to show how erotic literature maps the movement of subjectivity from knowledges constructed through the relationships between corporeality and discursive reality to social discourse; from the “wounded erotic” to the sites of resistance and possibility. In order to understand erotic subjectivity and how it functions in literature that seeks to converse though an erotic lens, I have found three theorists particularly helpful. Each of these theorists is influenced by philosophical concepts established by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Using Deleuze’s concept of “fold,” Maria del Guadalupe Davidson iterates an new understanding of how subjectivity is created by using difference as both a function of identity construction and a connection to other subjectivities. In addition, Valentine Moulard-Leonard and Tasmin Lorraine have created approaches to understanding a type of paradoxical space that can hold both the epistemologies of difference and the a broader understanding community and the collective. According to Lorraine,

> Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to ontology and doing theory suggests a constructive way of “mapping” a variety of projects promoting progressive change as well as individual and collective projects invested in living “good” (as in ethical) lives. This ability to provide framework loose

> enough not to exclude disparate projects, and yet coherent enough to allow us to connect various kinds of progressive projects without assimilating those projects to specific theoretical paradigms, may provide the impetus for the kind of joyous hybrid connections. (2)

These theories provide the tools that map erotic subjectivity as a process of integrity in which the perpetual discovery of identity is one that seeks to integrate the various aspects of our identities that have been alienated from each other, but also to integrate the ways in which our identity is constructed in the process of becoming in relation to another.

Davidson's use of the metaphor of the fold will help to illuminate the ways in which subjectivity is formed in a space of resistance created by the relationship between the self and the social world. The fold is a space that, I argue, will be both a space of silence for this unfolding of subjectivity as well the place of the possibility of the immanent knowledge that transgresses the social world and connects to other subjectivities in that movement. Moulard-Leonard's theory of integral space provides a framework for understanding these sites of resistance in which the erotic can work to illuminate and heal the wounds of social and historical trauma, moving subjectivities through the scars of oppression and into a mode of healing—the condition of reclaiming the "wounded erotic." Finally, Deleuze's theory of the concept as explored by Lorraine is an essential paradigm for understanding how writing and poetic language is an elemental function to exploring the emancipatory potential of subjectivity. The concept, as Lorraine will argue, connects immanent knowledges as a way to stabilize pockets of thought movements while simultaneously imagining other possible ways of connecting those thoughts and other ways of thinking about oneself and the world.

The Fold. For Davidson, understanding how difference can play into issues of subjectivity and discursivity lies in the appropriation of a Deleuzian concept called "the fold." Deleuze, she writes, "is not so much concerned with alterity as with subjectivity" (128). For Deleuze, subjectivity is defined by its struggle with centers of power and resistance, and difference is a condition of an identity that is both independent from but related to history and the external world. Davidson finds helpful Deleuze's paradigm of subjectivity because it allows for an internality that is creative and productive without creating a dichotomy between an inner and outer sphere. The fold, she explains, "maintains its physical presence but at the same time can create new spaces within its formation of new crevices and pleats…Through its multiple *folding* the subject maintains access to the internal and external aspects of her being" (129). The doubling of the "fabric" in the fold creates a space in which the self is allowed to create new identities. Davidson explains that while subjectivity is not ahistorical, the doubling of the fold creates a counter-history that coexists with but is independent from "a prior set of historical conditions" (130). The fold is a relation to oneself, rather than a "reaction to" historical conditions. According to Davidson,

> The relation to oneself has an independent status. As Deleuze explains: "It is as if the relation to the outside folded back to create a doubling, allowed a relation to oneself to emerge, and constitute an inside which is hollowed out and develops its own unique dimension"…Instead of being a product of a relation to something else, positive difference is something like "the right to difference, variation and metamorphosis." This means that the

> struggle for subjectivity is not just a reaction to a prior situation; instead it is a creative force and a source for change. (130)

Conceptualizing subjectivity then means understanding the movements between the generative "inside" of the fold and the historical and counter-historical "fabrics" that create the fold itself. Not only does this describe the relationship between unconscious and conscious processes, but it can also be a helpful metaphor for the relationship between the body and immanent knowledge. Subjectivity lies in a mapping of the movement from the internal and external spaces of the fold, between the socio-historical past of the subject and the creation of new identities within the spaces of the fold. It is the subject's relationship with her body, the literal "external" aspect of the fold, that creates these maps. What happens here is that the body itself is not solely the product of the historical inscription; it is in active dialogue with the inner spaces of the folds to create a more holistic understanding of subjectivity—one that "can both inherit a historical condition and at the same time create new identities within that condition" (129).[6]

Davidson's use of the fold for understanding marginalized subjectivities informs my project in two ways: 1. It allows for an understanding of centers of power and the faculty of subjectivity to resist those centers without relying on traditional, dialectical, and hierarchical concepts of center and margin; 2. It will help to illustrate the ways in which poetic language will work both as an absence and a presence of discourse; a way of illustrating the "hollowed out" spaces of subjectivity that are at once generative and immanent, but that are also intimately related with the fabric of identity that relates more directly with the social sphere. Davidson cautions: “It is important to emphasize that Deleuze does not intend the fold as a retreat from the external world, since the outside and inside are not distinct from one another. Rather, while the fold provides a safe place for encountering oneself” (130).

---

[6] I believe this is also a particularly helpful notion in terms of understanding an alternative to social construction that both allows social construction to be a valid notion of identity construction, while at the same time "disengage[ing] individual identity from notions of an essential nature" (Marcano 55). Often the idea of an individual identity is conflated with an essential, communal identity "if we recognize that characteristics, behaviors, and tendencies of a group, and most important as individuals, are constructed through social, though normalizing, concepts or forces."

Integral Space. Moulard-Leonard addresses both a personal and political need find a space in which she can “hold all at once” the many fractured parts of her identity. She poses the problem of finding a way to “exist at the margin, live at the center, and yet inhabit integrity”; to be “fragmented and whole at once, multiple and one, growing and grounded” (4). Not only does she seem to echo the condition of postmodern subjectivity on the one hand, but on the other she proposes a space in which she can do just that. She proposes a new space of connecting and bonding called an “integral space: a space whose parts do not fit in with one another or whose connection is not predetermined; a migratory space whose territories must be mapped and remapped following decentralized lines of communication between margins and center” (4). If this sounds much like Eagleton’s “motley assortment of sub-cultures, each one at an angle to the others” (17), then that is no accident. Davidson, Moulard-Leonard, and Lorraine use Deleuzian thought to create spaces in which difference and experience are powerful iterations of subjectivity, as are community, political alliances, and unfolding histories. My project seeks to identify the conditions for these spaces of integrity by mapping the various manifestations of the erotic in postmodern theories and literature, particularly those structured around identity and difference.

Moulard Leonard is directly responding to a challenge issued by Hooks for women scholars to enter the space of marginality she and her Third World Feminist counterparts have recognized as a site of radical resistance.[7] Both Hooks and Moulard-Leonard envision this space as one that seeks to hold the pain and traumas of all ways in which people have been colonized, psychically and bodily. It is in this place where those traumas are transformed, but not transcended, into creative resistance. Integral space is a place where differences are maintained but solidarity between subjects is established. Alliances are created, oppressors are named, trauma is acknowledged, but liberation from that trauma is the ultimate goal. Moulard-Leonard writes, "immanence and integrity reinforce each other…if it is to avoid being recuperated by the dialectics of domination, this poetics/politics of integrity presumes the kind of philosophy of immanence that Deleuze and Guattari can produce" (5). In order to avoid being recuperated by the dialectics of domination, there must be allowed a certain integrity, or a "right to difference" (Davidson 130), that is inherent to erotic subjectivity.

Moulard-Leonard's definition of integrity comes largely from Morales's work on trauma and recovery and how they shape subjectivity. Integral space for Moulard-Leonard is a "small liberated territory" (a phrase borrowed from Morales) in which the oppressed and marginalized can reclaim dignity and pursue healing, but whose boundaries are political and social. This space is "largely psychological (or virtual) but no less real than any other territory, whose boundaries are always political rather than geographical—or whose geographies themselves are themselves produces of alliances and blocs of becoming" (6). The definition of integral space is particularly important to understanding erotic subjectivity because it paves the way for understanding aspects of our differences as both physical and psychological. It recognizes the internalization of "a certain (imperialist) order of the world" (8), but at the same time realizes that these internalizations also exist in a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (6).

---

[7] This call to arms is issued in Hooks's chapter "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" in *Yearning*.

Integral space, like Davidson says of the fold, is not an escape from the external world, but it is a space of potentiality made out of both those colonized, psychic spaces and the possibility of acting out for our own liberations. Because the fabric of this space resides in a social context, community is a particularly important aspect of healing. To connect what Moulard-Leonard calls her exiled potentials, a site of resistance must not only exist virtually, but socially as well; this is "a space where community may actualize in order to sustain substantial resistance" (4). Healing requires "the support of a social context that affirms and protects the victim" (6). Because integral space is social, physical, and psychic, the boundaries of this space are "migratory" and composed with plateaus or "regions of intensities, vibrating planes of immanence that grow while avoiding culminating or transcendent ends" (4). This is probably the most paradoxical aspect of integrity, but one that Moulard-Leonard insists is necessary for erotic integrity: healthy, erotic integrity relies on the existence of boundaries.[8] Integrity means having and sustaining the boundaries of your subjectivity that define your difference, your situation, your social context, your personal experiences, and from which immanent knowledge arises, while at the same time recognizing that this self "exists in relation" (4). These boundaries create sites of possibility and hold wounds of psychological trauma but are also sensual sites of physical joy and connection. Integrity is both bodily and psychically defined.

---

[8] Much of my understanding of integrity and integral space comes not only from Moulard-Leonard's article, but also from extensive personal conversations with her about her theory.

Moulard-Leonard argues for a way of constructing identity through movement in and out of spheres of difference, creating temporary but important connections between communities and individuals. Integral space emphasizes the importance of inhabiting the margins of our identity and meeting each other at sites of trauma and violent disintegration in order to heal these fractures and begin to construct identities in ways that promote difference but resist totalizing narratives. I argue that the project of integrity requires a particular type of subjective movement, the ability to transgress the boundaries of identity, thereby creating an erotic map of our identities in relation to one another.

The Concept. Lorraine's interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "concept" is particularly useful for understanding how literature and discourse is critical to the theory of eroticism. Concepts are unique to their philosophy because they imagine thought not as a dialectical process, but a process of stabilizing certain connections among an endless set of possible connections, thus "territorializing" a certain set of relations without being foreclosed by the limitations of that conceptual territory. It both imagines a particular relationship among components of a concept while holding the possibility of other possible relationships. Lorraine explains that "each component is an intensive feature of a pure and simple singularity; the component is a limit point rather than a constant or variable" (18). These concepts are critical to understanding the connections between the psychic and social aspects of subjectivity. Lorraine understands the concept as a function of both the virtual world and the actual world. The concept implies that the "ability of thought to approach the virtual can only occur through the thinking of embodied individuals" (17). The concept is the nexus of bodily knowledge and discursive expression.

Concepts are "critical points inhering in actual states of affairs without themselves being actual" (Lorraine 22). Concepts are clusters of relations that create possibilities for acting, decision making, connecting, bonding, and overlapping with other concepts that do not *necessarily* have to manifest in the actual world. "Concepts," she writes,

> Are inseparable from the concrete thought movements that think them and yet they are always in excess of those thought movements. This excess of meaning evokes the virtual that insists in every speech act and intimates the rich resources of time as durational whole and the intensities that reflect each and every present moment whether or not they actually unfold into new forms of life. (22)

However, the concept escapes merely representational forms of typical communication that function as recognition. This type of communication re-cognizes the past in the present as a synthesis of the information that we already know. The concept is imaginative and resistant to the present. Like the Moulard-Leonard's integral space, the concept has characteristics that reside in both planes—the psychic and the social (the virtual and the actual). And also like integral space, it both holds the existing connections with possibilities of other connections of the conceptual components and at the same time resists the stabilizing forces of territorialization. The concept is both embodied and discursive, but it is always creative and intuitive. These concepts are unique for language and communication because the concept relies primarily on the generation of movement for its creation, the overlapping of two thought territories of the conceptual creates the possibility for new thought, and so on.

Writing and poetic language is critical to the conceptual creation because "it allows one to rework the self again and again by enabling one to release one's hold on a stable conception of self long enough to allow new connections to form and a new, perhaps more provisional, self to form in the process" (Lorraine 24). By participating in conceptual creation, erotic literature becomes a space of play in which one can at once create concepts using immanent knowledge by "extracting virtualities from lived experience rather than representing it" (25) and at the same time imagine the infinite configurations of identity without necessarily having to represent them in lived experience. For these reasons concept creation is integral to understanding fantasy and imagination as a way to renegotiate the power relations in erotic relationships and erotic literature.

There is something singular about the erotic. The resistance to the dialectic found in the three theoretical paradigms outlined above, and which is characteristic of a theoretical formulation of the erotic, is evidenced by Joan Pinkvoss, editor of Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal feminist text *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In her editor's note to the 2007 edition of the text, she writes of Anzaldúa's theoretical influence not only on herself but on the theoretical landscape as a whole:

> Raised on dialectical materialism, I was left speechless by Gloria's destruction of that way of understanding. Gloria was *not* saying: well here are these two opposites and out of this contradiction comes a new, third way…she was saying that these opposites had to be kicked out from

> under—they were not a foundation but only got in the way of creating what she was after. There was no linear combination of two contradictions to create a third; rather Gloria saw that place between the contradictions was a place of the untethered possibility. (xix)

This is the distinction between re-cognizing difference and what Kelly Oliver calls "witnessing"—the ability to include others in the process of our subjective becoming without relying on "recognizable" identity which constructs the other as object to be discursively represented as part of our own identity formation (Lorraine 143-145). This is the nexus of what all those who theorize the erotic mean by understanding difference as a site of resistance and subject creation: one may be differently situated, have different experiences, different identities, even new ones unfolding, but the erotic is a condition in which those differences can maintain their integrity, their unique characteristics, and at the same time become a point of connecting to those other subjects differently situated, without being re-cognized, re-presented, or having the dialectic pressure to be collapsed one within the other. The erotic is the condition for connecting across the particular. The paradox of the erotic is that it both arises out of those fissures of identity and is also the condition for integrating those fissures and connecting through difference. The erotic is immanent—the knowledge emanates from within—both emotional and spiritual, but it is also material in the sense that it is corporeal, bodily; that is what makes the erotic integral to creative, liberatory subjectivity and what gives that mode of subjectivity integrity.

Each one of these theorists acknowledges the role that the erotic and eroticism play in these paradigms of connecting. The goal of my dissertation will be to explore theories that reexamine identity, agency, and subjectivity that incorporate the erotic as a resource and source of power. The erotic is the creative and connecting force of unexpressed and unrecognized knowing and feeling, which historically has been suppressed and perverted by dominant sociopolitical power structures, but which has also remained an empowering and liberating resource for the voice of the marginalized, subaltern, and the hidden. As these theorists suggest, the fact of subjectivity is that we must find a space that holds the pieces of identity dismantled by the postmodern project *all at once* and in the space of an individual's experience, relationship to sociohistorical actualities, and in *relation* to another and others. The erotic, as the next chapter will explore more thoroughly, is the condition for connecting these deterritorialized, exiled, discrete aspects of subjectivity in a way that is healing and that promotes joyful becoming. The erotic is the condition for connecting subjects with other subjects, subjects to communities, subjects to their own pieces of identity.

The erotic is the condition for connecting the knowledges that are produced both intellectually and bodily (virtually and in the actuality of daily physical living), for connecting the knowledge of a subject located in one social location with another subject who is differently situated, and for connecting communities and knowledges on a larger social and historical level. The language of eroticism then is the mapping of those connections. This language arises creatively but is not specific to one genre. Philosophy, poetry, prose, physics, and mathematics can all speak eroticism.[9] Of course, over the course of this dissertation, I will be focusing primarily on literary and poetic language as the vehicle for the erotic. To be able to speak the erotic, language must make way for the spaces of resistance, nondiscursive intensities, moments of movement and concept formation that set the conditions for both the absence of language—visceral knowledge, sensuality, and emotional intuition—and the possibility of expressing those concepts through discursive acts. Speaking the erotic requires conceptual, poetic, discursive boundaries for the very possibility of transgressing those boundaries. This is the meaning of integrity, and integrity cannot happen as long as there is hierarchy. If hierarchy is to exist in society then there needs to be another way of understanding and relating to the world around us that can accommodate that integrity. That integrity is found in the eroticism of connection. Sex and sexuality are important plateaus (planes of intensity) from which to examine the ways that erotic subjectivity functions discursively and nondiscursively. If we look at the ways in which the power of our sexuality has been misused, but also at what kind of power we gain from mapping erotic unions, we can find a map to becoming and connecting that can move us toward the type of integrity that can fortify ourselves against those perversions and abuses—even if we are to encounter them again and again in the world.

---

[9] This is why Deleuze and Guattari and those theorists who use them are particularly influential to understanding the erotic. Deleuze and Guattari's philosophies are immersed in an eclectic array of disciplines, both appropriating the ideas unique to each but also exposing the congruities that they all share.

CHAPTER 2

"I Was Body Alone": The Erotic as a Site of Resistance and Integrity

Writers and scholars such as Audre Lorde, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Hélène Cixous, Amber Hollibaugh, and Aurora Levins Morales have explored the myriad ways in which the erotic, in its many forms, has been perverted and distorted by patriarchy and power throughout history and across disciplines. Most central in their discoveries is the gross disconnect between a bodily, visceral knowing and intellectual knowledge—a division that has allowed hierarchical manipulation to disrupt the interconnectedness that is necessary for individuals to create intimacy with themselves and others. These scholars have identified women in particular as those most injured by this systematic repression of the erotic energy and power that comes from the feminine in everyone, and they have called upon other writers and scholars to relocate those connections within themselves and between each other. This, they argue, will begin a healing process, and a reclaiming of the erotic, that must take place on a cultural, global level in order that women and the feminine in women and men can begin healing individual and cultural traumas.

Desire and eroticism are integral parts of the theories of subjectivity, but there is a long and complicated history of the ways in which sex, sexuality, and the erotic are produced and expressed in any culture. Postmodern theorists and philosophers call for new paradigms of subjectivity that seek to reestablish these forms of bonding and connecting in the wake of the poststructural ungrounding of the subject and to redefine what it means to be connected to larger social and cultural communities. Each one of these theorists acknowledges the role that the erotic and eroticism plays in these paradigms of connecting. In the previous chapter, I discussed the tendency for postmodern theories to reaffirm the relationship between margin and center, often by agreeing that there is a need for mutual subjectivity or intersubjectivity—a subjectivity based on a mutuality and difference without stratifying those differences—but that in turn also reify the dependence on otherness in these systems of subjectivity. As we saw near the end of the last chapter, however, Deleuzian models of conceptual and integral subjectivity as interpreted by scholars Valentine Moulard-Leonard, Tasmin Lorraine, and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson provide a viable alternative model to the traditional relationships between margin and center. The goal of this chapter will be to explore theories that reexamine identity, agency, and subjectivity in the context of the erotic as a resource and source of power. Further, this chapter will take a closer look at the conditions of the erotic that not only make it a powerful subjective force, but also a target for perversion and manipulation. Because, as many theorists will contest, we are living with a “wounded eroticism” there is a need to “reclaim the erotic” and incorporate the erotic into understanding identity and the subject. Further, I argue that power relations work differently in eroticism because of the mutuality of subjectivity and the non-hierarchical nature of the erotic. As a condition of this power relationship, the body is also reclaimed from passive discursivity. The relationship between the body and writing leads to a reimagining of the ways that literature works as a site of reclaiming erotic power through both nondiscursive silences and discursive dialogic imagination.

Eroticism, according to Lorde, is the vital energy that is identified as creative, generative, feminine, and which has been repressed, demonized, and perverted throughout history because of its link with sexuality and uniquely feminine sources of power. It is the creative and connecting force of unexpressed and unrecognized knowing and feeling, which historically has been suppressed and perverted by dominant sociopolitical power structures, but which has also remained an empowering and liberating resource for the voice of the marginalized, subaltern, and the hidden. For Lorde, the erotic is both immanent—it originates in the depth of self and connects with an internal spirituality—and a condition of intimate connections between people, the source of social and communal cohesion. Because Lorde's understanding of subjectivity relies on difference, the erotic then is a condition of connecting across differences without transcending them. In Lorde's definition of the erotic, immanent erotic knowledge is both spiritual and bodily. The conditions of subjectivity are contextual and situational, and spatial and historical. In order to understand Lorde's eroticism, we must look at the erotic as a paradox between two ideals: 1. Erotic knowledge is a condition of bodily and subjective difference and contexutality. The erotic is both particular and uniquely situated in individual experience. 2. The erotic is the condition for intersubjectivity and building emotional, social, and political communities using difference and experience as a bridge, not a barrier, to bonding.

