

**“Out of This Confusion I Bring My Heart”
Love, Liberation, and the Rise of Black Lesbian and Gay Cultural
Politics in Late Twentieth Century America**

by

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*When you love as we did you will know
There is no life but this
And history will not be kind*

Melvin Dixon

(I)Eye
dedicate
this work
to
My Brother
O.B. Green
Who
was taken too
soon
from
this
earth

Acknowledgements

I believe...no—wait—I remember. Yes. I remember the exact moment when I received a call from Jesse Huffnung-Garskof. Jesse called to inform me that I had been admitted into the Program in American Culture here at the University of Michigan. I was in Der Rathskeller, the main lunch drag at the University of Wisconsin’s student union. In the middle of grabbing one of their delicious cheeseburgers, I struggled to retrieve my cell phone. “Hello?...hello yes, this is David.” Moments later I was screaming. “Really?!” Yes, I was admitted into a doctoral program at the University of Michigan—one of two programs that accepted me. I knew nothing about this university. To tell the truth, I had never heard of the University of Michigan. Seriously. When I was completing my Master’s thesis and applying to doctoral programs, a colleague, Eric Darnell Pritchard—who had completed his Master’s degree in African American Studies and Doctoral degree in English Rhetoric at Wisconsin and now works as an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas at Austin—encouraged me to apply to Michigan. Eric believed that Michigan would really appreciate the work that I do in African American Studies. Without hesitating, I began researching Michigan, doing my “homework” as I was taught to do by my life-long mentor, Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans. After a few days I decided to apply to the American Culture program, writing in my research

statement that I'd continue exploring topics in African American Studies—especially topics related to gay history. Months passed between submission and the admission's decision. During those months of waiting, I completed the research and writing of my Master's thesis. Weeks before I was scheduled to defend my Master's thesis, I received a call from Jesse. "Congratulations!" A few weeks later, I received a letter in the mail. I was awarded the prestigious Rackham Merit Fellowship, which covered five-years of funding, including four summers. I was in. I had been admitted. I was awarded a huge fellowship. I was getting my PhD and I resolved then that I would let no one or nobody turn me around—and I've kept truth to that promise...and what a journey completing the third step—the doctoral degree—has been.

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Prior to entering graduate school at Wisconsin and here at Michigan, I entered the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program as a rising senior at the University of Florida. I was in the program when I first learned about the doctoral degree—the PhD. Before entering this program, I knew no one with such a degree. I’d never heard of a PhD. I knew so little about education. I am a first generation college student. I am the first in my family to attend college. I’m from the hood—you know...the ghetto. With the exception of attending high school at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts and eighth-grade at Twin Lakes Academy Middle School, I primarily attended inner-city urban schools in Jacksonville, Florida. I fought hard not to be left behind. I’m still fighting. All that to say, thank you to the University of Florida and its McNair Scholars Program for taking a chance and admitting me into its AIM Program. In the McNair program I discovered the joy of research and learned about this thing called graduate school. As a McNair Scholar, I met Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans—and this meeting ultimately altered the course of my life. Dr. Evans: THANK YOU! You were the first black woman to believe in my dreams. You were the first black woman who took the time to tell me that I could do this thing called grad school. You were the first person to ever ask me about my dreams—what I wanted to do in this life: “I want to teach.” I wanted to teach well before associating this dream with the professoriate. Without skipping a beat you began preparing me for graduate school. You helped me understand the application process. You helped me write apple-polished admissions essays—eight drafts in total. You helped me become me in all of who I am and for that I am ever and eternally grateful. Thank you.

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Prologue
“Somewhere Listening for My Name”
An Ancestral Obligato

Haunted by poems beginning with I
seek out those whom I love who are deaf
to whatever does not destroy
or curse the old ways that did not serve us
while history falters and our poets are dying
choked into silence by icy distinction
their death rattles blind curses
and I hear even my own voice becoming
a pale strident whisper
At night sleep locks me into an echoless coffin
sometimes at noon I dream
there is nothing to fear
now standing up in the light of my father sun
without shadow
I speak without concern for accusations
that I am too much or too little woman
that I am too black or too white
or too much myself
and through my lips come the voices
of the ghosts of our ancestors
living and moving among us
Hear my heart’s voice as it darkens
pulling old rhythms out of the earth
that will receive this piece of me
and a piece of each one of you
when our part in history quickens again
and is over.