Immanent Knowledge

It is first helpful to consider immanent knowledge as one that is formed in the space of resistance that is both private and socially contextualized. Lorde and Clarissa Pinkola Estes emphasize the importance of accessing this inner knowledge, which for Lorde is the erotic, feminine power, and for Estes is the feminine unconscious. Both agree that these places are ripe with possibility, for they are the places where we begin to heal and to understand our self, others, and our world. In her study of women's repressed erotic nature, which she calls the Wild Woman, Estes explains that these "places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden…within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling" (36-37). Likewise, the erotic for Lorde "is a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (54). This "measure" is the bridge that connects an emotional and sensual plane with our subjectivity, or "sense of self." Later, we will discuss what it is about this characteristic of the erotic that gives us agency in our lives, but for now, we will discuss the "subject" in slightly more abstract terms. It is from this inner space that Lorde and Estes believe that we generate the erotic knowledge; "the erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all of our deepest knowledge" (Lorde, "Uses" 56). The erotic is situated spatially in the body but also as part of a temporal or durational sensory experience. It resides psychically and physically in an individual, and it is perpetually transforming and transformative as it both maintain a sense of self while destabilizing constructions of identity. The erotic is the bridge between the body and emotion, but it also bridges that connection with the ways in which we experience the unfolding of our daily lives. The erotic is about poiesis, the generation of life lived qualitatively and as an unfolding of experience and perpetual change.

For Lorde it is also, and importantly, a source of knowledge that is not subverted by the rational. It is a knowledge that is generated by possibility rather than historic facticity. It is creative power. The erotic is always already a part of the human experience, because it is not a condition of "what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we feel doing it. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various live endeavors bring us closest to that fullness" (Lorde, "Uses" 54-55). The erotic functions "in providing power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person…and [in the] open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy" (56).[1] For Morales, however, this joy is also attached to sexuality to complete a definition of eroticism that embodies a political imperative in which sexuality also becomes a site of pleasure and joy even though it is also a site of deeply destructive personal and historical abuse (117-119). These abuses of joyful pleasure in life and in sexuality are what underlie the eroticism defined by Lorde and Morales. These pleasures, feelings, and emotions are knowledges that are immanently generated and socially experienced. They create the conditions for connecting individual bodies and subjects with others in mutual subjectivity. Nevertheless, the process of connecting immanence and physical manifestations of the erotic in the social sphere and in daily living is a process that is fraught with risk, danger, and endless barriers to erotic connections. And in fact, as we discussed in the previous chapter, dominant ideology profits on severing the very connections that we explore here as fundamental to healthy erotic sexuality.

Difference and Experience

The work of Audre Lorde and other theorists who embed subjectivity in a personal-political dynamic are often accused of playing "identity politics." Indeed another interesting paradoxical condition of the erotic is that, while identity and difference are situated in the particular and contextual, this does not reduce the discussion of subjectivity to essentialism. Gloria Anzaldúa, who understands a marginal subjectivity

---

[1] One obvious concern here is that this reliance on unfettered, seeming subjective feeling can be misused. What I foresee as part of this project, but outside of the scope of this dissertation is a focus on an ethics of the erotic—not in the sense of a moral imperative but as part of an exploration of how to "be with" as a condition of eroticism. Until then, I hope I am not asking for too much willing suspension of suspicion when I discuss the importance of immanent knowledge.

(which she calls “Mestiza,” one who lives at the borderlands of culture, community, and constructed identity) in a much different way, writes, “Rather than a reductive, essential self, the New Mestiza constantly migrates between knowing herself…not knowing who or what she is…and the fear of not owning who she is…When she names all her names, once again she enacts the culmination of unearthing her multiple subjectivities” (7). Eroticism is the condition by which immanent knowledge, the physical body, and sociohistorical identity can coexist without being assimilated one into another. For this to happen, movement must be an integral function of eroticism.

Identity as a social construction has primary links to a discursivity that creates and constructs it over and over, often without any physical grounding. However, with the help of Moulard-Leonard and Lorraine, a Deleuzian understanding of the concept of “identity” and the real corporeality that embodies it can help illuminate the distinction between the accusations of identity politics and the reality of the theories of situated knowledge as they are presented by theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Morales, Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Bell Hooks. Difference as a mitigating factor not only in the construction of identity but also in the creation of coalitions or collectives based on shared identities or experience have presented issues in the postmodern problem of bonding through the disjointed narratives of identity. Suspiciously, however, many of those who have been wary of grounding identity or subjectivity in difference seem to have paid less attention to the awareness these theories have of their constructed nature. Collins in her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*, Hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics,* and Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* dedicate much of their arguments to discussing the importance of not “giving voice” *to* the individual experiences of the marginalized, but “coming to voice” as one who has been marginalized and theorizing out of that situated knowledge. Collins, in fact, structures much of her book in the ethnographies of black women who stand quite far outside of the academy, but whose theories about subjectivity, identity, and dominant culture are nonetheless rigorous, incisive, and insightful.

Hooks, too, as well as Barbara Christian, have in several instances personally stood back from the academy and from the theater of theory to offer criticisms about the tendency to try to reconstruct postmodern subjectivity with the very totalizing metanarratives that poststructuralism intended us to escape. What happened seems to be either a disclosure of the lip service to postmodern theorists—feminists perhaps even being the most vocal among them—to maintain a firm hold on the center, even while appropriating the indelible mark that these “marginal narratives” have left on theory.[2] Even in W. Lawrence Hogue’s *Postmodern American Literature and Its Other,* his noble attempt to construct a paradigm in which the periphery takes center stage is nonetheless at the cost of reifying the margin as “other” than the center. The danger in relying too heavily on discussions of margin and center (which even to my theoretical account proves helpful and illustrative of several key points) is that the margins and “otherness,” alterity in fact, are easily romanticized and appropriated. In order to avoid these trappings, we must avoid identifying Black women, and particularly Black feminists, as sites of difference or representative of alterity (Davidson 123). Instead, what eroticism calls for is for difference to be an *a priori* function of subjectivity across all subjects. Floyd writes,

---

[2] For an incisive account of the hypocritical standpoints of some feminists who rally against “situated knowledge” in favor of a “standpoint theory” that is more willing to acquiesce to universalisms and therefore more susceptible to “replicat[ing[hierarchical power relations among women” (112), I recommend Anika Maaza Mann’s chapter “Race and Feminist Standpoint Theory” in *Convergences,* referenced at the end of this dissertation.

> This interaction between queer studies and a range of other knowledges constantly raises the question of the extent to which they are in fact "other." These more recent developments in queer studies can to this degree be understood not in terms of a persistent rejection of generalizing impulses but in terms of a critique immanent to this generalizing impulse itself. (9)

Difference marks a critical function of the erotic. In fact, it is the "starting point for both individual and collective action. Difference becomes an essential property in a mode of being that makes us courageous and open even in the absence of what she terms 'charters,' that is, signposts, guides, and road maps" (Byrd 24). Difference renders us visible and vulnerable and it is through vulnerability that we are able to create intimate connections with other people and experiences. For Lorde, Morales, Collins, and Anzaldúa, intersectionality becomes a fact of subjectivity.

A distinct criticism of the postmodern, one that becomes a difficult conundrum for many mainstream critics when it comes to race and gender, is the struggle with alterity. It might be helpful to make a distinction between alterity in the mainstream postmodern sense and the reclamation of difference as encouraged by Lorde, Anzaldúa, and others. This could possibly be a difference between the understanding of the unfolding of subjectivity as a dialectic on the one hand, and in the other the unfolding of subjectivity in relation to another and the world.[3] Davidson promotes difference in its own right rather than using difference, or alterity, as a buzzword that obfuscates "otherizing" the subjectivity of the marginalized. The erotic conditions a space in which the center and the margin can relate through difference, rather than in spite of it. The construct of the center and the margin is helpful for understanding the ways in which powerful agency in fact does happen at the margins of dominant culture. Even Collins and Hooks who advocate for and as a voice from that margin explain that merely demonizing the center and championing the margin maintains a hierarchical system of stratification. Instead they advocate for a process of traversing the boundaries of center and margin through dialogue and sustained critical discourse.[4] Nevertheless, this construction of margin and center can also create a reification of identities at margin and center.

---

[3] I refer to Moulard-Leonard's concept of "integral space" as one that is anti-dialectic and alternatively rhizomatic.

While Eagleton maintains that in the house of cultural criticism, "what is center can alter over night," Davidson cautions that this is not quite the case. Davidson understands the hesitation of celebrating alterity in postmodern discourse because often it is the case that otherness, particularly the otherness of the "exotic" Black female, is more often a trend in examining and ultimately maintaining the boundaries of the center in favor of token marginalism. Davidson writes that while postmodernism has given us the tools for deconstructing the harmful, oppressive master narratives, "black women should be wary of postmodernism's fascination with difference and its identification of black women as the site of difference" (123). For example, Hogue's attempt at trying to restructure a paradigm of subjectivity in favor of the margin and the other relies on constructing it around concepts such as “the reason of the Other,” which seems to ignore the fact that reason itself is a metanarrative. Further, I argue, not only does it tokenize Black women’s subjectivity, but it also becomes a way of radically ignoring the subjectivity of other women of color. It also ignores the ways in which those who identity with or benefit from structures of privilege can still come to understand themselves as differently situated. If the site of absolute alterity is Black femininity, then what about the Chicana? What about the Syrian woman? This is how the issues of marginality often get reduced to alterity and otherness instead of difference as an inherent quality of subjectivity. Ann duCille writes “To myself, of course, I am not the Other; to me it is the white women and men so intent on theorizing my difference who are the Other” (qtd. in Davidson 123). Unless those who exist at the center are readily willing to give up the privilege of identifying *as* the center, willing to claim difference as an inherent factor in connecting with another (as opposed to an “other”), then the boundaries of margin and center remain unyielding.

---

[4] Nira Yuval-Davis posits "transversal dialogical epistemology," an intersection between Collin's work and Guattari's concept of "transversalism," is a method of communicating between mainstream and marginal sites of identity that promotes liberatory relationship rather than one in which the margin is reified by the center. For a closer examination of this argument see her article, "Dialogic Epistemology—And Intersectional Resistance to 'Oppression Olympics'."

At the intersections of discursive identity, what often happens is that people who have traditionally been marginalized have been so as a condition of their visibility and difference, and as a result have also been rendered silent. Nevertheless, these writers have also reconstructed the boundaries so that what has once been a site of abject oppression is now also a site of potential power and strength. Lorde writes, “power and primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness and my womanness” (“I Am” 58). Finding resistance in the margin is a powerful and energizing force, and for Lorde, difference is a critical tool to use against the dominant ideologies. Claiming your difference, much like reclaiming the erotic, is crucial to establishing egalitarian standards of connecting and producing community: to leave difference unchecked and unclaimed creates a "mythical norm"—unacknowledged difference creates a false hierarchy ("Difference" 203). Without claiming your visibility and difference, you risk difference being used against you. She goes on to say that "We do not have to become each other's experiences and insights in order to share what we have learned" ("I Am" 62). This is the key to "indifference"—steamrolling difference only creates indifference which fuels oppression.

Difference is not synonymous with separatism; rather it is a condition of uniting in political and collective alliances. According to Lorde, "The erotic cannot be felt second hand. As a black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joining concerted actions not possible before" ("Uses" 59). The erotic requires action, listening, participating, because there is a *particular* connection that the erotic makes, but it also always connects. However, keeping those differences silenced by reifying them into the dominant capitalistic machine and by identifying those desires of ours as dangerous and relegated only to the private spheres, making us believe that what we desire can only be bestowed on us from transcendent acts of totality and generalities, is a perversion of the erotic by the patriarchy. In this system, our bodies become matter that is separate from us, that works against our own best interests, and that must be transcended or fixed and then obfuscated by an identity constructed through accepted cultural codes. This division, separation, and obfuscation of the connections between our bodies and our knowledge and between our knowledge and other body-knowledges leave us vulnerable to assault on physical, emotional, cultural and historical levels. It leaves us in a state of what Morales calls “wounded eroticism” (117).

Byrd asks, “What, ultimately, was the purpose and function of Lorde’s theorizing, which maps the complex subjectivities of black feminists and gay men and lesbians? Is there a particular kind of intellectual labor performed by this mapping of subjectivities?” (29). He explains that Lorde answers this in her discussions of the way poetry functions in our lives. She writes, “Ultimately it comes down to making yourself and the people who share it with you, in some way, more themselves…The function of any art is to move more deeply, to make us more whoever we are’” (qtd. in Byrd 29). In this way, poetic language as movement that is deeply immanent—and as a way to connect us spatially—is what makes it a function of the erotic.

Reclaiming the Erotic by Reclaiming Integrity

Reclaiming the erotic means reintegrating the political and geographical (the body-geography) as well as the spiritual and immanent aspects of ourselves through an understanding of our own sexuality and the ways in which we claim power and agency in our most intimate moments. This re-integration requires a deeper exploration of our sexual/erotic selves than what history and culture has allowed. There is an integrity that underlies their erotic journey and an understanding that what happens in the bedroom influences what happens in the social sphere.

In “Radical Pleasure: Sex and the End of Victimhood,” Morales makes a historical connection between the systemic abuses of erotic perversions, cultural elisions of the erotic intimacy, and the perpetrations of individual abuses. Ultimately, Morales insists that history and dominant culture’s systemic and systematic assaults on healthy sexual identities work much like personal sexual abuses—they “interfere with intimacy, which ultimately requires vulnerability and surrender” (118). In this chapter, Morales answers this question: What does sexuality have to do with eroticism and subjectivity? For Morales, it is about joy and vitality. Our sexuality is “part of our aliveness” (118); it is one of the most important ways that we connect with our selves and with each other. Our sexuality is not a separate part of us, nor is it relegated to a private, separate sphere in the context of our experiences. If our sexuality is wounded, so is our spirit, so is our psyche, so is our body. Reclaiming a wounded sexuality or a wounded eroticism is about reclaiming life in all of its vitality and pleasure. It is also about reclaiming the ability to be intimate and to be vulnerable. This, too, is sexuality’s connection with difference. In difference and in pleasure we are uniquely attuned to immanent knowledges that cannot be separated from each other or from any other part of ourselves. This creates one more paradox of eroticism: in the particular, immanent, intimate places of our subjectivity are the ways in which we connect to the wholeness of the erotic life force through the movements indicative of becoming. When these divisions and assaults on our differences and sexual energies become reified or concretized, facts of our existence and our identities, our unfolding and becoming is blocked. Our intimacies are used against us. Our vulnerabilities become sites only for pain, abuse, and manipulation. We are silenced and turned against one another.

Lorde argues further that the erotic has been misused and misnamed as sensation (“Uses” 54). Because feminine power has traditionally been attached solely to the physical, feminism has wanted to deny the physical on the way to laying claim to their rightful place in the sphere of the intellectual instead of recognizing that the feminine erotic is a powerful place in which to reclaim our agency in ways that are bodily, spiritual, and intellectual. These perversions happen not only at the physical level, but also at the discursive level. Lorde explains that "abuses of the erotic comes from looking away, refusing to recognize it, giving it another name—it is this misnaming which gives rise to the distortion, perversion, pornographic, obscene—the perversion/distortion is a problem of language: knowledge, awareness and communication/relatedness." It is "An abuse of feeling" (59). The physicality of intimate connections is an integral part of eroticism. The concern, however, is that because intellectual and logical knowledge has traditionally been privileged and associated with masculine power, knowledges produced immanently and emotionally need to be transcended. Because differences often manifest physically, experientially, emotionally, and particularly, these aspects of identity should then be relegated to the physical only to be transcended in favor of universality and sameness.

Nevertheless, the physicality of abuse and sexual violence is also a serious concern when trying to come to situate identity and subjectivity in eroticism. Morales writes,

> We are so vulnerable in our pleasures and desires. The fact that they could induce physical pleasure in me against my will allowed them to shame me. It allowed them to persuade me that my sexuality was untrustworthy and belonged to others. It allowed them to persuade me that my desires were dangerous and were one of the causes of my having been abused (117).

This is a story told over and over in the context of sexual abuse and rape and sexual assault as a tool of oppression in all of its forms. It is easy to read that desire, in the instances of these abuses, was the problem, the fault of the victim, and not the wielding of that desire for harming others thereby holding the perpetrator accountable. In her book *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home,* Amber Hollibaugh outlines the ways in which we have been taught to fear our desires and our deepest cravings, which then blurs the boundaries of our subjectivity and obfuscates the power we have in these desires. It allows someone else to define our sexual desires, what is appropriate for us, what is or is not an abuse or violation of our bodies. When these boundaries are violated we are led to believe that there are no more boundaries or that the boundaries are artificial. Morales states that, "However the abuse is perpetuated, the result is the same: abuse does not make sense in the context of our humanity, so when we are abused, we must either find an explanation that restores our dignity or we will at some level accept that we are less than human and lose ourselves, and our capacity to resist, in the experience of victimhood" (4). Desensitizing ourselves to these boundaries desensitizes us to the power we have to resist, to reconstruct the integrity of those spaces in between the folds of our self-identified and socially-constructed subjectivity. Redefining those boundaries and being able to explore and transgress those boundaries with our integrity in tact are the goals of erotic subjectivity.

The tendency in literary criticism is to focus on the ways in which the postmodern subject has been disconnected to her own sexuality or the ways in which modern life and the contemporary situation has contributed to a trauma-based sexuality. In all fairness, much of literary canon has contributed to this discussion, exploring the ways in with sexuality has been largely a litmus test of social, cultural trauma and the ways in which that trauma manifests itself in our most intimate moments. However, intimate sexuality and sex itself has also been a haven, a place that has also maintained itself as a site of resistance to the modern cultural and social traumas. Writers and poets have certainly used sexuality as a way of claiming a particular marginality, of claiming individualism and agency through transgressing sexual mores. By the same token, sexuality, particularly the sexuality of female protagonists in literature, has been used to indicate sexual agency, to keep in check the erotic subjectivity of those individuals who function at the periphery. It is not surprising that much of the criticism examines these sexualities that are resistant, antagonistic, and aberrant, as this sexuality makes for an important metaphor for the states of cultural and social tension. But what is missing from this discussion is an understanding of sexuality, particularly eroticism, as a mode and a site of healing. Not only is it a place of individual healing, a healing that often must take place in spite of the personal, violent, sexual traumas that have been committed, but also as a first place for cultural healing. In the literatures I will be discussing, these two, the cultural and the personal, go hand in hand.

Sex, Power, and the Dialogue

Sexuality is often, overwhelmingly, a site of silence. This is true of those who are perpetrators as well as victims and survivors of the wounded erotic. Investigations of these silences, particularly in literature, have focused on the act of silencing by the perpetrator or oppressor. But discursive silence, too, is a means of empowerment, where the body’s language and action can begin. Language is simultaneously important for healing, for the telling of stories of eroticism of sex, for reclaiming the erotic and eroticism, and as vehicle for claiming one’s agency and contingent on another.

Nevertheless, refusing to participate in hegemonic discourse also provides a means of resisting reification into that discourse.

I believe that it is from this space that Lorde theorizes the erotic. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde explains the impetus for beginning her forays into nonfiction in what she imagined would be a series or a "progression" of essays on the transformative aspects of poetry and knowledge. Central to her desire to undertake this project were the silences themselves; silence was the impetus of her poetry. She tells Rich,

> I kept myself through feeling. I lived through it. And at such a subterranean level that I didn't know how to talk. I was busy feeling out other ways of getting and giving information and whatever else I could because talking wasn't where it was at. People were talking all around me all the time—and not either getting or giving much that was useful to them or to me. ("An Interview" 82)

Lorde reiterates here her thesis in "Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" that poetic language is a mode of connecting with and speaking from feeling. Feeling is that deep knowledge that is kept hidden and unacknowledged precisely because it is truly powerful; it is for Lorde a spiritual source, an intuition that connects us to ourselves and each other. If subjectivity is the map between the inner folds of identity and the external body of existence, then poetry is the expression of that subjectivity forged in the silences of those folds.

These silences are powerful spaces within us, but they are also often present because aspects of ourselves, particularly our impetus for joy and pleasure, have been silenced by others. These silences, or nondiscursive spaces, have dual characteristics.