--Audre Lorde, “Prologue”

“As gay men and lesbians we are the sexual niggers of society.”¹ These are the bold, provocative, and powerful words of the late black gay writer and intellectual extraordinaire Melvin Dixon; words that began his keynote address at the Out/ Write gay and lesbian writers conference held in Boston in 1992. Dixon’s address emerges during a profound moment of living absence—the “epidemic dead and living” as he elegizes in a poem dedicated to the black gay men who had already died from AIDS as well as black lesbians who had lost their battles with breast cancer.² “We are facing the loss of our entire generation. Lesbians lost to various cancers, gay men lost to AIDS. What kind of witness will you bear? What truth-telling,” Dixon asks urgently, “are you brave enough to utter and endure the consequences of your unpopular message?”

Summon the spirits:

Claude: “if we must die”

Richard: “one can love”

Langston: “a dream deferred”

Jimmy: “go tell it on the mountain”

Audre: “the erotic as power”

Joseph: “black men loving black men is a revolutionary act”

Pat: “I had a dream, too/ a simple dream”

Marcia: “The streets belong to the people”

Essex: “whom did he love?”

Assotto: “I want to celebrate wild officious cocks”

Sylvester: “do you wanna funk?”

Marlon: “black is/ black ain’t”

June: “where is the love?”

¹ Melvin Dixon, *Love’s Instruments*, (Sylmar: Tia Chucha Press, 1995).

² *Ibid.*, “These are Just a Few,” 71.

With a lucid sense of self, Dixon understood—like his black queer warrior ancestors and comrades—that he was approaching death. “My life is closing,” he states somberly. Death’s rapture was palpable and threatened the black gay literary cultures that were birthed by the devastating reality of AIDS and cancer, this apocalyptic regime of illness. “Our voice is our weapon,” which must be used, Dixon asserts, to combat the threat of our erasure. As the inheritors of this “chilling threat of erasure,” gay men and lesbians were (and are) responsible for remembering our stories, our history, and our literatures. “If we don’t buy our books, they won’t get published. If we don’t talk about our books, they won’t get reviewed. If we don’t write our books, they won’t get written.” Indeed, Dixon spoke of recovery. “Within this environment of sexual and racial niggerdom, recovery,” he asserts, “isn’t easy.”³ Gay racism in mainstream white gay communities coupled with the rabid homophobia in black communities relegated the existence of black lesbian and gay life, literature and culture, to the social margins of irrelevance. Yet, we must remember that the sum of broken hearts, of broken bodies, and of broken histories should not equate to a broken spirit. We must write about, excavate, and share our stories, and speak—help him Essex—“the ass splitting truth” even—say it Audre -- “at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”⁴ Dixon closes his address on an appeal so harrowing and emotionally gripping that it brings forth tears to my eyes each and every time that I approach its finale:

As for me...I may not be well enough or alive next year to attend the lesbian and gay writers conference, but I will be somewhere listening for my name.

I may not be around to celebrate with you the publication of gay literary history. But I’ll be somewhere listening for my name.

³ Ibid., “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name,” 74.

⁴ Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Plume, 1992); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Feminist Press, 2007).

If I don't make it to the Tea Dance in Provincetown or the Pines, I'll be somewhere listening for my name.

You, then, are charged the possibility of your good health, by the broadness of your vision, to remember us.⁵

Dixon's resilience inspires me. Even in the face of death and against all social odds, Dixon envisioned the possibilities of black gay and lesbian literature. Most importantly, he began to talk directly to his progenies, "you"...me.