They are places carved out to resist the totalizing narratives of oppressive hegemonic forces, but they are also places from which we connect immanently with the erotic plane and others who reach out to us through the pain of lived difference and marginality. Pleasure as a condition of the erotic is mode of resistance, but because this pleasure occurs in the context of another and the world at large, this pleasure comes with responsibility and accountability to another's agency and power.

These issues of power in relation are important to an erotic discourse because it is "in the bedroom," in our moments of sexual and intimate play, that we are most vulnerable and most powerful. We are constantly renegotiating our power with our partner or partners, and the foundations of safety exist in the very ways in which we establish the boundaries of our intimacy and maintain the integrity of our bodies and minds. Thus, the issue of sadomasochism has been an important point of contention in sexual identity and sexuality particularly for feminists. Lorde and Hollibaugh seem to stand on opposite sides of the divide, but looking carefully at their arguments about power reveals some important intersections in their understandings about power relations in the bedroom.

First, both feel that power in the bedroom is not confined to the bedroom. Both Lorde and Hollibaugh believe in the primary importance of examining the ways in which we enact power in our intimate relationships disseminates into our political and social lives. For both, negotiating power in the bedroom is central to understanding not only our own personal agency but our agency in the sociopolitical sphere. For Lorde however practicing sadomasochism has ethical implications that belie the erotic project. Allowing ourselves to play out the inherent power inequalities in a sadomasochistic relationship, even in fantasy, betrays the anti-hierarchical erotic condition. However, for Hollibaugh, the line between play and the sociopolitical statement is a bit blurred.

For Hollibaugh it is important to play out issues of power in the bedroom. She writes, “Sometimes I want to play, resist, fight against another woman sexually; sometimes I want to surrender. I can’t imagine sex without this. In the end, I don’t’ want to do away with power in sex, like a part of the feminist movement; I want to redistribute that power and knowledge so I can use it (and use it better) for myself and my partner” (101). Lorde understands sadomasochism as giving up your power to “play” oppressed. This conditions us, she believes, to accept our powerlessness and “feeds the belief that domination is inevitable and legitimately enjoyable” (“Sadomasochism” 52). Hollibaugh on the other hand suggests that we embrace our vulnerabilities, not by abdicating power, but by letting another person help us achieve a certain sexual equilibrium. For Hollibaugh, power in the bedroom is not about abdicating our power, but about considering our sexual agency in the context of the other person, allowing the person power in our most vulnerable condition. It asks the other to accept a critical and delicate responsibility for us; it requires accountability. Lorde, of course, recognizes this accountability in our actions but forecloses the sadomasochistic relationship. Hollibaugh takes a less definitive stance, making concessions for the possibility of examining those sadomasochistic relationships and asking us not to close off the possibility of those relationships before we can examine them more closely.

For Hollibaugh, there is a discourse that happens in these intimate relationships. This is a new dimension of equality in the erotic that Moraga and Hollibaugh identify:

> It’s hard to talk about things like giving up power without sounding passive. I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting. I expose myself for her to appreciate. I open myself out for her to see what’s possible for her to love in me that’s female. I want her to respond to it. (75)

Opening up the dialogue for response is entirely active, even if cultural cues have made it seem passive. Asking questions instead of making claims can be just as demanding in discourse. Power must be given/agreed upon in order to be erotic. In the case of erotic sexuality, the ability to get to the point of orgasm is a complex dance of negotiating power and relinquishing control for all those involved.

Allowing your desires the space of fantasy is integral to the health of the self—not just the sexual self, but the self that creates intimacy with others, sexual and otherwise. It is a space that allows you to generate and assert your own power and agency, even if that agency involves allowing someone access to your desires and allowing someone to be responsible for producing pleasure in you. Sharing power is implicit in eroticism which is an important part of communicating your needs and desires to others. For Hollibaugh, erotic subjectivity and potential is frightening because it requires accepting a huge responsibility for oneself and the world, precisely because the erotic thus defined cannot be relegated to one area of life—on the contrary it infuses every area of life experience (95). When you strive for erotic integrity, in which the erotic is integrated into all aspects of life, you are also responsible the erotic potential in others. You desire to share your erotic power with others and to see them thrive, because the connection with the immanent knowledge of the erotic is predicated on a connection with others. Where there is disconnect, there is pain, fear. Where there is connection, there is great responsibility to yourself and another. Maintaining integrity is an issue of maintaining power.

Power, however, has to be re-membered. Poetic expression, the literary erotic, is an important tool for remembering erotic power. Poetic space is a way in which we can conceptualize our fantasies of giving up and accepting power in relation to each other without having to actualize those fantasies. Poetic language realized in the space of eroticism can become a powerful site for connecting subjectivities within the text itself but also between the writer and the reader. Erotic literature is meant to connect on a visceral level. By connecting both on a visceral level and an intellectual level, erotic literature creates a dialogue between the two that is parallel to the dialogue between the characters in the literature as well as the reader and the writer. These relationships function much like the relationships that Hollibaugh hopes for as part of healthy negotiations of power in intimate sexual relationships. The reader is as much responsible for navigating the textual map as the writer is in constructing it. This is an inherent partnership in erotic literature. But this literature also allows the reader to see alternative modes of subjectivity. It allows the reader to see a subject differently situated. It is concept creation at its most raw.

In the following reading of Salwa Al Neimi’s erotic novel *Proof of the Honey*, I explore the various ways erotic literature maps erotic subjectivity in the process of unfolding, but also the way the text itself works as a map of the movements from the silences to the expressions of subjectivity and resistance. What I find particularly important about this text is its auspicious overtures about language itself as a function of sexual identity, but also the relationship between sexual identity and cultural identity.

Erotic Textuality in Salwa Al Neimi's *The Proof of the Honey*

In *The Proof of the Honey*, Syrian writer Salwa Al Neimi's narrator details her sexual exploits during her journey through the erotic literature from her Arab ancestors. Of her encounters with men early in her journey she reveals, "I knew that I was body alone, that I possessed nothing else. My body was my intelligence, my consciousness, and my culture. He who desired my body loved me. He who loved my body desired me. This was the only love that I knew, and the rest was literature" (35). The rest, then, is a literature central to her story and to her self-discovery. Al Neimi's unnamed narrator is a woman whose journey through her secret, hidden desires takes place in the context of her discovery of the erotic literatures of her Arab ancestors. By discovering and reclaiming that literature and her own story, she is able to find love that extends beyond the simple conflation of body and desire that begins her story. She does not negate those bodily passions, or subsume them with transcendent romance, but seeks integration between her physical and emotional desires, between her private life and her public life. Al Neimi's narrative is a textual revelation of the healing, connecting nature of erotic sexuality. Throughout *The Proof of the Honey*, the narrator's reflections on her erotic life reveal the ways in which that life and its physical, intellectual, and unconscious demands push her towards a deeper understanding of her own subjectivity. Her hidden erotic life provides opportunities for connecting to something outside of her, be it her intellectual past, her cultural history, a community of women, her lovers, or her colleagues in ways that are both meaningful and redemptive. Her "only love," her bodily love, she learns, does not need to be transcended, mastered, or compromised on the way towards an integrated understanding of herself in the context of another. In fact it is through this journey from her inner, secret life, to that which is largely communal, public, and intimate of another person that she might “uncover [her] powers” (136) and “arrive at meaning” (138). Her literature, her text, and her story that she shares with her reader is uncovered in the process, and is, in fact, the very thing which liberates her from a culture of repressed sexuality.

Writing is one of the most important tools with which to begin this process. “Storytelling,” explains Morales, “is a basic human activity with which we simultaneously make and understand the world and our place in it” (61). Writing “confirms our presence” (62). Writing—poetic, creative expression—is a process that unearths that which has been hidden by one’s self, by complicity in one’s own repression, or by that which has been done to us by oppression. The erotic power within women and men has been silenced by this repression. Al Neimi’s narrator begins with this silencing: “I silenced my noises. I forgot my girlfriends. I dissolve exegesis and theory into the experimental fusion of bodies” (13). The narrator begins from a point of singular subjectivity. She claims to come to her lover, the Thinker, in their rendezvous, aware that she is constituted entirely by her physical body, yet she recognizes elements of her life that are ignored and hidden. The narrator’s erotic encounters with her lover parallel her intellectual exploration with the classical Arab erotica. She is a scholar working in a university library where she discovers the ancient texts of her culture full of stories that have been forgotten, silenced. The discovery of these stories intersects with the discovery of her own voice when she is asked to put together a project for the university that will expose these texts to a larger, Western audience. From the beginning of the text, however, we sense her deep hesitation about exposing these secret, succulent texts that she has indulged in and a place that has empowered her. But there is also a sense that the silence and secrecy is a place that has allowed her and the texts to grow stagnant and comfortable. The power of these texts, as well as her own body-text, she seems hesitant to unveil.

Lorde speaks extensively about the power of naming and speaking out that which has been hidden and oppressed, and the role that poetry plays in that process. She writes, "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. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding" ("Transformation" 36). Poetry is the way to access the "deep, ancient knowledge," the erotic in ourselves, and to put it out in the world as a way to connect with the erotic in others. Because these places do not reside within the intellectual realm, because they are unintelligible, it takes a unique process to access the knowledge that resides there. Here, for Lorde, is where poetry becomes a critical tool for breaking the silence of oppression while honoring erotic knowledge. She explains: "We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it" (38).

For Estes, storytelling, like dream symbols, is the tool that allows the conscious to access the wisdom of the deep, pre-historic knowledge of the unconscious. She notes that "the language of storytelling and poetry is the powerful sister of dream language…That is why images and languages that arise from core are so important" (518-519). Reading and decoding dream language, the stories told by that the unconscious, as a way to access the memories of the hidden, repressed erotic life is critical to bridging unconscious, pre-intellectual knowledge with understanding. She explains that naming our desires, calling on the Wild Woman, the one who symbolizes our forgotten, unconscious feminine, creative powers, allows us access to our memories. By reclaiming memories on our own terms, not as they are revised by those who would have us re-member our selves based on other's reconstructed versions, we reclaim our "alpha matrilineal being" who "comes through the written and spoken word; sometimes a word, a sentence or a poem or a story, is so resonant, so right, it causes us to remember, at least for an instant, what substance we are really made from, and where is our true home" (5-6). We are able to begin the construction of our own subjectivity outside of the oppressive patriarchal paradigm of history. "Stories," Estes explains, "set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered" (20).

Writing is, according to Lorde, the distillation of the experience of untapped, unheard, unrecognized voices of those most marginalized. Poetry gives me the tools to name the deep, ancient knowledge, the feminine creative, but it also allows me to implicate the reader in that knowledge, to connect my experience to the experience of someone else. Through the poetic discourse, I ask you to access your deep and ancient knowledge, too, so that we can come to an understanding. The distillation of experience as the central role of poetry, or of writing, or of art, underscores the nature of the erotic, where it resides, and how it works in our lives as an inner struggle and an outer mode of connecting in the world. This is critical to accessing that which is not logical or rational, which, alone, can often limit the possibilities for change in discourse and culture. In her seminal essay "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous that writing has been run by "a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated…where woman has never her turn to speak" (879). The repression of the feminine and the non-logical, non-rational aspects of self and expression is the most pernicious way that patriarchal mechanisms of discourse have alienated the feminine and the erotic from history. "This," says Cixous, "being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). The power of the poet, artist, writer is the power to access this site of resistance to those patriarchal forces by exposing the feminine to these logical/rational structures, thereby creating a fissure—what Cixous describes as

> That radical mutation of things brought on by a material upheaval when every structure is for a moment thrown off balance and an ephemeral wildness sweeps order away, that the poet slips something by, for a brief span, of a woman…because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive. (879-880)

I find it difficult to ignore that her language itself in this passage is erotic, creating chaos resembling that moment of orgasm during which the poet/lover can create something new, something productive, and give power to that which has not been powerful before. This is the principle role of literature, the importance of literature, not just in any society or culture, but to life that would be lived with any quality, with any desire to survive psychically or physically. Poetry and literature, art in general, are the scouts for any discourse—the one that rides ahead scoping out the landscape of the unconscious, the silenced, the repressed, reporting back her findings. And from this begins the exploration of all other disciplines, discourses, conversations, debates, rhetoric. Only when we name through poetic language (or concept creation in general) that which has been hidden from us can we then put our finger on its pulse, to resuscitate it if it needs to be resurrected or to let it die were it to mean us harm.

The path from the unconscious to conscious can be a painful but crucial one. The journey from recognizing our deepest desires to the expression of those desires happens in an experimental place that, as Cixous stated, is crucial for creating the possibilities required for transforming one's relationship to oneself and society. Poetry, storytelling, and written and oral expression come from a space of experimentation that emanates from within. Reveling in the space of play that erotic literature provides is a healing activity. It not only allows us to act out decisions, but it allows one to play out desires that the culture represses as unacceptable. For Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, the repression of the unconscious erotic desires is a threat to us. Moraga explains: "What I think is very dangerous about keeping down such fantasies is that they are forced to stay unconscious…If the desire for power is so hidden and unacknowledged, it will inevitably surface through manipulation or what have you. If you couldn't play captured, you'd be it" (Hollibaugh 73). Fantasies provide a space for acting out choices; it allows those unconscious desires for power to be played out. "If you don't speak your fantasies," explains Hollibaugh,

> They become a kind of amorphous thing that envelops you and hangs over your relationship, and you get terrified by the silence. If you have no way

> to describe what your desire is and what your fear is, you have no way to negotiate with your lover...People are profoundly afraid of questions of power in bed. And, though everybody doesn't play out power the way I do, the question of power affects who and how you eroticize your sexual need. (74)

Reclaiming the erotic is contingent on reclaiming agency and power to explore, express, and fantasize one's desires. But most critical is a space for this to happen, a space that allows for the realization that these desires may not always be played out physically, but imaginatively they might provide those moments of expression without the fear of harm to ourselves and others.

Erotic literature then provides a safe space for those desires to be explored and metaphorized, while at the same time allowing deep, visceral feelings to come to the surface, eliciting sensual feelings and challenging the status quo. Desire is highly regulated precisely because it is the space of possibility and of the liberty of choice, the space where we play out decisions in ways that privilege our individual power instead of surrendering our choices to systemic, institutionalized power. This is what makes erotic literature so subversive, not because of the material that makes it up but because of the democratic, liberating nature of the space of play itself. Hollibaugh explains, "fantasies had a reality of their own and did not necessarily lead anywhere but back to themselves…[allowing] me a freedom unhindered by the limits of my body or the boundaries of my conscious" (98). Fantasies allow us to defamiliarize ourselves from the existing constructs of identity; we are able to check reality by ungrounding our intellectual knowledge and finding other ways of being and seeing and sensing. It is in this way that we redefine our limitations, integrate, not disintegrate. Fantasies allow us to envision that which is beyond what our realities allow and challenge our limitations. They also ask us to identify that which does limit us, be it the pain of other people or things or the pain of our own lives. It makes us push ourselves farther imaginatively so that we can figure out how far we're willing to go realistically. It is how we continue to progress instead of stagnate. But there must always be movement between these two spheres, fantasy and reality; there must always be communication between the inner and outer, and we must map the dialogue between the two through writing, poetry, art, creative expression, and love-making.

This space of play and fantasy was particularly important for Al Neimi's narrator. Her relationship with the classic literature provided a space for the narrator to explore her desires and her sexuality. This literature was a space that confirmed her power as a woman, as a sexual being, and it gave her the language that allowed her to "play" with the Thinker both intellectually and sexually. "It was enough for me to find pleasure in my books, as I read them again with him" admits the narrator (19). The books gave them names of sexual positions that "became a secret code with which we communicated with one another." The books, then, became a bridge between her secret desires and her lover. "It wasn't always easy," she says, placing those names "in the midst of meaningful sentences." In this passage, the desire for the classical texts, a desire that she had once kept secret, transform from an unconscious, secret desire to one that is shared between her and lover as verbal expressions, a game. The realm of the erotic becomes, quite literally, a space of play in which sexual positions are not merely acted out but are shared verbally and playfully between the narrator and her lover.

Lorde recognizes the hesitation or the utter inability for women to access the source of the power and agency that we have that would be the foundation of these interaction of mutual sexual power. “As women,” she claims, “we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (53). Because we distrust it, Hollibaugh argues that feminism often tries to strike power from the record completely. The distrust of traditional, historic, patriarchal power has been the excuse for giving up all claims to power, including our own. This is the legacy, Holligbaugh argues, that we have inherited from second-wave feminism:

> I think what feminism did, in its fear of heterosexual control of fantasy, was to say that there was almost no fantasy safe to have where you weren’t going to have to give up power or take it. There’s no sexual fantasy I can think of that doesn’t include some aspect of that. But I feel like I have been forced to give up some of my richest potential sexually in the way feminism has defined what is, and what’s not, ‘politically correct’ in the sexual sphere. (79)

But merely claiming and relinquishing power in our own dimensions or in connection with others is not enough; we need an anchor, a record of those movements into and out of the margins of ourselves and of social and cultural spheres, showing us the ways in which those interactions are creative, productive, and just. This distance is mapped out by Al Neimi’s narrator through the story of her journey towards self-awareness and self-love. Such is the difference between impotent literature and revolutionary literature, the difference between romance and dimensionality. Poetic language and erotic literature—

the intimacy of scrutiny—is the measure of that distance, the road map between ourselves and each other.

Al Neimi's narrator insists that the sole measure of herself was through her "body alone," but this body, she claimed, was a text itself, "a a spoiled draft whose symbols no one could make sense of, note even myself—pages written in a secret code. The Thinker came to shine a light on the code and make sense of the symbols" (31). The Thinker "read" her draft, made sense of her body, in a literal way. She insists that, "He did not sweep the past aside but bestowed upon me a key with which to read the palimpsest of my life…before him I was complete unto myself" (31). She had power within herself that was made manifest through the erotic relationship in which she was able to relinquish a certain type of power to her reader so that she might better understand that which was latent in herself.

The negotiation of the body as text lays out some important work that the narrator must do in order to come to a more integrated version of herself. Allowing her desires the space of fantasy was integral to the health of her Self—not just her sexual self, but the self that created intimacy with others, sexual and otherwise. Just as important was this space for understanding how she generated and asserted her own power and agency, even if that agency involved allowing someone access to her desires, allowing someone to be responsible for producing pleasure in her. Sharing power is implicit in eroticism and was an important part of communicating her needs and desires to others. This relationship exists in writing and poetry as well. The text needs a reader to decipher and make sense of its language for it to have an effect in the world. The voiceless and silenced need to be heard, read, and engaged.

For Estes, the masculine/feminine relationship is an important part of this intersubjectivity, particularly in terms of expression of the erotic. Coming from a Jungian tradition, she calls the counterpart to the erotic drives/desires the animus. With the help of the animus, the erotic is given expression into the world. It is the bridge between the conscious and the unconscious, the organizing tendencies of the unconscious symbols that make expression possible. Estes explains that the "Animus can best be understood as a force that assists women in acting in their own behalf in the outer world. Animus helps a woman put forth her specific and feminine inner thoughts and feelings in concrete ways—emotionally, sexually, financially, creatively, and otherwise" (336). Estes uses the language of travelling and mapping, the animus being that which takes the product of the free play of inner thoughts and dream work and then brings those ideas "to fruition" (337); he is the traveler between the inner and outer words. This relationship is one between artist and body: "Think of Wild Woman, the soul-Self, as the artist and the animus as the arm of the artist…Without him the play is created in one's imagination, but never written down and never performed" (336). The body must produce the inner work to expose it to the world. Importantly, "the key aspect to a positive animus development is the actual *manifestation* of cohesive inner thoughts, impulses, and ideas" (338). For the masculine to be a positive force, it must help the erotic be produced; instead, the patriarchal tradition encourages the masculine to play a destructive role by silencing the erotic, desire, and the unconscious drives associated with the feminine.

Al Neimi's narrator creates for herself a positive animus. She reveals at the end of the narrative that her lover, the Thinker, is a story she created for herself, a composite of her lovers, an entity necessary for her to bridge her hidden desires to her Self made manifest. By exposing the reader to the classical texts, primarily written by men, she exposes positive masculinity, allowing herself to take control of her voice and express it to the world. Like Estes suggests, the positive masculinity that resides inside the narrator becomes an organizing force who "[shinned] a light on the code and [made] sense of the symbols" (35). Encounters with the Thinker first begin making an impression on her psyche through her dreams, which Estes points out produces the language symbols of the unconscious. The Thinker, the narrator reveals, inhabits her dreams unlike previous lovers:

> Before the thinker, men entered my dreams only long after they had left my bed…They had to be left to mature in my secret caves for a time before they could come to me in my dreams and enliven them. I needed time as my accomplice to recreate them as stories that kindled my imaginations, as words that restored my balance. The Thinker, however, would steal away from bed and enter my dreams; he was going too far, too fast. He came to me. I awoke. I was scared. (37-38)

Understanding the Thinker as a metaphor for her writing life, for her storytelling as part of her erotic journey to an integrated self, shows in this passage. While it is certainly important to complicate this binary of masculine/feminine, what is important here is that these two aspects of her subjectivity, the immanent knowledge and the discursive imperative, exists simultaneously without one being transcended by the other. The animus might be considered a metaphor for the need to enter the discursive sphere, rather than to remain in the hidden recesses of silence. Her fear is that of the impending congruity between the conscious and the unconscious, between the fantasy life to which she escapes and the fantasy that provides the foundation for change in her waking, conscious life.