I first read Dixon's speech as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the "stacks" in Memorial Library. While reading Dixon's address, tears came pouring down my face uncontrollably; bodily shakes jerked me in and out of reality within that small space between the desk and chair that encompassed the infamous "cages" that lined the walls of the stacks. This moment of my visceral bodily response to Dixon's address crystallized my scholarly pursuits: I was going to write this history, I told myself, because I am "responsible" for my people. There were many times folks told me that recovering such history was impossible, that such history did not exist. "Black gay people don't have a history," I was told well before applying to graduate school. But when I discovered Dixon and Audre Lorde and Assotto Saint and Joseph Bream and Essex Hemphill and Barbara Smith and Pat Parker and Marlon Riggs and Cheryl Clarke and James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin I began to dream big dreams that held my faith and that carried me over the culture of hateration and disbelief. I began listening for their and other names. Samuel Delaney, Larry Duplechan, Ann Allen Shockley, E. Lynn Harris, James Earl Hardy, Michelle Parkerson, PomoAfroHomos, Voicescapes, Adodi Muse, Dykes Against Racism Everywhere, Salsa Soul Sisters, Gay Men of African Descent, Black and White Men Together, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Langston

⁵ Dixon, "I'll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name," 78-79.

Hughes, Melvin Boozer, Other Countries, David Frechette, June Jordan, James Tinney, Carl Bean. Marcia P. Johnson. Sylvester. Blackberri. Me.

“Out of Confusion I Bring My Heart”: *Love, Liberation, and the Rise of Black Lesbian and Gay Cultural Politics in Late Twentieth Century America* is a recovery project. It represents my listening and the “breadth of my vision to remember.” In the pages that follow are the punks, sissies, dykes, transvestites and drag queen outsiders who “loved without mercy” in search for “something like freedom.” They wrote with “fire in their eyes” as their bodies suffered, pained by approaching deaths. But, as the black lesbian poet June Jordan reminds us, “some of us did not die.” Despite, and perhaps in spite of bodily pains, these fierce black queer warriors of love did not stop “dancing in the streets” and discotheques to funky music that enable them to fly “higher” with the “winds of Orisha.” Within the pages of this dissertation are “the days of good looks,” were folks “turned forty in the 90s”; the days when they were “forever gay” singing “new long songs,” hoping for the days when we shall all overcome, “risin’ to the love we [all] need.” Melvin. Audre. Assotto. Essex. Joe. Pat. Michelle. Marlon and the rest of ya’ll, I hope that you all can hear your names being shouted from these pages. I hope that between metaphor, synecdoche, and simile; between ellipses, guttural pauses, periods, hyphens and dashes that you all can hear the love I have for your tenacity...for your bravery. This work represents the labor that you all endured with the hopes that one day I would be listening for you names. I am here listening. Abide with me as I share your labor of love and this archive of passion with those of us still here living on the “edge of each other battles.” Here ye’ a toast, celebrating your convictions; we begin to drink from the gourd of love’s instruments in a relentless attempt to quench our thirst for your words.

We promised to grow old together, our dream
since years ago when we began
to celebrate our common tenderness
and touch. So here we are.

Indeed, here we are... “coming home with our heads held high.” Cheers.

--David B. Green, Jr.
Tuesday, September 25, 2012
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
*Updated March 27, 2015

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Introduction

“That Toward Which We Endlessly Struggle”

I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter.

--Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*

Love itself, the subversive gift, is an important public good, and loving is a significant political act, particularly among those stigmatized and marked as unworthy of love and incapable of deep commitment.

--Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*

Our confusion about what we mean when we use the word “love” is the source of our difficulty in loving.

--bell hooks, *All About Love*

Love, that “fragile moment which lasts forever,” is at the heart of this study.¹ Throughout various stages of the researching and writing of this project, I have repeatedly asked myself: As a field of intellectual endeavor, is African American Studies prepared for a public discussion of love? Of course, as the epigraphs framing this introduction imply, the immediate response to this inquiry is simply yes. Yet and still, we may further complicate our question by posing it differently—with a keen eye on nuance and subtly: are African Americanists, those who take seriously the questions of blackness

¹ Baldwin, James. *Just Above My Head* (New York: The Dial Press), 119.

as a framework for socio-cultural critique, prepared to publicly discourse about love as an erotic and political practice in the name of revolution, indeed, in the name of freedom and liberation? Answers to that question vary and demands attending to the shifting nature of love in black political imaginaries in the U.S.—a shift, indeed, from the privatization of love to it being a public good on which black liberation hinges.

Out of This Confusion I Bring My Heart: Love, Liberation, and The Rise of Black Lesbian and Gay Cultural Politics in Late Twentieth Century America, mediates on this question as it endeavors to offer a radical approach to African American Studies—an approach that places black lesbians and gay men at the center of the question of love and liberation in the last decades of the twentieth century. This project does not queer love, per se. It does, however, examines what happens to and with love when in the hands of a coterie of feisty, fierce, and rebellious black queer folks at a particular moment in U.S. history: when at the apex of struggles for black liberation there was a call for a politics of love imagined as the beloved community.

With all of its promises of redemption, freedom and liberation, and the coming together of people across racial divides, economic classes, political persuasions, and religious practices, the hopefulness of beloved community continues to fail many—especially the gamut of queer folks, political prisoners, and women whom all continue to suffer under the weight of institutional violence(s) sanctioned by a capitalist and patriarchal U.S. nation-state. In *Seeking The Beloved Community*, the black feminist critic Joy James echoes these concerns exactly. Tracing the political and theological articulations of the beloved community back to the civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., James finds that while King was “guided by the New Testament, Gandhi, and

love,” he saw “only one redemptive route out of black suffering. Other routes though,” James concludes, “would be explored by radical freedom lovers.”² While James never explicitly names this one route or those other “radical freedom lovers” who would explore alternative routes, she raises questions that help her reader imagine these others.

There are other primary questions, that King does not address, to ask about our suffering and our activism. What is its relationship to black political death and political prisoners? How is it relevant to the issues of sexual violence and exploitation of black women, children, and LGBT communities? What are sustainable commitments and organic organizing of black freedom? How shall we remember the political dead and disappeared?³

James’s focus on suffering and “political death” helps the framing of this project, and especially my deliberate focus on the “rise” of black lesbian and gay cultural politics in late twentieth century America. Fully aware that transgender and bisexual activists also participated the fight for liberation and justice in this country, too, this project, in part, responds to James’s feminist critique of the beloved community as it focuses on black lesbians and black gay men, those other “radical freedom lovers.” fully aware that transgender and bisexual activists also participated the fight for liberation and justice in this country, too. Whereas James chooses conjecture to frame her notion of political death—hinting at the possibility that women, political prisoners, children, and LGBT folks occupy this category—I understand political death, by way of Sharon Holland’s *Raising The Dead*, as a hermeneutics of erasure, slippage, neglect and otherwise historiographic amnesia that in the context of African American Studies, condition black

² Joy James, *Seeking The Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader* (Albany: SUNY, 2013), 144.

³Ibid., 146.

lesbian and gay life and history.⁴ Embracing the politically dead in this way enables me to “speak about the unspoken” by attending to the ways that black lesbian and gay radical freedom lovers “have slipped between the cracks of language” associated with the beloved community: love.⁵

Black Love & The Long 20th Century

Although the scope of this project undertakes as its temporal bounds the late twentieth century—and specifically the decades during and after the 1960s—it is worth noting that black folks have a long history of negotiating their subjectivities through love, despite detractors and naysayers. As early as the Harlem Renaissance, all throughout the Jazz Age, and in the modern Civil Rights movement, black writers and artists went to great lengths in order to capture and thus imagine the importance of love to black life, community building, and liberation practices. When some of our earliest black female heroines were not “in love with the poignancy of escape,”⁶ they were opening their hearts to “the presence of love,”⁷ that “exquisite torturing emotion”⁸ which offered “the promise and fulfillment of freedom.”⁹ Achieving love and “intimacy”—to borrow Michael Cook’s turn of phrase—was no small feat after emancipation and throughout the Harlem Renaissance. Being “free to settle,” or as Cooke argues, “comely and resolute in one’s own being,” as a black woman or *enfant terrible*—or sexual deviant—was freighted by the politics of race and gender respectability, which Candice Jenkins have argued,

⁴ Sharon Holland, *Raising The Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁵ Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 4-5.