It is terrifying to bridge the two because it is unfamiliar, everything in our culture works towards keeping them separated, and the convergence of the two can be destabilizing. It must be so. It must unground the narrator from that which is familiar to her. This, according the Estes, is the difference between the nurturing and comforting. Comfort maintains the familiarity of isolation and solitude. It is entertainment that one seeks when one hides from the outer world—a way to distract oneself from the fear of responsibility of expression. Estes explains that “When women are out in the cold, they tend to live on fantasies instead of action. Fantasy of this sort is the great anesthetizer of women” (348). Action carries with it responsibility, but with it also comes community. Once the narrator’s hidden desires were coaxed out of the solely unconscious realm, the narrator begins her exploration through the stories of women. She writes “I have a physical need for water, semen and words…Each helps to organize my confusion and accompanies me through my days and nights” (49). The masculine drive to organization is associated with the critical moment in the text in which the narrator seeks out the stories of women as part of her research towards her erotic project. The parallels between her desire to unveil the classic erotic texts and her journey to unveil her erotic self bring her to the nurturing community of women who tell their own stories of sexuality and repression and ask the narrator to uncover even more of her history.

The first time the narrator experienced a deep need for more time and interaction with the Thinker, who has come to symbolize her private, hidden life, was in the company of women in the hammam, the Turkish baths. This need was elicited by the masseuse’s physical touch, which reminded her of the Thinker. Al Neimi titles this section of the story “On Water,” which suggests the elemental nature of the need for these desires to make themselves manifest. Incidentally, this section transitions into the narrator’s exploration of women’s narratives, thereby accessing her own personal history connected to the histories of women in her own life. Like the transition of her desires from her dreams to her bed, characterized by the Thinker’s intrusion into her dream life, this is a process that is painful and difficult for her. Her memories are riddled with stories of women who followed their love and their desires and were ostracized and shunned by her Arab community. Memories of these women played a critical role in her own personal history, one which she vehemently protected. The narrator writes of an instance in which her innocent memory of a neighbor was challenged by a friend who suggested that the secret meetings to which the narrator was party might have been less than chaste encounters. The narrator, indignant about the suggestive remarks, denies that anything like what her friend suggested had happened, but, the narrator admits, “I wasn’t defending my young neighbor. Vigilant, ever on the alert, I wanted to defend the images impressed upon my memory…I was defending my personal history” (56). Having the innocence of her memories challenged, the chasteness that was constructed by the intervention of a patriarchy bent on the politics of respectability for all women, was a painful experience for her. Complicity in these clandestine affairs was discomforting for the narrator, because it asked her to question the places in her memory where women in her life had been placed—a place of clear delineations between women who succumbed to impropriety and those who denied their desires and impulses only to marry into lives that the narrator swore never to emulate. The transgression of this boundary, in her memory and her personal history, was a difficult experience, but one necessary for her erotic journey.

This transgression in her memory was crucial also because it created the resistance necessary to delineate the boundaries of desires and what the culture, the outer world, can hold, and how one finds one's place in it, while challenging it at the same time. This erotic, experimental place for the narrator has transitioned from a private, intimate space of intellectual play with her own desires and the classical texts of her culture, to that of her bodily expression with the Thinker, and now to a more communal space filled with women who share their stories of repressed and expressed sexuality and desire. Estes notes that this communal territory is part of the process of integrity: "Adjoining in instinctual nature means not to come undone but to establish territory—find one's pack—there is vast integrity to it" (11). The expression of desires exercises choice; to move and transition from one space of play to the next (mapping: creating a map through the movement in and out of the private and the communal) is to territorialize—delineate the experiential without limiting it. Storytelling as a part of the narrator's journey through the world of women nurtures her desires, because the women challenge what she has learned and experienced as a woman repressing her eroticism. Lorde, too, emphasizes the importance of women's intimate communication with each other as a space of experimentation: "For every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made a contract with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging out differences…we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence" ("Transformation" 41). For the narrator, the tyrannies are those of "dissimulation." She is systematically uncovering the “truth” of the erotic history of her culture, of the community of women, and of herself by engaging with her desires and slowly bringing her hidden pleasure to the surface. Naming desires in the presence of others or to the world through writing is to embody it poetically so that it can move about in the world and touch things.

Forms of expression and communication throughout these parallel experiences continue to shape the narrator’s private life, bringing them closer to her public life. Metaphorically, this is accomplished through understanding herself and the Thinker as a question and a reply. The Thinker’s “presence was so complete that it obliged me to answer him” (93). That she compares their meeting to a question and a response emphasizes the rhetorical nature of this relationship, the confluence of the bodies as texts and the relationships as conversations. But this metaphorical relationship was also part of what defined their space of play, moving it from the comfort of fantasy to that of true intimacy, which creates the possibility of change and progress for her as an integrated subject. She explains that “between the question and an intimation of the reply I moved ever closer to the Thinker, becoming more aware of the dangerous game that was defining itself in the space between us” (92). In this very moment, she makes a startling discovery which conflates the very nature of poetic expression with her physical being: “Was poetry one of the keys to my body? Poetry was there between us. He loved me through the poems of others…Was my body one of the keys to poetry” (94). The answer, we discover, is both.

Al Neimi’s narrator engages with her lover in much the same way she engages with the classical erotic texts that she is reading. Her encounters with the Thinker are riddled with word games and stories, poems read to each other out loud as they prepare to have sex. At the end of her story, the narrator reveals that the Thinker is not, in fact, one man, but a man of her own making, her own unconscious desires made manifest into an allegory, a literary device, “a ruse,” as she calls it. This man is her story created as a way to express her hidden desires and to share them with her reader. He is the scout come to map the distance between the “chaos of [her] strongest feelings” and “the beginning of [her] sense of self” (Lorde, “Uses” 54). The story of the Thinker, at the end, is reinscribed into her own story, into the text itself, so that one is necessarily informed by the other. She has integrated her desires symbolized by the Thinker into her expression of those desires through her story. She has mapped this journey with the literature of her texts: her body, the classic erotic texts of her ancestors, the narratives of women, and finally her own story woven into a literary project. Al Neimi’s narrator insists, to the reader, that “Each of us has a Thinker, male or female, one or many, who waits for us in some part of the world to reveal us to ourselves, to uncover our powers, so that we can go further into the labyrinths of our beings” (136).

The narrator emphasizes the importance of the bodily, visceral experience of her sexual encounters as the impetus for her journey to a more integrated self—the distance from a woman who defined her self as purely physical to the woman who was able to expose her hidden life—her pleasures and desires—to those around her, or, at least, to her reader. “Our encounters do not end, and the body is always the preamble,” she writes of the relationship between her and her allegorical Thinker. “The body was the basis of our story. Every morning the thinker accompanies my nudity…I recall his words and I shudder. I recall his words and his touch and his gaze and I shudder. I recall and I shudder, but I want to forget to get on with my life" (95). She recognizes her physical reactions to the psychic recantations of his words, his texts and words creating a response in her body. Again, she is frightened. She is frightened like she was when he would infiltrate her dreams so close to her bed; when the stories that her female friends shared with her challenged her personal history. Yet the narrator expresses her desire to have the Thinker (her hidden life; her desires) with her in her everyday world, her public life. It is here she recognizes her own strength, power, and agency—when the secret trysts between her and the Thinker come to an end. It is here she reveals that her hidden life, her secret desires, have come closer to integrating themselves into her public life. When she wants to negotiate her private being into her public life, wanting her erotic power expressed, the metaphor then is exposed, the narrative climaxes, the orgasm takes place, figuratively speaking, and her power disseminates throughout her life.

Conclusion

Estes writes that "to create one must be able to respond. Creativity is the ability to respond to all that goes on around us, to choose from the hundreds of possibilities of thought, feeling, action, and reaction that arise within us, and to put these together in a unique response, expression, or message that carries moment, passion and meaning" (343). The narrator's creative project is a response to the erotic narratives that she uncovers in the library of her cultural ancestors. Their disclosure was necessary for the narrator to integrate her own desires with her sense of self that she felt could no longer be hidden—a self that was exposed through the sexual relationship with the Thinker. By doing so, and by expressing it purposefully in her native tongue, Arabic—"the language of sex"—she creates a response that maps a course towards reimagining an erotic history of her own culture. She argues that “the forbidden words [of Arabic erotica] brought to life a history of sexual repression and of the resistance to that repression” (21). Al Neimi’s narrator maps out her own resistance to that culture of repressed desire by forming herself into a more fully integrated feminine subject through the erotic journey. The text itself, her narrative, her journey is the map of this movement from the inner life of desires that threatened to remain repressed to the willingness to share her erotic texts in its myriad forms.

Lorde writes that “the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger…we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live…and that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (“Transformation” 42). The narrator makes herself visible to her reader through her text and through her mother tongue. In doing show she also makes visible a cultural, textual history, exposing the erotic tradition and undermining those tyrannies of dissimulation. For Al Neimi, the process of writing and poetic expression, or “intimate talk,” are the keys to “true cultural exchange” (124). Al Neimi’s text is erotic not only in content but in the very structure of the narrator’s story as it unfolds from bodily desires, that deep, ancient knowledge expressed through feeling, to an expression of that knowledge, the naming of desires that can no longer be contained the a repressive cultural regime. The text conflates words with sex, as any good, erotic literature should. “Freedom of speech,” says Al Neimi’s narrator, “is undoubtedly a form of sexual freedom” (106).

The Proof of the Honey illustrates the ways in which poetic expression can map the distances between the discursive silences and the poetic expressions of erotic subjectivity. As an erotic text, it discloses the secret, silent places that allowed the narrator to forge a subjectivity that stood just outside of the forces of discursivity, but at the same time were informed by a particular cultural coding. Her subjectivity was always already contextualized by her particular historical and social situation, yet it does not limit her ability to imagine herself as more than that. The power of the erotic is the power to at once reside in the vulnerable but secret spaces of the immanent knowledge, but also to realize that knowledge through the physical body, viscerally and emotionally connected to the world at large.

CHAPTER 3

"Isn't This Counter-Revolutionary?": Discourse and Silence in African American Erotic Texts

Being vulnerable and intimate does not mean surrendering power. This is the most difficult ideal of the erotic to understand because we have relegated to the margins the models that show us that we can be powerful in our intimacy—that we can ask to share power in our intimate relationships. Reclaiming the erotic, and therefore reclaiming power and agency at our most vulnerable, is also about reclaiming the body as an active participant in, and site of, both resistance and integrity. This chapter explores literature in which sex, intimacy, and the body has been reclaimed as this very site of resistance, integrity, and intersubjectivity by actively resisting the conventional and discursive, while at the same time connecting and bridging emotional, psychical, and physical subjects.

In the previous chapter, I explained that theories that grew out of not only Black feminism but other feminisms theorized by women of color paved the way for discussing sexuality as something that is both vulnerable and powerful. As part of a conversation between these feminisms and mainstream philosophies, these theories have suggested that the space of the erotic lies at the intersection of the discursive and the possibility of the nondiscursive. Because theories of the erotic must also be theories of gender, identity, and sexuality, discursivity then becomes an important component of understanding the erotic. In fact, it is through dominant ideological discourse that the erotic has been perverted, weaponized, perverted, and "wounded." Revising the discourse, "coming to voice," transforming silence into action, and speaking our difference are all primary functions of reclaiming the erotic and reestablishing personal and cultural integrity.

Nevertheless, there is the possibility of understanding an aspect of subjectivity that is prediscursive.

The danger of considering a prediscursive aspect of subjectivity, however, is the risk of revising the theories of essentialism. However, many theorists argue that the erotic is fundamentally primordial and essential and that it preexists the individual, gender, race, identity, and the subject in general. In the introduction to *Erotique Noire*, Miriam DeCosta-Willis defines eroticism as:

> The powerful life force within us from which spring desire and creativity and our deepest knowledge of the universe. The life force that flows like an inscrutable tide through all things, linking man to woman, man to man, woman to woman, bird to flower, and flesh to spirit...Desire. Pleasure. Wholeness. (xxix)

Of course this definition of the erotic is certainly reminiscent of Lorde's definition, and these definitions have been reviewed earlier in this project. But what is particularly important about DeCosta-Willis's definition is her inclusion of the word "wholeness." Indeed, there is tendency to identify something prediscursive about the erotic—something whole that has been dis-integrated. While it is certainly not my intention, nor my project, in this argument to philosophize on the "nature" of the erotic, what is elemental to my project is this juxtaposition of the desire to insist upon a prediscursive erotic even as erotic literature constructs it discursively.

Language and discourse is critical to eroticism—a point made in the rest of DeCosta-Willis' definition of eroticism: "Our ancestors taught us this in their songs of live, their myths of creation, their celebrations of birth, and their rituals of initiation" (xxix). Erotic literature, then, is the space of linguistic play and experimentation in which we seek to give voice to that which, some might argue, lies outside of symbolic order. Indeed it may well be an essence as defined by some; nevertheless, it is some way of understanding an underlying wholeness to which we all seek to connect in some way. Indubitably, eroticism lies at the intersection of language and non-language, action and discourse, social bonding and private desires. This is the ultimate conflict of eroticism: that which is prediscursive is best expressed socially through the language of literature. However, what is elemental to erotic literature is the effort to express these nondiscursive moments through poetic, creative language.

African American literature's approach to sexuality is rife with the oscillations between overt expressions of sexuality as a way of resisting and revolutionizing the racialized, sexualized, marginalized Black subject and the suppression of the language of sexuality, eroticism, or intimate love. The complex relationship between Black writers and sexuality has been discussed at length elsewhere,[1] but out of this sociohistorical unfolding has emerged a way of expressing desire that some African American writers express as emblematic of the erotic intersection of language and non-language. A common theme in these literatures is the impulse of these writers to produce texts that do not choose between the two. There is no either/or of language/non-language, mind/body, intellectual knowing or body-knowledge. The two exist simultaneously, and, in the spirit of a nondialectical language, are not subsumed one within the other. I believe this is exemplified most honestly and (deceptively) simply by Ntozake Shange in "Fore/Play," the piece which opens the anthology *Erotique Noire*: "What are our names and the touch, taste of our bodies? Where do our tongues linger on each other and what is the nature of the language that we speak?" (xx). Side by side but unstratified, joined by "and" and not "or," is bodily action of "knowing" another through senses that do not speak and the naming of "each other." The tongue has a dual role, to taste and to speak—to know and to understand, to make sense of. Shange ends her piece with two quotes, one each by poets, activists, and founding members of the Last Poets, Felipe Luciano and Gylan Kain. She writes:

---

[1] Bell Hooks, Ann duCille, Ronald Johnson, etc.

> Years ago, Felipe Luciano brought a smile to my face when he incanted, "Jazz is a woman's tongue stuck dead in your throat," while Gylan Kain protested, "I am the golden flute your vulva lips refuse to play." (xx)

What Shange indicates here with these two selections is two-fold. First, there is a correlation between sexuality and musicality, one that can immediately be identified as something that is language and other-than-language. Jazz as a representation for language also complicates it, as jazz is often instrumentally driven, not lyrically driven.[2] But secondly, these two quotes indicate an interesting relationship between sexuality and the absence of language. For Luciano, the erotic nature of jazz is such that the sexual action interrupts the utterance of language. There is an absence of the lyric or word as the musical signifier. Kain's quote, too, conflates the sexual act with music-making, but it is also indicative of an absence of language that happens in the refusal of the intimate sexual moment. These quotes are metaphors for so much more than just the conflation of the sexual body and musical language, or language in general. There is a resistance, a tension inherent in these quotes, and one that is thematic throughout several of the pieces that I will discuss in this chapter. This tension lies at the heart of eroticism: the tension between the discursive and the nondiscursive, all expressed through the poetics of language. This tension is also the bond between intimate subjects.

---

[2] As a lover of, though certainly no expert in, jazz and blues, even I recognize this is a gross overgeneralization and could be complicated in any number of ways, but I hope that one understands the spirit in which I am making this barely supportable claim.

Excavating the erotic literatures of African American writers offers readers an intimate look into the erotic play of these tensions. The artists that I chose here play these erotic expressions like a guitar or a drum—each one adjusts the tension on her or his instrument to play to the just-right tone of her or his intimations. But these literatures also reveal the erotic as a uniquely historical site of resistance. The erotic is both a site of intimacy and a site of social resistance. I believe that these literatures reveal this dichotomy not because there is something essential to the African American subject, but because there is something essential to eroticism that makes it a site of both intimate connection and social resistance, and one that has become historically and culturally instrumental for African American writers because of a common, though differently experienced, socio-historical past.

Sexuality as a Site of Silence and Resistance

In African American literature, issues of sexuality have a complex and checkered past. American history is littered with stories of abject sexual enslavement, abuse, assault, and objectification. Women were seen as oversexualized (or asexual) exotic objects of lust and unchecked desire; Black men as sexually aggressive. DeCosta-Willis explains that "many nineteenth century and early-twentieth-century Afro-American writers and artists felt compelled to prove the moral worth and intellectual integrity of blacks by avoiding the literary representation of physical desire and sexual pleasure" (xxxii). In issues of sexuality, for Black women in particular, the delineation between silence and privacy and public discourse is not a clear one. Black women's sexuality was highly relegated, legislated, publicized, such that agency, protection, self definition, and safe space came in the form of secrecy, silence, and self censorship (Collins 135). In this way, discursivity became a form of protection, a way of controlling the narrative; politics of respectability became both a form of resistance and new type of silencing.[3] Sandra Y. Govan details visions and patterns of sexuality in black literature. Sex was the means of oppression, degradation, comeuppance, agency, inversion, rape, imprisonment, but at no point does she list any of the literature that suggests that sexuality was healing or liberating, at least in any mutual sense. She goes on to conclude that

> What we have is not so much a new tack as it is an 'unapologetic foregrounding of the madness' which has marked our past and 'infected' our present. The specter of unholy lust, illicit sex, suppressed erotica, and unlicensed sexual violence, acknowledged or not, permeates both our history and, sadly, our society. That such themes recur in our literature should be recognized as necessary revelations, as psychological insight into individuals and the culture which produced and 'sustains' them. (43)

I suggest that Govan sees canonical African American literature as a literature that is stuck diagnosing itself, sustaining those themes in terms of sex and sexuality. Of course these are important and revolutionary stories to tell—one must name the trauma and name one's oppressor. These are the ways in which one demands that the world see the wounds, to show it those gaping holes of pain and violence. But at the same time it is important to find models of bonding that are healthy and liberating as well; one must to be willing to let the wounds heal. There will still be the scars, and the stories, to show for it.

---

[3] I recommend both Evelyn Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* and E. Frances White's *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. This subject has been taken up by many theorists and writers including several of the theorists featured in my study such as Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Ann duCille, and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson.

Davidson's understanding of the fold presented in the last chapter is a helpful way to understand how silences are used in erotic literature. As the fold creates immanent spaces in which a new identity can unfold, we can imagine these spaces also as silences in the midst of a becoming. These silences are in no way voids, but active creative spaces constantly in dialogue or in movement with the external body or the externality of consciousness. There is a resistance to a historical construction, but also a fellowship with it as it helps to embody the space for generative, creative action independently of that history. This understanding of silence, I argue, was particularly apparent in many of the works by Black women who wrote both as part of and independent from the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was a particularly potent literary period in which a cultural identity was being shaped but often at the expense of the particular experiences of Black women. Claiming a space and a voice in this movement was difficult for Black women because of the movement's focus on nationalism, which primarily reinscribes patriarchal hierarchies and provisions.

Sex and sexuality were important themes for literature of resistance and critique of white power during the Black Power Movement.[4] Cherise Pollard states that "the physical disruption of the social order through sexual action becomes the perfect merger of social thought and political poetics" (177). While these tropes were used in many of the texts of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), Black women began to critique the power structures of BAM itself with their own expressions of sexuality. Sexuality and sexual power were used as potent sites for resisting the binaries that insisted Black women choose between their Black nationhood and their gender. The difference between Black feminists' undertaking of these sexual tropes and that of those artists endorsed by BAM was the way in which sexuality was used as a critique; women took ownership of their sexuality in opposition of the Black Nationalism. These women began to take on both racist and sexist institutions using Black feminine sexuality as a critique of the hegemonic structures. This critique becomes a staple of Black women's poetry, in the 1970s—diagnosing the problem by taking ownership of sexual agency.