⁶ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928).

⁷ Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig* (1859)

⁸ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

⁹ Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (1966)

“regulated” black sexual politics during those times.¹⁰ In addition to Jenkins, a host of Harlem Renaissance scholars—such as Gloria Hull, Erin Chapman, A. B. Christa Schwarz, Eric Garber, and James F. Wilson¹¹—have demonstrated well that black women who flouted traditional gender roles and self-fashioned black dandies and otherwise “queer” men often relegated themselves to private quarters—and not without cause.¹² Cabarets, buffet parties, as well as rent parties, as depicted in Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) and Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* (1932), afforded such men and women safe and private spaces where they could, Shane Vogel notes, indulge together their otherwise “criminal intimacies.”¹³ Such intimacies enabled black queer Harlemites alternative expressions of sexual and racial selfhood against uplift demands and “daunting and defeating forces,” such as the police and the law. Claude McKay

¹⁰ Michael Cook, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). Candice Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)

¹¹ Gloria T. Hull, *Color Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); A. B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Erin Chapman, *Prove it On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (Oxford University Press, 2012); James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Eric Garber, “A Spectacle of Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem” in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, eds., *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Penguin Press, 1989).

¹² Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, might be the exception. Through a “blues of defiance,” Rainey often expressed her sexual and erotic desires and orientations. In a few of her performances, she dared her audience and anyone suspicious of her sexuality, to “prove it on me”—where the “it” stands in for rumors that we would call her queer-lesbian sexual proclivities and desires. See Erin Chapman, *Prove it On Me*; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*

¹³ Vogel draws upon the work of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner when theorizing criminal intimacies. He defines criminal intimacies as “relations and relational narratives that are not legible or recognized as valid by dominant discourses and social institutions.” Such relations, he continues quoting Berlant and Warner, “bears no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.” Vogel concludes that private spaces, such as a cabaret, “offer a horizon of possibility for social and sexual contacts that were transient, contingent, non-normative, and emergent.” See Shane Vogel, *The Scene of The Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*.

imbues a minor, nameless, character in *Home to Harlem* with a stylized dandyism that in fact constitutes a radical act of resistance to the status quo. Presumably an associate of Billy Biasse—a relatively important character in the novel whose name provocatively signifies his bisexuality—McKay illuminates the boy’s presence vividly:

Billy Biasse was there at the neighboring table with a longshoreman and a straw colored boy made up with high brown powder, his eye-brows were elongated and blackend up, his lips streaked with the dark rouge so popular in Harlem, and his carefully-straightened hair lay plastered and glossy under Madame Walker’s absinthe-colored salve for “milady of fashion and color.”¹⁴

Indeed, in the days of the Harlem Renaissance, privacy was key to achieving intimacy, fashioning a self-hood as fierce as Billy Biasse’s friend, and the essence of embodying and practicing “something like freedom” within the limits of containment.¹⁵

Moving beyond the Harlem Renaissance where love and intimacy were private matters, love enters public discourse as a fierce black music aesthetic. Indeed, as a blues people love ignites African Americans with unbridled passion that they then used to express their spiritual center, their desires and, when necessary, endure the pain of heartbreak. In the 1960s John Coltrane gave us his deeply spiritual “A Love Supreme,” while the Supremes told us to “Stop in the Name of Love” before, the lyrics go, “you break my heart.” Whereas Tina Turner asks us in the early 1990s, “What’s Love Got to Do With It”—and several years before she suggests that love is “second hand emotion”—Cheryl Lynn posits that love operates as a shared resource that bonds black folks together. “Your love is my love/ my love is our love/ our love is here to stay,” Lynn croons in her disco hit, “Go To Be Real,” which was released in 1978.

¹⁴ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, 91.