---

[4] Cherise Pollard is cited here, but Madhu Dubey also discusses this topic at length in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994).

Nikki Giovanni was unique in her ability to both work within the Black Nationalist Aesthetic and to critique the very aesthetic from which she wrote. In a collection of poems published in 1968, *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment,* Giovanni challenges binaries of gender and race by deconstructing the very language through which being and subjectivity is constructed. In the space of only seven lines, Giovanni's "Word Poem (Perhaps Worth Considering)" reconstructs the very process of being as a mutual unfolding:

> as things be/come
> let's destroy
> then we can destroy
> what we be/come
> let's build what we become
> when we dream. (39)

Giovanni's poem begins with the separation of "be" and "come," being and action, specifically sexual action. In this process of dividing being and sexual identity, lines two and three of the poem fold over on each other, with the final two lines ending in a virtual space, a psychic space of dreaming. The destruction of the binary, being and sexual identity, is a necessary gesture of turning being into becoming, but also, in the interest of the fold, constructing a creative space for building an identity that both privileges the process of becoming and is integral to intersubjectivity ("*we* dream").

The poem's temporal markers are a bit disorienting, but this seems deliberate. While there is a division between "be"-ing and "come"-ing, being and coming are always present (because they are repeated) even when reintegrated as "become." It is as if the integration of "be" and "come" were always already so, yet simultaneously particular, individual, and discrete. Temporally, the poem folds back onto itself—present in tense and directive. The poem begins "as we be/come," indicating that we are in an already unfolding process, while "destroying" and "dreaming" are constructed as both future and present. The phrase "when we dream" suggests both something that is happening and that will happen. Destruction is also temporally ambiguous: "let us destroy" now, so that "we can destroy" in the future suggests that in becoming we must continue this creative process of subject formation.

Giovanni's poem is unique for BAM poems because it couples sex with being and becoming. "Coming" is separated from being both as a prescription of the binary problem—the divisive understanding of being—but also as a way to emphasize the verb "come" as integral to the process. While certainly female poets used sex and sexuality as a critique of both white and black power structures that they found themselves resisting, the sex act was usually a trope that enforced male political power and virility. In explaining this impetus in a poem "The Awakening" by Keorapetse Kgositsile, Pollard explains that the “cosmic orgasm” employed in the poem is a “show of inherent physical power and revolutionary release, *his* metaphorical orgasm disrupts the social hierarchy” (177, emphasis mine). The Black male figures in many of the BAM poems that metaphorize sexuality use the penis as a “marker of territory…a weapon” (176). Giovanni’s poem might be read in this tradition, but we might also read her use of the word “destroy” as a mark of disrupting power. However, there is a different type of resistance, a broader philosophical one, happening in the poem as well. While the use of Black sexuality as a disruptive trope was prescribed by the Black Aesthetic, sexual power was aggressive and masculine. The Black Aesthetic championed blatant overtures of Black power, concrete proclamations of revolt, and idealized Black manhood. Subterfuge, ambiguity, and ambivalence were maligned as “feminine” expressions and therefore relegated to the margins. However, Giovanni and other Black poets who use sexuality as both a force of resisting and connecting found ways to use the “imaginative spaces” of both poetry and marginality in order to critique hegemonic power enforced by both white privilege and Black Nationalism.

Reading Giovanni’s “Seduction” and Salaam’s “Tasty Knees”

Her seminal poem “Seduction,” published in the same volume of poetry as “Word Poem,” illustrates Giovanni’s use of the erotic as a way of creating and resisting the static definitions of gender, sexuality, and connecting. In “Seduction,” not only does Giovanni use sexuality and sexual bonding as a means to critique Black masculinity, but she uses silence as both a creative force and a site of resistance to the dominant narratives of the Black Nationalist rhetoric. “Seduction” is at once a cheeky satire of the relationships between men and women of the Black Arts Movement, a reflective look at her own role in the Black Nationalist discourse, and a serious critique of the relationship between the discourse and silence.[5]

In the poem, the narrator attempts to seduce a man who is trying unsuccessfully to express his ideas on revolutionary Black thought. The narrator seemingly ignores her object of desire's rhetoric and tries to distract him from it by undressing herself. When he fails to notice her own nudity, she puts his hand on her body, making the sexual movements for him. When that fails, she disrobes him, which then draws his attention away from his speech only long enough for him to chastise her for ignoring the import of his rhetoric. What this act of seduction initially represents is the role that women were often accused of playing in the Black Arts Movement or in the Black Liberation movement—a role of sexual companion, those who were relegated to the background, not invested or engaged in the rhetoric. As satire, this poem suggests that while this Black Nationalist idea of the woman's role is problematic, it is an ideal that also presents a moment of resistance—an important critique and alternative to the rhetoric of revolution and Black Nationalism.

At first Giovanni's narrator seems to be playing into the gender role of the Black woman, one that was overtly sexual, passive, and ambivalent about the revolutionary conversation, by wrongfully seducing her lover away from his revolutionary rhetoric. Yet, the narrator is not a passive figure. While she is a silent actor in the poem—she never speaks—she is active in her seduction, in her silent, bodily-engaged response to his rhetoric. As a dialogic partner, she is responsible for stripping him of the vestige of a constructed identity by “taking [his] dashiki off.” This is a particularly risky critique of the Black Nationalist, but one that is seen in other poems by Giovanni, such as “Beautiful Black Men,” in which she also satirizes the airs of identity that Black men, particularly Black Nationalists, constructed in the late 1960s. In “Seduction,” the narrator and her partner are wearing traditional African garb. She is the first to take off her “African gown” and then she proceeds to divest him of his “dashiki,” exposing him to the constructed nature of his identity—exposure about which he is indignant.

---

[5] Much is going on in this poem in terms of uniting Black Nationalist rhetoric with the larger rhetoric of race and gender unity as pointed out by Cherise Pollard and Cheryl Alexander Malcolm. While my reading will focus on the juxtaposition of silence and discursivity in the poem, I would like to point out that the former readings set the backdrop for this one.

After she has taken their clothes off, she takes his hand and places it on her stomach. This gesture is a subversion of the speech act itself. This gesture of touch and feeling undermines the knowledges that are available only through language and logic. Giovanni seeks to expose this hierarchy and the hypocrisy of this limitation. The revolutionary’s speech is interrupted by his nudity, as if his “state of undress” is inextricably tied to his nationalist rhetoric. But Giovanni positions his rhetoric and the end of a line, using an ellipsis as a sign of his interrupted speech. Each interruption is followed by the narrator’s nondiscursive action of taking off her clothes, touching him, taking off his clothes, and physically *feeling* him. The poem ends: “then you’ll notice/ your state of undress/ and knowing you you’ll just say/ ‘Nikki/ isn’t this counterrevolutionary…?” While the revolutionary seemingly has the last word, the line ends, again, with an ellipsis. Structurally we know that if a response were to follow, it would be a nonverbal, physical, seductive response. What’s more, however, is that the revolutionary’s last line is uttered in a state of absolute vulnerability, aware of his nudity and exposure. This is Giovanni’s ultimate subversion.

What is particularly progressive about this poem is that Giovanni's narrator privileges the act of love rather than proclamations of Black Nationalisms as the revolutionary act. In this way, Giovanni anticipates the Black feminist critique of Black Nationalism and BAM, critiques that often provoked discourse about self- and communal-love, particularly Black love, as a mode of resistance to both racist and sexist discursive paradigms of oppression. Anticipating Audre Lorde and Bell Hooks, both of whom celebrate Black female sexuality and the promotion of strong Black female egos, Giovanni's narrator strips her and her lover of their Black Nationalist identities, disrupting his discourse and exposing the truly revolutionary (not counterrevolutionary) act of love. The protests against the power of sensuality betray the limitations of rhetoric making the silencing of those acts and the acts of the silenced that much more powerful. "Seduction" then becomes a metaphor for the ways in which Black women related to (Black) power, both as a concept and as a movement. The revolutionary becomes a man of words, not action, a critique of the meaning of social activism itself. She is behaving, performing acts on the revolutionary. She does not speak to him, she acts upon him. She undresses him, revealing the deep insecurities of the revolutionary and the revolution itself. By undressing the revolutionary, she is asking him to be vulnerable in his sexuality with her—a power that traditionally exists in the realm of marginalized sexualities. The space of silence is a space of resistance to the rhetoric that disengages them from the truly revolutionary act of erotic bonding.

Alternatively, in Kalamu ya Salaam's erotic poem "Tasty Knees" initially it would seem that it is an orgasm, not silence or language, that is the act of resistance. Like Giovanni's poem, Salaam's "Tasty Knees" uses the Black revolutionary as emblematic of rhetorical power. However, in an interesting twist, the “militant” exercises rhetorical power through the “resolve to remain mute” (5). Beginning the poem “in the dark of touch,” Salaam positions the reader in a sensual environment. This environment however is not merely sensation, or surface, but it is the access point for the deeper place of understanding, the one in which the narrator descends. He’s taking us to a new site of knowledge. The beginning of this poem echoes Lorde’s “dark place within…these paces of possibility within ourselves” (“Poetry” 36). The description of touch as “dark” creates an interesting play, a unique way of spatializing sensuality. Several lines later, he reiterates this space by comparing his lover’s hair to “the lightless black of a warm womb’s interior.” Not only does this reinforce the spatial sensuality that begins the poem, the concrete “hair” is compared to a dark space, but it also makes compares the body with the body. As a method of literary rhetoric, there is no subverting the body or the sensual to privilege the conceptual. The body is not transcended through poetic ideals—a part of the body, in fact, becomes a metaphor for another part of the body. This device creates a tension, a friction from which the “dark of touch” is the meeting place for the two lovers’ bodies (Salaam 5). Touch is a new way of generating knowledge--the hand/touch/body is a metaphor for knowing. The surface of the body is the starting point of contact for a deeper journey. The lover’s hair becomes a “womb’s interior”—the body is both surface and interior. The lover’s body is doubly concretized as “your earth,” which opens up upon contact with the narrator’s “staff.” The poem suggests that the space of touch and the act of sexual contact is the access to a deeper joy.

After the lover has gestured to the narrator with her “wetness inviting touch,” the narrator’s “staff/ slides across [her] ground” (Salaam 5). The image of the penis (rod/staff) inscribing on the womb (ground) certainly seems emblematic of writing itself. The function of language and discourse in this relationship is reinforced in the subsequent lines: “though I want to scream i/ resolve to remain mute/ as a militant refusing to snitch/ to the improper authorities.” Writing is then supplanted by the absence of language, the mutism of a militant. However, in addition, there is a significant and deliberate line break after “though I want to scream *i*,” which also undermines the ego (I) of the narrator. He withholds his inscription by remaining mute, but only temporarily. This is an interesting companion to “Seduction” in that the militant is then electively mute in the face of authority, subverting revolutionary discourse for powerful silence.

The interaction between the narrator and his lover suggests a mutual connection that creates the moment of joy—the moment of orgasm. His moment of orgasm is achieved by diving below the surface, into the place of visceral, uteral knowledge, but there he does not remain quiet. While he “resolves” to keep quiet, to subvert his ego in the erotic act, he finally “disperse(s) the moist quiet of our union” with a “loud,” “triumphant,” “involuntary” orgasm (Salaam 5). And it is delicious![6] This dispersion, however, is caused by the “riot of joy” that is his orgasm. While we might read this poem as the man’s need to “vocalize” his orgasm at the expense of the woman who remains silent, it is important to go back to the space in which this poem begins. It is in a “dark of touch,” a space of knowledge, the space of the feminine, that the man is able to connect to the capacity for joy. For Lorde, joy is key to reclaiming the erotic, and in fact is one of the bonding agents in an erotic encounter. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” she writes,

---

[6] “*Tasty* Knees.”

> The erotic functions within 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)

Salaam's poem creates a union between the two lovers in which language, even the absence of language, is the map between the two lover's immanent knowledges. The narrator's "riot of joy" is the "chaos of our strongest feelings" (Lorde, "Uses" 54). This joy reflects the concept creation underlying the poem. The point of the creative process is "to make the kind of connections that could incite joyous alternatives to past representations of what it means to be female or male, feminine or masculine, a woman or a man, transgender or intersexual" (Lorraine 26). I would argue that this poem attempts to reimagine the masculine as the intersubjective companion to the feminine, folding inscriptions of gender on itself several times allowing for a space in which the concept of the masculine is reinvented in the space of the feminine.

"The dark of touch" that begins Salaam's "Tasty Knees" echoes the agency of the body in Giovanni's poem, a new way of connecting by destroying existing oppressing power and forming a new map to each other. In both poems the woman is silent; nevertheless, she is articulating her power and her desires quite clearly, and in doing so, undermining the "language" of the male or the revolutionary, forcing him to consider where and in what shape her agency lies. The difference between the two poems is articulated in Pollard's assessment of Giovanni's poem. Pollard explains that while the speaker of “Seduction” “inverts the political dynamic and makes the male the object, not the agent of sexual conquest, she usurps the Black male revolutionary’s power by privileging her own sexual desire… [demonstrating] how black male power is easily inverted by politically reflective women” (181). At a time when Black women were by and large being relegated to a supporting position in the Black Power Movement, Giovanni uses active silence as a means of undoing the vocal protests of the revolutionary. Pollard also explains Giovanni’s satirizing of the “male-body-as-weapon” motif that runs throughout BAM poetry claiming that Giovanni subverts this motif by suggesting that not only is the revolutionary, in fact, self-conscious at his “state of undress” but that this state of anxiety at his vulnerability is what is truly counterrevolutionary. This reveals the hidden hypocrisy of what many of the Black female poets were resisting: the Black body, which has been so long seen as an object of domination, is then objectified again by the Black revolutionary by being turned into a weapon. The seductress in Giovanni’s poem exposes this predicament and in doing so shows that the revolutionary’s words and ideals are disconnected from his own Black body. The body unobjectified, actively agential, is truly transgressive—a weapon not of destruction but of connective, redemptive healing.

Merely inverting the power structure—silence over rhetoric, sex over activism, female over male—does not resolve the issues of hierarchical power, but in fact reinforces them. If we were to read Salaam’s poem as a sequel to Giovanni’s poem, however, we could get a clearer picture about how power can begin to be renegotiated. In Salaam’s poem, language itself is decentered, even as sound disseminates silence. The union creates the possibility of expression, but not in rational language. The emphasis on where knowledge is located is not on words itself, but on a prediscursive expression, expression that emanates from the union of two bodies as opposed to two subjects. The expression of the deep, ancient knowledge of the erotic is privileged over "propriety" that the mute militant confronts. Salaam's poem reveals a movement that transgresses the boundaries of the body but without transcending the body, inverting power structures, or relying on subject/object hierarchy. Even as his "staff" inscribes, his inscriptions are enveloped by the womb, by his lover. The interaction between the two creates the openings through which expression escapes. The bodies are the "folds" of externality, while the "dark of touch" is the space in which each subject's identity is created through mutual, erotic interaction. The concrete language of the poem itself measures the transgression between body and the space of the fold, and it maps the moment of subjectivity from the chaos of the sensual union to the expression of the joy that is produced by the union. This is, in fact, the job of the poem. In accord with Lorde's sentiments about poetry as a faculty of erotic subjectivity, Reginald Martin in the introduction to *Dark Eros* states that it is this "inability to give words to exactly what it was about those cultural indexes that provoked you to think about turning sex into poetry" (xv); or, as Lorde would suggest, what transforms that silence into poetry and action. Primacy lies not in the words but in the feelings that are created in the reader when those words rub up against each other. The erotic is the condition for the resistance that provides the necessary friction between the words, the subjects, the lovers, and the readers.

The Body and the Imaginative Spaces

The use of the body as a space of erotic play and subversion of rhetoric is a predominant theme in the erotic poems presented in this chapter. Mid-way through Giovanni's poem "Seduction," the narrator imagines that her lover, the revolutionary, will "rap on about 'the revolution…' /while I rest your hand against my stomach." Here language serves as a divisive function. In the previous chapter, language united Salwa Al Neimi's narrator and her lover in the erotic novel *Proof of the Honey*. Where Al Neimi's text works on a conceptual level using erotic language as the map for tracing the erotic journey of the narrator's quest for integrity, Giovanni's poem expresses the moment at which identity is territorialized and stabilized by the rhetoric of the revolutionary. However, while the poem expresses the primary boundaries of gendered roles for the revolutionary and the narrator, the poem also indicates the site of resistance from which the destabilization becomes possible. The points of physical connection in the poem are marked also by silence. The combination of silence and the emphasis on the body or the physical act of touching creates a nondiscursive moment of creation beyond which the narrator can resist the "counterrevolutionary" role that to which she has been assigned by her lover. There is a doubling in this poem of both a narrative, told by the revolutionary and by extension the Black Power Movement, and a counter-narrative, unspoken by the narrator but conceptualized through the poetic language. This space, and presumably outside of even the limitations of the poem itself, is a nondiscursive site in which the narrator imagines love *as* revolutionary instead of counterrevolutionary.

Black women writers were not the only ones using these imaginative spaces to revise the marginal spaces of race and history as new ways of being and becoming.

Etheridge Knight, who has been vocal in his understanding of Black women's social location in the matrix of oppression,[7] has also used the virtual, imaginative spaces of eroticism from which to voice a new way of understanding the unfolding of subjectivity. In "Belly Song: For the Daytop Family," from his 1973 collection *Belly Song and Other Poems*, Knight make use of both the white space in the poem's structure and the sociohistorical narrative of the narrator's subjectivity in order to create a tension between the narrator's own sense of self and the self socially constructed. Out of this tension the narrator creates a space in which he realizes a union between himself ("I") and another ("you").

In the first line of the poem, Knight repeats the phrase "And I" (37). Between the first and second iteration of the phrase "And I," Knight leaves an indentation. Two lines later he repeats this pattern:

> And I   and I/must admit
> that the sea in you
>   has sung/ to the sea/ in me
> and I   and I/must admit
> that the sea in me
>   as fallen/in love
>   with the sea in you
> because you have made something
> out of the sea
>   that nearly swallowed you

---

[7] I am thinking of two interviews with Knight in particular: with Sanford Pinkster in 1984 and with Charles Rowell in 1996 (both of these interviews are cited).

The combination of this repetition after the spacing creates a doubling of the narrator's self, "I." The result is both a literal space and a conceptual space, reinforced by the metaphor of the sea—a vast space that lies below the surface yet is teaming with life unfolding. Here, Davidson's understanding of the fold is particularly resonant because not only do we have the construction of a creative space in which the narrator's identity is reimagined in relation to himself, but the end of the poem suggests that this creative space was a site of challenge and struggle for the narrator's lover as well.

The next two stanzas reinforce the erotic language by drawing attention to the very nature of poetic language and erotic knowledge. In this stanza, Knight repeats the phrase "this poem," creating a type of refrain. The meaning of "this poem" moves not only down the page but in time and, in the context of the poem, spatially, from the "bottom/of the sea/in my belly" of the narrator. Further, the expression of the language literally transforms from one mode of expression to another, from poem to song. The song, the narrator claims, is a "song/about FEELINGS." "Feelings" is one of only two words in the poem emphasized by all capital letters. Not only does the Knight put emphasis on feelings as a source of knowledge, but he moves it from the abstract to the concrete in the subsequent lines:

this poem
this poem/ is a song/ about FEELINGS
about the Bone of feeling
about the Stone of feeling
        and the Feather of feeling

In the span of five lines, Knight moves the erotic concept from the discursive (poem/song) to the nondiscursive realm of the body (bone) and concrete objects found in the realm of the real (stone and feather).

Knight's poem is divided into four sections. In section two of the poem, Knight's poem becomes "a grave/stone" (38) reflecting the "Stone of feeling" from the previous section. In the stanza that follows, the "grave/stone" and "death/chant" into which the poem transforms has become a eulogy "for young Jackie Robinson," an icon of young Black manhood. The stanza imagines Robinson in movement, but the movement itself is through a traumatic historical-political landscape. He imagines Robinson

> moving   moving   moving
> thru the blood and mud and shit of Vietnam
> moving   moving   moving
> thru the blood and mud and dope of America

Knight underscores the fabric of identity that is connected with the trauma of African American identity in the social reality of a war-torn, racial stratified culture. However, in a moment of resistance, Knight creates a refrain in the last line of the stanza to echo the beginning. The first stanza of section two ends with the line "for Jackie/who was/" and begins the next stanza by finishing the thought with the phrase "a song/ and a stone." The enjambment and subsequent space between stanzas again creates a moment of transformation in the poetic development of the erotic tension. If Jackie Robinson represents Black manhood both as traumatic and nostalgic for the youthful hero, the "Blk/warrior," then his transformation into "a song/ and a stone/ and a Feather of feeling" in the next stanza reflects the conceptual transformation of trauma to possibility through erotic movement.