¹⁵ Robert Reid-Phar, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

This epistemology of love that I have briefly and broadly sketched here indicates that from slavery to freedom love functions as salient topic in African American letters and artistic expression and is, James Baldwin claims in *Notes of a Native Son* (1949), that “toward which we endlessly struggle.”¹⁶ In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin shares these struggles about loving deeply and widely people of different hues, spiritual beliefs, and different lifestyles. “If love will not swing wide the gates,” then he concludes, “no other power will or can.”¹⁷ Recalling his earlier childhood and introduction to Christian theology, Baldwin writes:

When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant everybody. But no. It applied to only those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all. I was told by a minister, for example, that I should never, on any public conveyance, under any circumstances, rise and give my seat to a white woman. White men never rose for Negro women. Well, that was true enough, in the main—I saw his point. But what was the point, the purpose, of *my* salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love toward others, no matter how they behaved toward me?¹⁸

Baldwin felt restricted by the ideologies that undergirded theological and political principles of love. He “fled” from the church and by doing so he realized an important reality about love across and within the black community. He writes: “In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare. Perhaps,” Baldwin continues, “we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so,” Baldwin concludes, “within these limits we sometimes achieved with

¹⁶ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955)

¹⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963)

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

each other a freedom that was close to love.”¹⁹ As Clarence Hardy notes, Baldwin’s view on love did not “promote a more passive posture on social change and the world.”²⁰ Throughout his work, Baldwin pits the “working of love against the rigidities of the institutional church.”²¹ In so doing, he constructs love as “a force that is frighteningly inclusive in its breath and all-encompassing in its demands. At the same time,” Hardy argues, “love [for Baldwin] is an ordinary facet of life; it is among the universal constants of human existence.”²²

Unlike his cultural interlocutors and his Harlem Renaissance ancestors, love for Baldwin is not rooted in romantic or sexual desires for an object other. Rather, through Baldwin we repurpose love as a public good, an aspect of his everyday life that survives and celebrates difference and one that also challenges established institutional ideologies that otherwise hinge on racial exclusion and class division. Although I do not want to suggest that Baldwin’s views on love were exclusively a product of his sexual identity, it is important to flag that as a black gay man Baldwin’s articulation of love begins to do the kind of work that this project seeks to explore more deeply. In other words, this project attends to the politicization of love, noting the ways in which black lesbians and gay men imagined love as a public practice that was not only critical to their own survival but also to the collective liberation of black communities. I argue that in its articulation as a liberatory praxis love shaped and was shaped by the rise of black lesbian and black gay culture within and across black communities in the last decades of the twentieth century.

¹⁹ Ibid., 55.

²⁰ Clarence E. Hardy III, *James Baldwin’s God: Sex, Hope and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 62.

²¹ Ibid., 63.

²² Ibid., 62.

Love: A Hermeneutics for Social Change

Writing in *Desire/ Love*, Lauren Berlant asks: “What does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so *conventional*, so bound up in institutions like marriage and family, property relations, and stock phrases and plots?”²³ In this dissertation I am not interested in conventional love or in defining love as a single concept. Instead I am interested in expanding upon Chela Sandoval’s theory “love as a hermeneutics of social change.” In *Methodology of the Oppressed* Sandoval attaches love to punctum, and specifically that which “breaks through social narratives” of conventional love cited by Berlant; Sandoval’s theory shifts love “away from [these] traditional moorings.” Drawing upon the work of Roland Barthes to situate Third World intellectual’s philosophies of love, Sandoval writes:

Third world writers such [Che] Guevera, [Frantz] Fanon, [Gloria] Anzaldua, Emma Perez, Trinh Minh-ha, or Cherrie Moraga...similarly define love as a “breaking” through whatever controls in order to find understanding and community: it is described as “hope” and “faith” in the potential goodness of some promised land; it is defined as Anzaldua’s *coatlicue* state, which is a “rupturing” in one’s everyday world that permits crossing over to another; or as a specific moment of shock, what Emma Perez envisions as the trauma of desire, of erotic despair. These writers who theorize social change and understand “love” as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement.²⁴

In this project, I read the literature of black lesbian and black gay men in an effort to show how they “puncture” limiting discourses of love in a black cultural context. In literary and queer theory, love is, Berlant notes, always-already attached to “fantasy” and otherwise sexual and erotic desire. When scholars attempt to interrogate love beyond the

²³ Lauren Berlant, *Desire/ Love* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 7-8.