The final stanza of the section is a reflection on the coupling of several men and women, the "silver feather" of the "love/rhythms" that marks another refrain in this stanza (Knight 38). While there is very little evidence in the poem itself for identifying the people in the stanza, it seems viable that if this is an autobiographical piece, then these men and women are people Knight met while recovering from drug and alcohol addiction at the Daytop Rehabilitation Center (Boyd 184). The journey from the cultural to the communal in the space of these two stanzas reflects not only the process of erotic subjectivity unfolding, but here the poem creates a parallel between this process of becoming and a literal process of recovery. This is a process that is also discussed by Moulard-Leonard in her personal testament that establishes the foundation for her investment in theorizing integral space. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the trauma of individual and collective abuse also creates the space for resistance to that abuse, but, as Morales and Moulard-Leonard argue, this space is conditional upon the establishment of a community that nourishes that space. For Knight, this happens in the community of people he meets in recovery. Knight creates another refrain in the midst of identifying these people: "love/rhythms" and it underscores the natural imagery of the "sun-gold/glinting/green hills breathing" and the movement of "river flowing" the "Sunday walk"; movement is literally expressed in this stanza represented by the repetition of river and re-imagined by the musical movements of "rhythms" (38).

Moulard-Leonard writes that "Imperial history is sedentary. It tries to root us down into territories we had no part in delineating….what is lacking is a mapping of flows and migrations, rather than the internalized image of a certain (imperialist) order of the world" (8). Knight's stanza captures this moment of resisting sedentary imperialism by moving us from the imperial ideal represented by the reference to Vietnam and America in the previous stanza, to a community of loved ones in recovery. While he imagines his friends in an idyllic setting, the end of the line reminds us who the "Daytop Family" is and the connection the facility has to the previous stanza. Knight's stanza tells us that "this poem" is "for Karen J. and James D. and Roland M. and David P./ who have not felt/ the sun of their eighteenth summer…" (39). The absence of feeling ("not felt") reiterates the "death" of the first "imperialist" stanza. Yet the refrains of "love/rhythms" still echo in the ellipsis at the end of the line, keeping the silences of addiction and trauma from foreclosing the erotic journey.

The third section of the poem dedicates the poem to "ME" (Knight 39). "Me" in this poem is the second and only other word emphasize by all caps along with "feelings" in the first section. The coupling of these two words also seems to emphasize the absence of the repetition of the word "Bone" from the end of the first section. Of the three phrases that close out the first section "the Bone of feeling," "the Stone of feeling," and "the Feather of feeling," "the Bone of feeling" is the only phrase that is not repeated in a subsequent stanza. This absence creates a type of critique of the nondiscursive nature of the body—the presence of both "feelings" and "me" and the absence of a repeating of "bone" underscore the nondiscursive silences from which the poem generates part of its erotic power. As the poem moves from the space of the folding of the dual "I" at the beginning of the poem, to the cultural reality of the author's Black manhood, to the community of recovery from where he finds a certain resistance to those oppressions, Knight takes us once again back to a reiteration of the subject. The emphasis on the pronoun “me” instead of “I” is just a subtle hint at the relationship between the poem and the self. The subject has now become the object (of the sentence) and the poem is now in the subject position.

As the poem focuses back onto the narrator, it does so also in the context of the narrator and the “you” who was introduced at the beginning of the poem. Again, Knight expresses subjectivity always in the context of another. What separates this poem from Salaam’s poem is that the creative space is not auspiciously feminine. The space itself comes from the folding of identity of the narrator himself. Knight creates a refrain again in the stanza with the phrase “this poem” repeated throughout the stanza. He writes “this poem/is/for me/and my woman” (39). Unlike Salaam’s poem in which the creative space of the poem is constructed as the space of the feminine, the Knight’s poem is neither gendered nor ungendered. As the poem sits in the subject position, it displaces the “me” of the narrator even while the structure the poem unfolding seems to parallel the unfolding of the narrator’s erotic subjectivity. Nevertheless, by suggesting that the poem is not only for him, but also each one of the people he dedicates the poem to, including “my woman,” Knight is creating a poem that is at once a discursive expression of himself, all of the others, and at the same time a concept independent of himself. The poem expresses both the discursivity of language, but also the absence of language by creating nondiscursive spaces and withholding the re-presentation of the “Bones” of feeling—the bones of feeling, the physical body and body-knowledge, become are presented as the un-re-presented real.

The Body as Metaphor and Lorde's "On a Night of the Full Moon"

Gloria Anzaldúa writes,

> I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body…This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. (96-97)

The connection between the physical body and erotic language has been a theme throughout the poems featured in this chapter, but what I would also like to make clear in this section is the movement not only from the depth of subjectivity to the social expression of identity and the connection between subjects differently situated, but also from internality to the natural world. Through the process of the unfolding Audre Lorde's poem "On a Night of the Full Moon," materiality is represented by both the body and the natural world, but neither is subsumed by the other. The poem does not collapse one for the other or use the natural world as a metaphor for transcending the body, but creatively conceptualizes subjectivity unfolding through the materiality of the body and the natural world only to fold back onto itself in order to critique rational knowledge in favor of immanent knowledge.

Lorde's poem begins as the narrator focuses on the sensuality of her lover's body. The poem begins: "out of my flesh that hungers/ and my mouth that knows/ comes the shape I am seeking/ for reason" ("On a Night" 394). These lines situate the body, both her and her lover's simultaneously, as the agents of knowledge. The second half of the first stanza, however, then pairs the sensuality of bodily knowing with direct comparisons to natural world: “your breasts warm as sunlight/ your lips quick as your birds/ between your thighs the sweet/ sharp taste of limes.” The narrator continues,

> Thus I hold you
> frank in my heart’s eye
> in my skin’s knowing
> as my fingers conceive your flesh
> I feel your stomach
> moving against me.

The body continues to be the generator of knowledge. The skin “knows” and fingers “conceive.” The use of the word “conceive” is heavy with meaning here, as it refers not only to the act of thinking a thought, but also to creating and procreating (conception). This play on the word “conceive,” just ahead of the mention of the stomach, establishes the body as the site of knowledge creation, creative conception, and physical connection between the two lovers. Instead of the “mind’s eye,” Lorde move the sites of knowledge below the neckline to the “heart’s eye.”

Like Knight’s poem “Belly Song,” a space is created in Lorde’s poem by a type of doubling of language. Several images of a “folding” is captured in the first and second stanza. In the first stanza, the “curve of your waiting body” (Lorde 394) creates a bend that is reinforced by the presence of the “tide” in the third stanza (395). These bends act as the potential bending of linearity into a type of space with physical boundaries, boundaries of the body and the boundaries of the surface of the water. In the space of those boundaries of the poem, the first and third stanza, the second poem creates the potential for bonding and connecting. The second stanza ends with the line “we shall come together,” meaning both sexually and spiritually. To complete the erotic process, however—to establish both the integrity of the poem itself and the erotic subjectivity unfolding in the piece—the poem ends with a fourth and final stanza in which the titular moon “speaks/my eyes/judging your roundness/delightful” (395). The circular moon literally rounds out the erotic space that slowly unfolds throughout the piece.

The third stanza constructs the tension between bodily and intellectual knowledge. There is a “breaking against reservations”—a disintegration of the intellectual that would stand in the way of the lover’s union (Lorde 395). The phrase “breaching thought” in the fourth line of the stanza is also a transgression between the boundaries of body and mind, the material and the ideal, the physical and the spiritual. However, there is a breaching of the body as well as of the intellect: “My hands at your high tide/over and under inside you.” This breaching of both the body and the intellect is reminiscent of Salaam’s narrator, whose orgasm breaches his and his lover’s silent union. In Lorde’s poem, however, action and gestures seem to breach the intellectual—there is no trumpeting, no failed mutism, and in fact no indication of anything expressly spoken between the lovers.

Paying close attention to the succession of knowledge in the first stanza: knows, comes, reason, I argue that there is an interesting relationship here in this trinity. Out of the body, the union between the lover and the narrator, is reason. But reason itself is not just embodied, there is also a process of becoming (to echo Giovanni’s “Word Poem”) that is underlying this process. Hunger is a bodily function that has been supplanted through the process, but we never go back to reason either; reason, too has been supplanted through transgression, breaching, and breaking. In the boundaries of the roundness—of the moon, the narrator's eyes, and the lover—there is an allusion to wholeness that the narrator "judges" as delightful, the joy as a result of the union.

Conclusion: Articulating Difference in African American Erotica

As both a critique of the white feminists as a whole, but also as an attempt to establish a dialogue with them, Lorde wrote an open letter to feminist scholar Mary Daly highlighting the major issues of the mainstream feminists' use of Black womanhood. Lorde accused Daly of participating in a feminist tradition of using nonwhite stories solely as examples of victimization. Collins, too, questions the broader Western philosophical tradition of "giving voice" to the marginalized, when the marginalized themselves have long been vocal. As a way to resist the oppressive culture's tendency to silence marginalized voices, reify them, appropriate them, or "give them back." Darlene Clark Hine explains that, "Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives" (Byrd 19). The secrecy is both a site of wounded eroticism but also a site of resistance, a space of immanence, a spiritual space in which strength is fostered and the possibility of expressing erotic agency from this space is eminent. This secret space is a gift of survival that, understood, can help us all find create expressions of eroticism.

In "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Lorde insists that "as we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us" (36). Each one of these poets illuminated the spaces of silence in which immanent knowledge arises and connects intimately with the subjectivity of another, whether or not that subjectivity is mutually acknowledged. For African American artists, illuminating the spaces are essential for radically transforming the spaces of individual, collective, and historical trauma.

CHAPTER 4

“It’s Your Own Destruction You’re Singing”: Gayle Jones’s *Corregidora* and the Erotic Journey

Toward the end of her article, Valentine Moulard-Leonard writes that “all creative acts are transhistorical, brushed up against history, passing through liberated lines…acts of resistance that spring from a marginal space, a space constituted by the very acts it permits, insofar as they refuse to substitute things for relationships” (17). Moulard-Leonard cites one creative act in particular, a song by Johnny Cash, as indicative of the space she claims for herself as a site of healing and resistance. The song itself lyrically represents the space she has carved out for herself, a type of home-site, but also the transience of that space. This movement of “entering, leaving, returning,” Moulard-Leonard explains, is a “play of territory and deterritorialization” (16). This play is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as the “refrain.” While the concept of the refrain is unique to the genre of music, I find it helpful in illuminating the ways in which the blues is understood as a creative act rather than a fixed genre of music. Also, when reading it as a companion to the concept of “the fold,” I find it particularly helpful in identifying the ways in which silences and discourse are used in Gayl Jones’s seminal blues novel *Corregidora.*

Moulard-Leonard marks the refrain as a particularly important mode of making sense of her spaces of trauma and resistance, and I believe the Jones’s novel employs the refrain similarly—as a way for not only Ursa to make sense of her own trauma, but also her own erotic subjectivity as it unfolds out of personal and collective traumas. I argue that Jones employs not only this refrain but also a creative juxtaposition of nondiscursive silence and imaginative dialogue as a way to illustrate Ursa’s resistance to the discursive collapsing of her own pain and experience into expectations of the social and cultural milieu.

Corregidora is narrated by Ursula Corregidora (Ursa), a blues singer, who, after a violent encounter with her husband Mutt, is left coping with the aftermath of a hysterectomy and subsequent divorce. The novel follows Ursa's struggle with her identity as a professional singer, woman, a wife, a daughter, grand-daughter, great-granddaughter, lover, and friend while navigating her own traumatic memories and the collective memories of rape, abuse, and oppression passed down by the women in her family. The novel itself recreates the disorienting senselessness of trauma by interspersing imagined dialogues, the voices of other characters, remembrances, and fantasies throughout Ursa's narrative. The narrative structure of the story resembles a blues structure, a narrative that circles back on itself, telling and retelling, calling and responding, uttering the Deleuzian refrain, and ultimately creating the possibility of healing by employing repetition with a difference. Ursa's ultimate mode of resistance to the perpetual narratives of historical and personal trauma that she repeats and hears repeated again and again to act out a nondiscursive silence. In this way she embodies the ultimate paradox of the blues: it is as much the creation of silence and spaces of nondiscursivity as it is the utterances and sounds of the blues song that makes the blues itself both a site and an act of resistance and deterritorialization. The presence and absence of language reflect the ways in which her body and her memory are both agents of her healing, but they also reflect the alternative ways in which she connects with the community of people around her. Employing these discursive and nondiscursive elements situates the novel as an erotic text, a mapping of Ursa's erotic journey to reclaim her erotic subjectivity by transforming the sites of trauma into sites of healing.

The refrain is the carving out of a place, or a home, in the midst of chaos, but only temporarily and in the process of opening up the boundaries of that place by "launch[ing] forth" into the world (Deleuze and Guattari 311). In her essay, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance, Hooks's concept of homeplace resembles this aspect of the refrain, the idea that part of the unfolding of subjectivity is having a "homeplace" from which to launch into the world, to regroup, only to be flung back into the world again, in the midst of chaos. I argue that in *Corregidora* Ursa does just that. She returns home at a moment when she needs the comfort of tracing a space in the midst of her chaos but also because she is aware that she is ready to move forward in her quest for healing.

The Blues as an Act of Difference and Resistance

It is important that we recognize that the blues arises out a specific cultural past and unique colonial trauma, but it is also helpful to conceptualize a blues as a space of healing—a site that does not try to reconcile difference through shared experience, but one that arises out of that difference. The embodiment of a personal blues resituates the blues artist not as a site of production, but as a site of becoming, a way of mapping the ever-moving margin, the ever-evolving blues. In this way, this chapter envisions the blues as a site of immanent knowledge and integrity, rather than one that relies solely on a historical-material paradigm.

For Houston Baker the blues matrix was an always already script, a transient force that the blues artist must translate as it charges through temporarily fixing it in one place long enough to give it material expression and then the blues continues on, in search of a new text. This scene of the blues, the blues artist, is a place where, as Baker puts it, experiences the experience of the blues. Baker's blues lies in the specific historical context of an early 20th century social and economic milieu, and one that resists dialectically oppressive forces of colonization and cultural oppression. Out of this dialectic arises the blues as a site of resistance, which for Baker is a "mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding" (Baker 6). In *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic,* Madhu Dubey notes while oral forms such as blues and jazz "attest to the strength and resilience of black culture, they also bear the traces of self-hatred, double consciousness, and all the other disabling consequences of an oppressive history" (Dubey 25).

Trauma as a site of resistance is the foundation for Moulard-Leonard's "integral space." In her open letter to Bell Hooks, Moulard-Leonard calls for a rethinking of space that addresses a new mode of subjectivity, new ways of being, and new sites of resistance that focus not on the conditions of history that create it—though those are carefully re-organized in the process—but on the connections between people and populations that produce the margins, the psychic spaces in which the marginalized can recover their potential power from filial history. Moulard-Leonard is directly responding to a challenge issued by Hooks for women scholars to enter the space of marginality from which she and her Black feminist counterparts have recognized as a site of radical resistance. Both Hooks and Moulard-Leonard envision this space as one that seeks to hold the pain and traumas of all the ways in which people have been colonized, psychically and bodily. It is in this place where those traumas are transformed, but not transcended, into creative resistance. It is a place where differences are maintained but solidarity between subjects is established. Alliances are created, oppressors are named, trauma is acknowledged, but liberation from that trauma is the ultimate goal. However, Moulard-Leonard's discussion of the refrain near the end of her article is a subtle homage to the home-place that Hooks privileges as a site of both subject formation and resistance to hegemonic categorization. The refrain is the mapping of this home-place, the sonorous marking of territory that resembles the ways in which the blues, too, is an act of establishing a geographical and psychological location of "home" in the midst of historical cultural upheaval of oppression. What sets this understanding of the blues apart from the blues matrix posited by Baker is that the blues is the act of creating the space, not necessarily the space itself. In this way the act-er, the subject, is central to the construction of this space as an active creator, not as a passive experience-er of the space itself.

The materiality of the experience comes from the negotiation of internal work performed by the blues artist as a way to make meaning from his or her experience, or to territorialize a creative concept long enough to make sense of it, but always in the act of connecting with another outside of that concept (deterritorializing). Difference is the characteristic of the blues that gives it the ability to both construct a homeplace and at the same time break through the boundaries of that space to maintain its mobility. However, Jeffrey Nealon argues that it is helpful to look at the blues through the context of difference not as a binary opposition of margin and center, black and white, but as difference that is ungrounded and emblematic of the blues as an act or a verb, and not a noun or a genre (85). If the refrain is a process of repetition for constructing temporary moments of safety or sites of stability—momentarily organizing a space of calm in the midst of chaos—then the blues act is the moment at which the refrain is deterritorialized, the blues artist flung back into the world, through improvisation: the difference in the repetition.

Because the repetition with a difference is linked with the call and response structure of the blues, it makes sense that it was also a potent way of accessing and processing the traumas of both racism and sexism for Black women. The blues as a space or site of resistance specifically arises from the unique cultural experience of the African-American artist. Originally the blues began as a solitary act, one in which the musician would profess his “blues” through songs that were, at least to a wayward audience, not easily intelligible but coded and deeply personal. The emphasis was the expression, the release of the oppressive experience rather than the communication. Ralph Ellison, in *Shadow and Act* explains the contradictory nature of the blues expression:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (78)

Black women and men have had their own relationship with the blues experience that provides a distinct evolution of blues, particularly in the early part of the 20th century. Baraka, in *Blues People*, explains that just after the Emancipation, Black men were more mobile and were beholden to a whole new American experience, but one that was much farther from the mainstream of white America. The blues were a much more personal art form, and the blues lyrics that developed were no longer constricted by the white master narrative. These blues were defined by wanderers—men who were no longer confined to the plantations or to the south, and those wanderers and vagabonds shared their personal and solitary experiences through blues music (Baraka 65-66).

However, the classic blues changed that, and the communal spirit of the blues found its way back into the call and response structure. As African American music expanded as an entertainment venture, blues music became widely popular, and the men were not the only ones capitalizing on it. Women, such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Sippie Wallace, Ida Cox, and later, Memphis Minnie, ushered in nearly two decades of blues as mainstream entertainment and one that was highly profitable. Song and entertainment were the only other place that women could find work besides in the home. Vaudeville and the early black minstrel shows became popular among the Black folk audience and, from there the classic female blues stars were born. These women not only brought back the call and response of the original communal blues forms, but they had their own brand of subversion. Kalamu ya Salaam explains that “the classic blues divas who emerged from this social milieu were more than entertainers; they were role models, advice givers, and a social force for cultural transformation” (“Do Right” 72). In short, these women brought the blues experience back into the community and the blues evolved one step further—enduring.

The female blues tradition gave voice to the complicated social contradictions that were Black women’s lives. Faced with both racism and sexism, the blues gave women a “place” to consider and negotiate the multifaceted violence, a cultural space for community building, and the possibility of understanding these social conditions and contradictions. As translators of a personal trauma these women were able to turn the blues into a communal experience, their own site of resistance. Women invited others into this space openly as a condition of their own liberation taking on the risks of vulnerability—which lends to the erotic nature of these performances. Through the interaction with the audience, an integral space was formed through which the audience was able to participate in the blues and to experience the joy of that liberation through community. Though it seems like an oversimplification to suggest that women sang the blues differently than men, the idea resides in the cultural facticity of the gendered experience of the social scene of blues creation. While emancipation opened up travel as an option for African American men and women, it was largely men who profited from this option as a way to find jobs. Women were often relegated to the domestic sphere, staying regionally bound both for economic and cultural reasons.[1] However, for women who found blues singing to be a lucrative career, it opened them up to travel as well. Nevertheless, these blues women were also, still, both in spite of and because of their mobility, chief organizers and leaders of the communities in which they lived.[2] Therefore one might see two different types of blues experiences, the blues of alienation and the blues of community.

Salaam argues that the blues women were a critical influence in transforming the blues into something that was neither transcendent, nor one that was particularly romantic as well. The women helped the blues transgress the social and historical facticity of its origins while still owning to it in terms of the new performative imperatives. The call and response was no longer just a structural form inherent in the song itself, it was how the blues was sung to the audience. The audience became an integral part of the blues performance—we can see this, too, in the erotic texts of Al Neimi and Jones, as the reader is included in the process of making sense of the erotic text.

---

[1] The exceptions to this are outlined with much more specificity and complexity in Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

[2] See Davis and also Salaam's "Do Right Women: Black Women, Eroticism and Classic Blues."

The blues is not a space that always already exists but one that is created through the relationships between subjects who embrace the immanent knowledge of personal experience, privileging that which is internally generated instead of that which is materially defined. Blues is a space created through this relationship not only as a site from which one resists, but also as a form and language through which to express those revolutionary cries. It is through difference, not in homogeneity of experience, that the blues moves. The blues musician and the blues text illuminates the inherent contradictions of the spatial and temporal milieu surrounding them, but these contradictions are also critical for the evolution of the blues matrix. In these spaces people communicate their blues through the process of mapping their ways into and out of the margin through the process of becoming. Therefore, this new space does not seek resolution, but embraces the power of paradox. It is a place where these traumas and joys are expressed and where the rejection of the colonizer can coexist with the embracing of the colonized spaces within.

Understanding the blues as a contemporary site of resistance as well as one that speaks to a particular historical past allows critics to examine blues texts, written or oral, as still active, potent spaces of societal resistance and radical possibility. But one important aspect of this approach is that the blues artist is an immanent site at which blues is produced. Acknowledging the artist's agency as a translator of both a historical past and an embodied present and at the same time insisting that the creation of the blues requires a communal, interactive approach allows us to examine the postmodern paradox that resides in the matrix and the evolving nature of the matrix itself. However, the conditions of possibility in this new matrix, and one that Moulard-Leonard recognized is a critical aspect of this new mode of becoming, is connecting to another subject, inviting a dialogue with the deep source of power within another.

In "Poetry is Not a Luxury" Audre Lorde stresses the power of accessing these deep, internal reserves of knowledge, particularly for women. However, for Lorde, true transformative power of this knowledge, that which creates lasting change and triumph over silencing oppression is to give voice to that knowledge through poetic expression. The point is to distill experience into a creative form, like the blues. The artist translates an immanent knowledge, an experience that is generated internally, and therefore privileges the personal. This marks a difference between history and becoming by searching for connections between two subjects, moving beyond the rhetoric of us versus them, which often allows us to abdicate responsibility in understanding, particularly at a site ripe for resistance and empowerment like the blues. This new space allows history to be acknowledged and recognized, while allowing the artist to personally embody the blues at his or her own site of knowledge, and it creates the conditions for the possibility of self love and love between subjects

Silence, Discourse, and the Fold

Ursa's struggles with the reality of personal and collective trauma are overwhelmingly the theme of the Jones's text. *Corregidora* begins with Ursa's fall down a set of stairs during a fight with her husband Mutt. As a result Ursa has a hysterectomy thereby losing her ability to have children, or "make generations." The narrative weaves

Ursa's struggle with her sexuality in the aftermath of the fall with the tragic history of rape and incest that has been passed down as an oral narrative from her great-grandmother and grandmother to her mother and her. While many critics have focused on the nature of these narratives as a way of witnessing to racism and sexism of Black women's legacy, what I would like to focus on is the narrative as not only a site of witnessing of a collective experience but also as a part of a subjective reality that articulates one aspect of the subjective becoming. Ursa's narrative is a counter-history that comprises part of the "fabric" of the textual fold that elicits Ursa's resistance not only to her personal experience of "the wounded erotic" but also the added burden of reliving her ancestors' painful past as well.

The trauma experienced by the Corregidora women at the hands of the Portuguese slave-owner Corregidora is constructed by stories that the women in Ursa's family have passed down from generation to generation. The oral tradition of repeatedly telling these stories is part of the structure of the novel. The story of the Corregidora women's enslavement, rape, and revenge is repeated over and over, but each time, and throughout the novel, it is repeated with a difference. Near the beginning, these stories are difficult to differentiate from the conversations that Ursa imagines having with Mutt and from the conversations she is actually having, but it is also difficult to distinguish whose story is being told. There is often a conflation of Gram and Great Gram's stories.

Trauma is often characterized by fear or stress that is so great that there is a dissociation—at the heart of trauma there is always memory loss; loss of memory leads to a loss of meaning. The Corregidora women do not mean to relive the tragedy of their past over and over again as much as they fear historical erasure that is a primary characteristic of colonial oppression. Great-Gram insists that the slave-owners and the institution of slavery itself tried to erase the tragic history of their perpetrated horrors after the Emancipation. The Corregidora women kept these stories alive through the oral tradition as a way to remember the horror and to hold the perpetrators accountable. This was their way of making meaning out of their abuse and trauma, their way of trying to make sense of their experiences. However, they also believed that in order to do this it was critical to "make generations" to which these stories would be passed. After Ursa's accident her participation in this narrative tradition was severed. In many ways, I think that Jones illustrates Ursa's disorientation from the severed connections to the women in her family by structurally intermingling Ursa's own traumatic memory with the other women's. However, as the novel progresses and Ursa progresses in her journey towards erotic integrity, the novel's structure becomes much less disorienting, and Ursa begins to make sense of her own personal trauma by unraveling it from those of her ancestors.

One way that this unraveling happens is through the use of silences and nondiscursive actions in the text. Resisting the colonial oppression and historical erasure of slavery and rape for Gram and Great Gram involved a conflation of the oral tradition and maternal reproduction. The ability to resist erasure required "making generations," literally reproducing bodies to which the Corregidora descendents could witness, thereby locating the act of resistance in the womb (Davis 43). When Ursa is left without a womb, she is rendered "silent" and unable to participate in the oral tradition as practiced by the other women. While Mama's participation in the oral tradition takes on different characteristics than those practiced by Gram and Great Gram, her participation is still through the "making of generations" and witnessing. However, Mama begins a subtle pattern of silence as resistance by keeping her own story secret and separate from Ursa. These separations themselves are interesting, because these separations from sexual agency, from the collective experience, and from the matrilineal tradition are indicative of violences perpetrated by men. Gram and Great Gram are enslaved and impregnated by Corregidora, therefore while they are victims of gross violations done to their bodies and spirits, they share that past and therefore construct a way of resisting that past through the oral tradition. However, this shared past is also the premise for Mama's alienation. Mama does not share the abuse at the hands of Corregidora, and this is at once a blessing and a source of alienation. Mama is made witness to these atrocities through the oral tradition, but when she suffers her own abuses at the hand of her husband she keeps those abuses a secret from Ursa. Mama both participates in the oral tradition by passing the stories of the Corregidora women down to Ursa, but also creates her own type of resistance to the past by participating in her own silences.

However, while Mama's erotic journey may be to create new resistances to the traditions passed down from her mother and grandmother and at the same time understanding the need to resist historical erasure, Ursa's erotic journey is different. Hers is a journey that focuses on her need to claim her body as part of her sexual identity and in absence of the constructed testimony of resistance as procreative ("making generations" is the only way to bear witness). As Jennifer Cognard-Black puts it, "If Corregidora is about anything, it is about how bodies invent and influence stories: stories of sex and sexuality, pain and pleasure, the uses and abuses to which bodies are put" (43). Cognard-Black argues that Ursa's silences are congruent with the womb-lack that is created by the physical violence of the fall and Ursa's literal withholding of language.

Ursa's body becomes intertwined in the construction of her own narrative. She, like her body, involves silences as part of the way that she produces knowledges and connections. Ursa's hysterectomy and her "hole" that the hysterectomy makes is the basis for her trauma but, in keeping with Moulard-Leonard's understanding of integral space, also becomes the basis for her resistance and integration of the fragmented identity. Cognard-Black explains that this "womb-lack" allows Ursa to "articulate a response to this complex loss, but, additionally, the language and imagery evoked in relation to Ursa's womb-lack confound typical notions of how bodies interact with and produce words, turning the 183 pages [of the novel] into a response and a refusal, a silent rejoinder" (43).

Ursa's physical trauma is also marked by her inability to feel the physical sensation of sexual intercourse. This becomes a particularly crucial point of contention and further trauma in her relationships with men throughout the book. Her second husband Tadpole leaves her partly because she is unable to find pleasure in their lovemaking. Cognard-Black connects this loss of sensation with a loss of language: "In other words, the experience of Ursa's body, its double 'barrenness,' negates language by employing a specific kind of linguistic silence: the refusal of sensation. Indeed, Ursa's descriptions of women's bodies are predicated on an incapacity to feel that is repeatedly linked to an incapacity to engage language" (44). Silence is connected with non-feeling with non-emotion. Her body is "enacting silence," a silence that has been forced on her, reiterating the violent silences. However, her rhetorical silences are those chosen by her. I argue that this loss of sensation and loss of language is indicative of a "safe space" that has been constructed by the folding of the history and counter-history of Ursa's trauma, her families, and the larger historical trauma of slavery and oppression. The space created by the fold is space of non-language, what I would connect with Lorde's "deep, ancient" spaces in which creative forces are percolating and through which Ursa constructs her erotic subjectivity.

The discursive silences are coupled with the nondiscursive silences of her hysterectomy. In the definition of the fold, Deleuze refers to the inside of the fold as a "hollowing out" of space for the creative becoming that is required for subjectivity predicated on difference (Davidson 130). This allows Ursa to produce her own resistances and narratives with a difference. This difference is critical for subjectivity that is generated in the fold, because the concept of difference "means that the struggle for subjectivity is not just a reaction to a prior situation; instead it is a creative force and a source for change" (130). Cognard-Black explains that the loss of the womb not only severs Ursa's connection with the oral tradition, but also the Corregidora women's tradition of connecting the womb with resistance. Cognard-Black argues that "To men, the womb is the center of a woman's being because it represents a man's participation in language…[to the Corregidora women] bearing children is equal to authorship, a liberatory impulse" (45). Ursa's separation from this tradition is also a reclamation of her body as her own and a new way in which to resist sexual and cultural trauma without needing to participate in resistances of her ancestors. There is agency in Ursa's not speaking. Her silences often force her aggressors to betray themselves. But these silences and denials are also learned from the past, from her mother, from Mutt, from Tadpole. They are both protective and intuitive and her agency and oppression lay somewhere in the middle.

Like Giovanni's "Seduction," there is seduction in the silences, but there is also seduction in the blues. Ursa urges people to talk with her silences, yet she can also silence them with her blues. Cognard-Black insists that "By revoking her part of these potential dialogues…Ursa distinguishes between the life expressed in language and the life of experience" (55). This is the very nature of the silences in many of these erotic texts I have discussed. The silences encourage others to speak as well; silence becomes a powerful tool of erotic agency. It is often inviting, if not always hospitable. This way of communicating—or narrating—then is one that is powerfully absorbent. It is both vulnerable and powerful. It is risky and protective. It also allows room for new knowledges to be produced, for room to trust the immanent instead of the rhetorical and the symbolic. Ursa's externality, symbolized by both her body and her history, creates the fabric of the fold—the inner part of the fold symbolized both by her womb-lack and her elective silences. However, this absence also leaves her without the physical boundaries that the womb represents. She has found her means of creating a space of resistance, but in order to continue her erotic journey, she must begin to create new territories and stabilities necessary for subjective becoming.

The Refrain and the Blues Dialogue

Cognard-Black argues that "The intangible mysteries and particulars that make up Ursa's inner life are meticulously and purposefully sealed off by her refrain, 'I said nothing,' a kind of negative blues, a phrase that iterates and enacts the barrens she's experienced her whole life" (56). The paradox of Ursa's narrative is that the silences that are enacted by Ursa are neither contradictory nor counter-productive for her life as a blues singer. In fact, her blues is the very means of integrating the inner silences of the fold and the outer legacies of her past and her collective history. Through the blues refrains that she sings she enacts a type of creative repetition, an improvisation of discourse that allows her to create a home-site as part of her journey to erotic integrity.

In the chaos of Ursa's life as her struggle with trauma unfolds, what remains constant, and what she struggles to get back to as soon as possible after her hospitalization, is her singing. As the boundaries of her womb have been lost and the boundaries of her memories are blurred, Ursa's singing becomes a refrain that territorializes, stabilizes some of the pieces of her identity in a way that, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, "is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos" (311). Each refrain is a repetition of an older refrain, but with a difference. And each refrain's boundaries are opened by a moment of improvisation, a difference that moves the singer of the blues into the chaos of life again, deterritorializing the boundaries of the refrain.

Improvisation is important for the way repetition works in concert with a refrain. The improvisation is an act that "launches forth" that act-er in a moment of pure creation, the moment in which difference deterritorializes the repetition, saving it from simple representation of the same (Nealon 87). One might compare this launching with what Wong calls an apparent "stumble" in improvisational jazz. She writes,

> To stumble the way Monk stumbles is to recognize the constant necessity of picking one's way through that [cultural] minefield…It can be a terrifying freedom—the freedom to be blown apart by a careless step, by an extravagant hubris. But at the same time, "stumbling" remains one of

> the few honest motions left in a world that demands a collective march step. (Wong 474)

One might think if this stumbling as an improvisation out of a refrain. In most blues songs, even when lines are repeated word for word, the rhythms, the tones, the stresses may not be the same. Nor are they foreseen. Even if they are premeditated by the blues performer, what happens at that given moment is not entirely predictable. We might compare this stumble, too, with Ursa's fall. Out of this terrifying and tragic even precipitated by Mutt, Ursa's identity, her subjective stability was ungrounded, deterritorialized. Her voice took on a new tone, as did her songs.

Ursa is afraid that she will not sound as good as she did before the accident. After hearing her sing, her friend Cat tells her that her voice is still good, but different. The songs that she sings, the ones that she repeats from before the accident, are imbued with a soulfulness, a tone that suggests that she has experienced something—for better or worse. She organizes a new refrain. But as she sings her song, she must not only contend with disintegrated boundaries of her sexuality, but the physical boundaries of the blues club. Ursa had always had someone she was singing to, and when she fell in love with Mutt it was him she sang for. However, after Tadpole banished Mutt from the club, she again was left with the destabilization of the territories she once knew. These refrains, as they are related to the call and response of the blues, became the means through which she connected with other people in a type of blues dialogue. The verb-alizing of the blues is also predicated on a response, a repetition with a difference that emphasizes the unfolding nature of participating in the becoming. The "merging with the world" is metaphorized by the merging of voice in concert with others throughout the text.

As the blues performance elicits the call and response structure, it is requires both a storyteller and a listener. When she merges with the world, she merges with an audience who is actively participating in the organization of her territories. The blues was an important part of her family's stories; Great Gram listened to the blues but Mama would not allow Ursa to sing them. When Ursa reminds her that Great Gram listens to the blues, her mother insists that "listening to the blues and singing them ain't the same" (Jones 103). Stephanie Li argues that "This distinction indicates that for Mama there is a profound difference between acknowledging the difficult experiences of someone else and articulating one's own pain. Mama is accustomed to absorbing stories of abuse that do not belong to her" (137). While Mama has not been able to articulate her own blues, Ursa's articulation of her blues is truncated because not only does she use silences to opt out of conversations, but she does not actively listen to the blues of the people around her. Ursa's decision to resist the perpetuation of the trauma is part of establishing a healthy space for her own healing, but in order to participate in becoming, she must also acknowledge the response of her audience; she must become an active listener as well as an active storyteller.

The concept of the fold is predicated on a relation to oneself that exists independently and is constructed inside the fabric of the fold. This space creates "a positive identity from a perspective and position internal to" oneself (Davidson 130). In essence, not only did Ursa have to learn how to be a good listener to others, but first she had to learn how to be a good listener to herself. In both the psychic space of her imagined dialogues between her and Mutt, Ursa had to finally hear what it was she needed from herself (and from him, and from Mama, and from the world) before she could actively listen to others. When she does, she begins to gather the pieces of herself that have been missing, and she begins to, as Moulard-Leonard puts it, “reconnect with all [her] little exiles” (8). She realizes that she needs a missing piece of her past—her father. She seeks it from her mother, because this piece is also the secret that her mother has been keeping. What makes this a moment of the construction of erotic integrity is that not only is this a healing moment for Ursa, when she learns how to truly listen, but it is a healing moment for Mama as well, who is able to articulate her own trauma, to express her blues. Cognard-Black explains that “Their exchange of stories highlights the mutuality of the blues, the give and take between audience and performer. By describing her personal experiences to her daughter, Mama succeeds in creating a safe discursive space that dispenses with the totalizing narrative of making generations such that individual difference can exist” (139). This is the erotic space. The boundaries of this “safe” discursive space that avoids totalizing narratives is constructed as each becomes listener and teller.

Ursa’s womb-lack is a powerful space of silence from which she is able to begin to heal her pain, a place from which she can explore her sexuality. Her encounters with Tadpole and with Mutt in her fantasies reveal a dual need to both make them feel her alienation but also connect with them sexually. Because her body is still healing, she cannot “feel” them having sex with her. As Cognard-Black explains, there is a silencing of feeling that accompanies the discursive silences. The silencing of feeling is a prediscursive silence that is difficult for her to articulate—it is in this space that she is forming a body-knowledge that will reveal itself as a part of an integral movement. She will have to “resensitize” herself to the act of connecting with life and with those around her. During this time, I imagine she is conducting the “labor of the refrain.” Moulard-Leonard explains that music, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is defined by the problem of the deterritorialization of the refrain (17). The process of difference is one way to address this problem.

The improvisation that happens in blues and jazz singing creates the moments of difference in the repetitions that deterritorialized the refrain. Uniquely, in *Corregidora* these differences are punctuated by a combination of Ursa’s body and her fantasies. The painful changes in her body after the accident lend themselves to the changes in her relationship with the world around her. Her specific experiences are the material evens that constitute her alienation from Mutt (the fall), from Tadpole (her inability to feel), her mother (her mother’s secret), Gram and Great Gram (her inability to “make generations”), and her sociohistorical situation (rape, oppression, slavery) that construct her specific type of marginality that “makes possible [her] active responses” (Nealon 85) and that becomes her unique site of resistance from which her improvisations spring. I would argue that in some ways, in the context of her sexual subjectivity, her body becomes a type of refrain. As she experiments with sex and imagines it again and again in her fantasies, she is trying to stabilize her deterritorialized body and her memories of sex and love. With the imagined dialogues, Li explains, “Ursa is not simply rehearsing painful memories. In the safety of her mind, she relives them with greater courage and awareness of their import. Here she is able to articulate the ambiguity of her desire ‘Yes. I mean I’m lying’” (143). These repetitions with a difference do not seek resolution, because resolution is not the point of erotic subjectivity; these repetitions are meant to destabilize the territories of identity so that she can continue the process of becoming in erotic subjectivity. She continued to sing her refrains, constructing invisible but nevertheless quite real boundaries, but as these boundaries were organized around her music, they also played into the anti-refrain of her silences outside of her singing.

In one of her imagined dialogues, Ursa and her mother discuss where Ursa learned the blues she had been singing. Mama tells her, “Songs are devils. It’s your own destruction you’re singing…Where did you get those songs?” to which Ursa replies, “I got them from you” (Jones 53). Ursa’s songs are adapted from those implanted memoires of Portuguese brutality that had been passed down to Mama. Ursa says, “I’ll sing as you talked it, your voice humming” (53). These memories are repeated, and in those repetitions Mama herself finds a refrain, the labor of humming and talking those memories out, even if she is not aware. These refrains carry not only the memories, but the memories with a difference through which Ursa is able to connect and create her own blues. In this way both of the women create the possibility of resisting the old narratives of Gram and Great Gram, while informing each other’s refrains. Ursa is aware that she must find away to improvise her own blues, and her imagined dialogues creates a space for that. The exchange ends with Ursa’s reflection: “Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning” (54). Mama’s refrain has been deterritorialized by Ursa’s blues.

Erotic Integrity

As Ursa begins to learn how to listen, she begins to establish the boundaries of her subjectivity, ones that are strong enough act as safe healing spaces and at the same time hold the complexity of her identity constantly unfolding—the traumas and abuses as well as the resistances and possibilities. However, these boundaries exist in relation to those others whose stories are being told to her. While much of Ursa's healing comes from the integration of the pieces of her sexuality unfolding in the nondiscursive spaces that she has created both from her womb-lack and her elective silences as a resistance to the oral traditions that repeat the ancestral traumas, the repetitions of these nondiscursive moments open up into moments of intersubjectivity.