²⁴ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 139.

practices of desire and fantasy they find themselves confronted by (and limited to) questions of “protectionism,” “patriotism,” and love’s entanglement with nation building. The reason for these limitations is that scholars do not wrestle with love’s multiplicity in spite of often recognizing the various kinds of love. Writing in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed asks: “What does the language of love do? How does it work?” Although Ahmed sets out to explore the work of love across multiple contexts—multicultural love, chief among them—she states that:

there are, of course, many types of love (family, friendly, erotic). My concern is not to define ‘what is love’ or to map the relation between these different kinds of love. Rather, I want to consider how the pull of love towards an other, who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object. I do not want to suggest a one-way relation of transference (when a love for a particular other comes to ‘stand for’ the collective, or when love for a collective ‘stands in’ for the particular other). Rather, I want to examine how love moves us ‘towards’ something in the very delineation of the object of love, and how that direction of ‘towardness’ is sustained through the ‘failure’ of love to be returned.”²⁵

Without exploring the various kinds of love noted parenthetically, Ahmed’s formulations imply a static or fixed notion of love. Is the love in Ahmed’s “pull of love” always the same? Does this love remain the same in the movement towards something? What is the “failure of love to be returned” based on if this love is constant? Are there other factors that contribute to this failure? To state my concerns more pointedly: What might it mean to think about love in a black cultural context where black lesbians and gay men are at the center? Approaching love in this context requires that we articulate the various kinds of love that Ahmed notes: “family,” “friendly,” and “erotic.”

Because my deployment of Ahmed suggests that I am, like she, less interested in defining love, than I am in explore multiple kinds of love in the interest of outlining a

²⁵ Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2014), 124.

hermeneutics of love. Towards this end I read the black lesbians and black gay men studied in this project as “autological subjects.” In Elizabeth Povinelli’s *The Empire of Love* autological subjects are self-authorized custodians of self-making who engage in *multiple* “discourses, practices, and fantasies” about “self-sovereignty and the value of individual freedom” within larger social, political, historical and institutional contexts—different iterations of what she calls “genealogical society.”²⁶ The convergence of an “autological subject” (black lesbians and gay men) and “genealogical society” (the beloved community) produce an “intimate event” that can either produce normative love or a crisis. In either event, the intimate event is never the same and always determined by the context through which it’s produced. Yet and still crisis is not an ends to a mean in this project—in a black cultural context I locate love as a hermeneutics that goes beyond an analysis crisis. Stated differently, when black lesbians and gay men re-imagine the beloved community they do so with multiple visions of love that is both destabilizing and inspirational.

As a social and political phenomenon crisis has a long and tortured history in African American letters. From W.E.B. Du Bois’s (and the NAACP’s) *The Crisis* and Harold Cruse’s *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: The Failure of Black Leadership* to Audre Lorde’s poem “A Conversation in Crisis”—which calls for attending to the history of sexuality in black communities—crisis motivates both public conversations about blackness that require critical reflection on black humanity and the intellectual possibilities articulated within and against racist and racialized notions of U.S. citizenship. I want to follow this line of thought by suggesting that black lesbians and

²⁶ Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward A Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

black gay men, within the cultural context and political imaginary of the beloved community, sought to address what I discuss elsewhere as “the crisis of black love.”²⁷ Yet the crisis produced within these contexts inspired their activism, which concerned them expanding the beloved community by imagining the multiple possibilities of love. As autological subjects black lesbians and black gay men imagine various possibilities of love that are conditioned by their diverse lived experiences. Thus, like Povinelli, I understand the relationship between “love, intimacy, and sexuality” less as an attachment to “desire, pleasure, or sex per se”—though I discuss these as constraints and sites of pleasure throughout the dissertation—and more concerned with “geography, history, culpability, and obligation...the distribution of life and death; hope and despair; and the seemingly self-evident fact and value of freedom.”²⁸ Moreover, when I speak of love and the beloved community, I too am referring to “the process by which the dialectic of individual freedom and social bondage are...localized and contested.”²⁹ In their literary activism black lesbians and gay men contest the discursive limits of love; they also contested one another’s notion of love. Indeed, because there were so many different dreams of love contestation was inevitable.