Mama's secrecy created by the silences she maintains may have created a site of healing for her, one in which to escape the perpetuations of the traumatic narratives, but it is not until she reaches out of those silence spaces to connect with Ursa's silences that the novel bears witness to Mama's erotic integrity. In the dialogue between Mama and Ursa in which Ursa seeks the secret her mother has kept, Mama once again bears witness to past traumas, but with a difference: she is witnessing to her own trauma, not Gram and Great Gram's. Ursa shares pieces of her own story, but rather than telling Mama, she expresses those pieces with knowing silences. Mama tells Ursa, "I know those other things you would never let me know" (Jones 122). Throughout the novel the phrase "I said nothing" is repeated throughout the text in conversations with other people. It is the elective silence of agency, but it is also a refrain—a way of establishing her order in the midst of others. However, there is a difference in her silence here. At this moment, her silence is not for her but for her mother—a way of accepting her mother's words or her mother's "knowing" in relation to Ursa. Ursa knows that "she was telling me she knew about my own private memory" and asks her mother "Do you want me to talk?" Mama replies, "Sometime when you're back here and you feel you have to." In this moment, there is an anticipation that this dialogue is unfinished and will continue to constitute a site of resistance and a space of healing—a return to the homeplace when Ursa is ready.

The homeplace is territorialized, yet even as Ursa leaves it again to merge with the world she establishes another refrain with her mother—one that is mutual but one that means something different to both of them. Of this relationship, Li writes

> Once vessels for the narratives of their foremothers, Mama and Ursa at last serve as crucial witnesses to one another, integrating experiences derived from their lives and family history to produce an understanding of their own unique identities. While Great Gram and Gram locate oppositional power in female reproduction, Mama and Ursa focus on the development and sharing of individual voices. (134-135)

At the end of the section in which Ursa goes to Mama to finally get the story Mama has kept secret, the novel hints that Mama might be able to move forward in connecting with other people, particularly her neighbor Mr. Floyd who has long had an interest in her. Both Mama and Ursa are able to begin the process of integrating the parts of themselves that have been separated from each other, the secrets of their pasts, and their connections to each other—the silences and the refrains. The spaces of resistance have created the possibility of Mama and Ursa expressing their traumas: Mama to Ursa, Ursa to her audience and, eventually, to Mutt.

In this exchange, however, another powerful moment of integration happens. As Mama walks Ursa to the bus stop, Mama continues to tell her story. Ursa says, “Mama kept talking until it wasn’t her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn’t Mama now, she was Great Gram talking” (Jones 124). The transformation of Mama into Great Gram is symbolic in two ways: first, it connects Mama’s story to the oral tradition of witnessing the pain and trauma that has been passed down since Great

Gram. While this passage could easily be a critique of these traditions, suggesting that they are themselves hegemonic, master narratives that reify the younger Corregidora women into their discourses, this is a repetition of the oral tradition *with a difference*. The story itself contains a different story from the ones of base oppression and violence that have been repeated throughout the story. This time Great Gram (through Mama) tells the story of a young boy, her friend, who attempts to escape the Corregidora's plantation. The boy confides in Great Gram: "He has this dream he told me about. That was all he wanted me for, was to tell me about his dream. He must've trusted me a lot though, cause I could have been one of them to run back to Corregidora with" (127-28). There is tenderness in the memory, even if it was supplanted by the violence of rape, and it took both the dialogue between Ursa and Mama and Mama's becoming Great Gram to find that tenderness in Great Gram's memory.

Mama returns to herself at the end of Great Gram's story and is now reflective of the ways in which Gram and Great Gram's discourse has held sway over them. Mama then tells Ursa about the difficulty of living with the two women and Ursa's father and the factures that occurred as a result. Out of this integration of Mama's stories with Great Gram's comes a new understanding of tenderness in the midst of violence, but also the potential divisions that the repetitions of those oral traditions created. As Mama finishes her story, the passage also comes to symbolize Ursa moment of resistance to those stories. While Mama is able to offer her a homeplace where she can come and tell her own stories, Ursa knows that she move forward by returning to another homeplace, the club where she sings her blues, She knows that she must employ one more silence as a way to resist once again that tradition of conflating memories, and her leaving Mama is emblematic of this silence.

Mama and Ursa's conversation ends the second section of the book. As Ursa sits back in her seat on the bus, she imagines both a man and woman whispering an exchange:

> "No."
>
> "Why don't you come?"
>
> "No."
>
> "What are you afraid of?" (Jones 132)

The dialogue markers seem deliberately left out so that we do not know who is speaking. I would argue that this is both Mutt and Mama asking Ursa, "Why don't you come," an imploring that suggests both the sexual orgasm and the returning to home. It is at this point that Ursa begins to integrate the fragments of her sexual identity and her identity as both a listener and a teller of the blues.

As these sites of resistance are integrated in Ursa, the text itself indicates this by more clearly differentiating between the imagined dialogue, actual dialogue, and the memories of the Corregidora women. Even as Mama becomes Great Gram in the passage mentioned above, the text itself makes it much clearer when Mama makes this transformation to Great Gram and back. In previous passages throughout the first half of the book, it is often unclear who is telling the memories, whose memories they are, and who is who in the imagined dialogues. This differentiation allows Ursa and the reader to make sense of her own pain and to be able to decipher her own traumatic memories. Because erotic integrity involves connecting these spaces and mapping the territories among them, Ursa's integrity is punctuated by these boundaries. These boundaries are her way of resensitizing her self and her body to those physical and emotional feelings that had been silenced. Ursa begins to remember what it is she needs to feel as she begins to re-member the fragments of her self.

Erotic integration allows her to express her own knowledges, those created in the silences of her fold, her womb-lack, and in the context of her refrains. Li explains that

> In stressing the artistic alterations of 'ritualized dialogue,' Jones calls attention to Ursa's emerging creative power. Her imagined conversations with Mutt are deeply connected to her blues performances as both provide arenas for self-expression and the exploration of her pain. Within the privacy of her mind, Ursa is able to achieve a greater understanding of her relationship to Mutt while fulfilling, at least in part, her need for a witness to acknowledge her experience of trauma. (143)

Her knowledges are the improvisations come to the surface to be expressed in her blues songs, but they are also expressed in the interactions with those around her. At the end of the book, Ursa sees Mutt once again, he asks her to come back to him. She thinks about his question, withholding her answer one last time. She tells herself, "I wanted to say that I can't come back, but I couldn't say anything…I knew what I still felt. I knew that I still hated him" (Jones 182). But when she finally gives him an answer, she improvises. She does not tell him "no," a refrain she had repeated for twenty years; she says "Yes." Again, she deterritorializes her refrain with this one difference. She returns to a place that was once her home, the Drake Hotel, with Mutt, but what is different in this iteration of the return, is that Ursa is now able to articulate her pain to Mutt, what she was not able to do at the beginning of her story. Li argues that "Ursa's final act toward Mutt suggests that she has come to terms with certain aspects of her traumatic past; she both communicates the ambiguity of her desire to Mutt and claims a subject position fraught with issues of power and bondage" (147). She is still in the process of becoming, and the return to Mutt insinuates a repetition of the pain and abuse that she suffered before, but Ursa is equipped now with an integrity that had been unfolding through the novel. What Ursa experiences in that moment of articulating her pain to Mutt is a certain joy. Both Moulard-Leonard and Audre Lorde understand this joy not only as a "good" feeling, but a visceral feeling in the moment of connection with oneself or another person. Moulard-Leonard explains that "joy as a bridge between people—joy here understood as self-connection: reminder of my capacity for feeling."[3] Joy is connecting through the depth of feeling; when you are connected with your feelings you can express them—there is joy in that expression.

Corregidora can be read as an erotic text because it embodies the erotic paradox of using words to express the wordlessness of subjectivity and emotion. These texts map the process of "coming to voice" and flinging one's self into the world while also finding ways to create and return to sites of resistance and marginality. The blues is a similar paradox; it is meant to expose the depth of ambiguity, the pleasure in the pain, the joy in the return—not that one necessarily arises out of the other, but that they can both coexist. What lies between them is erotic and that is what the poetry captures: the margins between the particulars, the immanence of the inner lives, the contradictions inherent in the power in the face of vulnerability. The blues becomes a perfect expression of this new type of space because it is the expression of constant moving of the margin—a mapping and remapping of the movement of the subject from center to margin—and the embodied protesting of oppression, the map to self love. It reminds us that we are, alone, subjects, but that we cannot thrive alone. Erotic literature negotiates those contradicting, paradoxical and ambiguous relationships between our inner and outer lives, the particulars of our experiences, and the fact of our social living.

---

[3] Per a personal conversation with Moulard-Leonard.

CONCLUSION

Perpetual Unfolding

In light of Davidson's use of the fold as a helpful paradigm of subjectivity was situated in Black women's experience, it is easy to see how the fold also works in Al Neimi's narrator's Syrian femininity. The narrator engaged in multiple silences as spaces from which she forged a "nomadic" subjectivity. In erotic moments with her lover, the Thinker, she remained silent, participating only bodily as the Thinker read to her from the classical Arabic texts. This scene, too, is reminiscent of Giovanni's "Seduction" in which the lover speaks, while the narrator remains silent, using body language as her source of communication.

The intimacy between the body and language in erotic literature is the catalyst for erotic expression. The body represents the nondiscursive or prediscursive moments in which the representations of identity are disrupted and ungrounded. This is part of becoming, in which the subject's particular experience of the world can exist side by side with the social identity. Eroticism represents the reality of living in relation to the trauma of a culture that prescribes sexuality, as well as the possibility of resisting those prescriptions and renegotiating identity in the context of multiplicity. The body represents boundaries, and while those boundaries are fluid, variable, and subject to historical inscription, the erotic relationship requires that one build and maintain integrity of both the body and the psyche. Eroticism requires a transgression of boundaries of the body, emotion, community, and politics; however, at each moment of transgression is an opportunity for choice and agency. This is what makes emotional and subjective liberation a function of eroticism. The erotic requires that we share power in the erotic moment, without hierarchies—this is why Moulard-Leonard suggests that the condition of the erotic is non-dialectical. It can hold all aspects of identity at once without collapsing some into others, maintain the integrity of those boundaries of identity and mapping the connections between them.

The refrains of erotic expression provide in its space the ability to hold both the pain of being and the possibility of becoming. These literatures engage the contingency of subjectivity by communicating the interdependency of language and the absence of language, the body and discursivity, self and other. The unique ways in which each of these texts constructs the dialogue between the inner and outer lives of their subjects maps the journey from the spaces that had once portrayed the trauma of opening up oneself in vulnerability and the joy and risk of the healing moments of finding power in that same space and reclaiming erotic agency. The power of the erotic is in the silences and dark spaces from which immanent knowledge springs. When the light is turned on, it is turned on by poetic expression, which is one of the most effective tools for tracing the connections between our erotic knowledge and the world in which we live. But because the silences in this space defamiliarize language, we must engage in creation instead of representation, we acknowledge instead of recognize. This requires an engagement of the particular and singular aspects of the erotic, the situated knowledge of the knower. It also requires the alliances of a political community. Erotic subjectivity needs to be nurtured or else transgressions become violations and power becomes abusive. The beginnings of erotic subjectivity are always available to us in those inner spaces of resistance, the virtual spaces through which we can begin connecting our pieces of identity. But without a connection with the real, without the physical and emotional connections to others and the world, erotic subjectivity cannot be realized and our erotic potential remains hidden. Lorde argues that poetry (poetic language, storytelling, writing) shines the light on these spaces. Poetic expression is revelatory, and so is erotic intimacy, the act of sexual play and love-making. We have so much to learn from a literature that is willing to take the risks of fantasy and imagination, of ungroundedness, in order to scout out the epistemology of the erotic and to report back to us the maps of those journeys.

In the throes of frustration early on in this project, I made a comment to a friend that there were so few models of healthy sexuality. So many of the books I had read were about men and women who had been sexually abused and raped and oppressed, who had been displaced, disconnected, and whose integrity had been undermined. It was so refreshing to read these stories of playful cheekiness, unfettered desires, in-your-face sexualities in the volumes of Black Erotica. At a recent conference, I had been enraptured by LaMonda Horton Stallings's mining of Fiona Zedde's erotica for some of most groundbreaking critical readings I had heard in a long time. But even as I read those literatures, the erotic texts that unabashedly reveled in the joys of erotic sexuality, I started seeing the connections between these literatures and the ones I had been so frustrated with. I saw the foundations for Zedde's eroticism in the complicated journeys from trauma to healing in *Corregidora* and the blues—the lines of integral connectedness began to appear. While I look forward to working more with erotica, I had to learn my own very valuable lesson, one that was both personal and professional. I had to acknowledge that these literatures that I had accused of representing only broken sexualities were also laden with the paths to healing these same subjectivities. I learned that the condition of healing the "wounded erotic" was remembering—of *"not* *forgetting"* as Hollibaugh puts it—the implications of our vulnerabilities in the hands of oppressive power. I had to understand that we find our power to resist in those moments as well. I think that is when I realized that *Corregidora* and the blues would be so important to my project. The kind of remembering that is presented in those texts is crucial to re-membering our erotic identities. Even though we have to find ways to move beyond those scars, those scars are still a part of us. Those scars are also healed wounds—the wounds cauterized by the "bright, hot center of pleasure and trust" (Morales 119).

Moving forward with healthy models of sexual intersubjectivity and identity destabilizes reified sexuality. In touch with the intimate, erotic, orgasmic moment of shared power, we begin to understand how these models of subjectivity can help us undermine the disintegrating notions of fractured difference without falling back on to universalizing, totalizing, and essentializing historical and hierarchical narratives. Lorde argues that in touch with the erotic we become less tolerant of injustices acted on ourselves and others. Creating an ethical erotic project, which could explore the erotic as a paradigm of social justice and community building is the goal of many of these writers and theorists.

At the end of Giovanni's "Seduction," the narrator's lover realizes that the narrator, Nikki, has divested both of them of their clothes in an act of seduction. All this time the lover has been waxing philosophical about politics and Black resistance, not noticing the narrator's silent play. In the final line of the poem, the lover rebukes her actions by responding, "Nikki,/ isn't this counterrevolutionary…?" (38). I always imagined that in the silence of the ellipses of the last line, Nikki responds, “How is love *not* revolutionary?”

WORKS CITED

Al Neimi, Salwa. *The Proof of the Honey*. Tr. Carol Perkins. New York: Europa Editions, 2008. Print.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007. Print.

Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1984. Print.

Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones). *Blues People: Negro Music In White America*. 1963. New York: Harper Perennial, 2002. Print.

Boyd, Melba Joyce. *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press.* New York: Columbia UP, 2003. Print.

Bullins, Ed. *The Theme is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays.* New York: Morrow, 1973. Print.

Butler, Judith. "From *Gender Trouble*." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. London: Norton, 2001. 2488-501. Print.

Byrd, Rudolph P. "Create Your Own Fire: Audre Lorde and the Tradition of Black Radical Thought." *I am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, et al. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 3-36. Print.

Cixous, Hélène, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*. 1.4 (1976): 875-93. Print.

Cognard-Black, Jennifer. "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." *NSWA Journal*. 13.1 (2001): 40-60. Print.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe. "Rethinking Black Feminist Subjectivity: Ann duCille and Gilles Deleuze." *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*. Eds. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano. Albany: SUNY P, 2010. 121-33. Print.

Davis, Amanda J. "To Build a Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. 26.3 (2005): 24-53. Print.

Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999. Print.

DeCosta-Willis, Miriam. “Introduction.” *Erotique Noire*. Eds. Miriam DeCosta Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell. New York: Doubleday, 1992. xxix-xl. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. “1837: Of the Refrain.” *A Thousand Plateaus: Captialism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987. 311-50. Print.

Dubey, Madhu. *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. Print.

Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. 1953. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.

“Erotic.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP, 2012. Web. 9 Mar. 2012. Print.

Floyd, Kevin. *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. Tr. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

Giovanni, Nikki. “Seduction.” *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*. New York: William Marrow, 1970. 38. Print.

--“Word Poem: Perhaps Worth Considering.” *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*. New York: William Marrow, 1970. 39. Print.

Govan, Sandra Y. “Forbidden Fruits and Unholy Lusts: Illicit Sex in Black American Literature.” *Erotique Noire*. Eds. Miriam DeCosta Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 35-43. Print.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.

Hogue, W. Lawrence. *Postmodern American Literature and Its Other*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009. Print.

Hollibaugh, Amber. *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

Hooks, Bell. “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990. 145-53. Print.

--“Homeplace: A Site of Resistance.” *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End P, 1990. 41-9. Print.

--“Postmodern Blackness.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. London: Norton, 2001. 2478-84. Print.

Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon P, 1975. Print.

Knight, Etheridge. *Belly Song and Other Poems*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1973. Print.

Li, Stephanie. “Love and the Trauma of Resistance in and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*.” *Callaloo*. 29.1 (2006): 131-50. Print.

Lorde, Audre. “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: The Crossing P, 1984. 81-109. Print.

--“An Open Letter to Mary Daly.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: The Crossing P, 1984. 66-71. Print.

--“Difference and Survival: An Address at Hunter College.” *I am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, et al. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 201-4. Print.

--“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: The Crossing P, 1984. 110-3. Print.

--“On a Night of the Full Moon.” *Erotique Noire*. Eds. Miriam DeCosta Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 394-5. Print.

-- “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: The Crossing P, 1984. 36-9. Print.

--“Sadomasochism: Not About Condemnation, an Interview with Audre Lorde.” *I am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, et al. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 50-6. Print.

-- “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: The Crossing P, 1984. 40-4. Print.

--“Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: The Crossing P, 1984. 53-9. Print.

Lorraine, Tasmin. *Deleuze and Guattari’s Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity, and Duration*. Albany: SUNY P, 2011. Print.

Malcolm, Cheryl Alexander. “(Un)Dressing Black Nationalism: Nikki Giovanni’s (Counter)Revolutionary Ethics.” *“And Never Know the Joy”: Sex and the Erotic in English Poetry*. Ed. C.C. Barfoot. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 389-97. Print.

Marcano, Donna-Dale L. “The Difference that Difference Makes: Black Feminism and Philosophy.” *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*.Eds. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano. Albany: SUNY P, 2010. 53-65. Print.

Martin, Reginald. “Introduction.” *Dark Eros: Black Erotic Writings*. Ed. Reginald Martin. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997. xiii-xviii. Print.

Morales, Aurora Levins. *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*. Cambridge: South End P, 1998. Print.

Moulard-Leonard. “Moving Beyond Us and Them? Marginality, Rhizomes and Immanent Forgiveness.” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 23 Sept. 2011: 1-19. Web. 16 Jan. 2012.

Nealon, Jeffrey. “Refraining, Becoming-Black: Repetition and Difference in Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*.” *Symplokē.* 6.1-2 (1998): 83-95. Print.

Perpich, Diane. “Black Feminism, Poststructuralism, and the Contested Character of Experience.” *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*.Eds. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano. Albany: SUNY P, 2010. 13-33. Print.

Pinkola Estes, Clarissa. *Women Who Run With Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York: Ballantine, 1995. Print.

Pinkster, Sanford. “A Conversation with Etheridge Knight.” *Black American Literature Forum*. 18.1 (1984): 11-4. Print.

Pollard, Cherise. “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women’s Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement.” *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. Ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2006.173-86. Print.

Rowell, Charles, and Etheridge Knight. “An Interview with Etheridge Knight.” *Callaloo.* 19.4 (1996): 966-81. Print.

Russell, Camisha. “Black American Sexuality and the Repressive Hypothesis: Reading Patricia Hill Collins with Michel Foucault.” *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*.Eds. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano. Albany: SUNY P, 2010. 201-24. Print.

Salaam, Kalamu ya. “Do Right Women: Black Women, Eroticism and Classic Blues.” *A Deeper Shade of Sex: The Best in Black Erotic Writing.* 1997. Ed. Reginald Martin. New York: Blue Moon Books, 2006. 69-93. Print.

--. “Tasty Knees.” *Erotique Noire*. Eds. Miriam DeCosta Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 5. Print.

Salih, Sara. “Introduction to ‘Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault’.” *The Judith Butler Reader*. Eds. Sara Salih and Judith Butler. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 21-2. Print.

Shange, Ntozake. “Fore/Play.” *Erotique Noire*. Eds. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell. New York: Doubleday, 1992. xix-xx. Print.

Valverde, Mariana. “A New Entity in the History of Sexuality: The Respectable Same-Sex Couple.” *Feminist Studies.* 32.1 (2006): 155-62. Print.

White, E. Frances. *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. Print.

Wong, Shelly. “Transgression as Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*.” *Callaloo* 13.3 (1990): 471-81. Print.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. “Dialogical Epistemology—An Intersectional Resistance to the ‘Oppression Olympics.’” *Gender and Society*. 26.1 (2012): 46-54. Print.