So Many Dreams

Earlier, I stated that a part of this dissertation responds to Joy James’s feminist critique of the beloved community. Now I want to discuss another critical part of this dissertation, a piece that gives the project its rhetorical legibility. Indeed, the title of this

²⁷ David B. Green Jr., “Erotic Alienation and The Crisis of Black Love: At Home with Joseph Beam, Melvin Dixon, and *In The Life*” in Steven Fullwood and Charles Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam’s Call* (New York: Vintage Entity Press, 2015).

²⁸ Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

dissertation references a poem by Essex Hemphill, a black gay poet, performance artist, activist, and Philadelphia-resident (by way of Chicago) who was a key figure that emerged on the U.S. black gay literary scene during the 1980s. Published in his critically acclaimed *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (1992), “So Many Dreams” gifts to us love’s multiple abilities to: move with yet contest the hegemony of Western philosophical thought, challenge scientific discourse of both racialized sexual pathology and “love and affection,” and understand love’s deep attachment to blackness in ancient African civilization. Indeed, “So Many Dreams” is Proustian in its logic. Through poetic language, Hemphill, like Marcel Proust, tells us—in the words of Martha Nussbaum—“that the sort of knowledge of the heart we need...cannot be given [to] us by the science of psychology, or by any sort of scientific use of intellect. Knowledge of the heart must come from the heart—from and in its pains and longings, its emotional responses.”³⁰

Within this context, Hemphill writes:

Had I been clear-headed
there would have been
no pattern of sanity
to follow.
Out of this confusion
I bring my heart
a pale blue crystal,
a single rose,
a kiss long held for you
before the myth of Atlantis
was created to challenge
the genius of
Memphis and Senegal.³¹

³⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 261-262.

³¹ Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Plume, 1992), 91.

Hemphill's persona does not want to be normal and he does not mind being vulnerable. Towards this end he offers his heart in the tradition of blackness, what he calls the "genius of Memphis and Senegal." He, like Martin Luther King Jr. before him, has a dream:

I long for the occult sciences
to inform you of my affections
and if this evidence
is insufficient,
then let a single dream
containing the content of my soul
spill throughout your sleep³²

The lack of end or eternal rhyme, coupled with decisive word choices—"clear-headed," "pale blue crystal," "single rose," "occult sciences"—unequivocally state Hemphill's intentions: to lay bare, without pretension, his and the persona's vulnerability and specifically "the content of my soul." Contrary to being judged by the content of his "character" Hemphill prefers that the content of his soul be the basis of social, intellectual, and emotional judgment. By the end of the poem, he literally and figuratively writes/ speaks from the bottom of his heart, noting here the placement of love at the bottom of the poem; love anchors the poem.

take whatever voice I would use
to call out your name
in the sleeping garden,
take whatever suits you,
my love for now.³³

There is so much possibility—and power—to be had in the poem's last line: "my love for now." Is love up for the taking or is it a signature. Although I claim that love is a

³² Hemphill, *Ceremonies*, 91.

³³ *Ibid.*

“signature” theme of Hemphill—and other black lesbian and gay writers in this project—it’s the possibility of love serving multiple needs that gives the poem its power. Hemphill’s love is discursive and open to interpretation: it’s sexual and erotic, signatory and aesthetic; it’s material, ideological, physical as well possessive yet accessible/available. The goal of Hemphill’s love is to satisfy the desires of his object and his readers and he stops at no limit to ensure these desires, these dreams, are satisfied—bringing, giving, and offering multiple forms of love in his efforts.

However, there is another reason that I adopt Hemphill’s poem, and his literary activism in the title of this project: Hemphill’s rise onto the literary and cultural scene during the 1980s and 1990s was conditioned by the creative and political work of black lesbian feminists.³⁴ A tradition to which I now turn. During my summer research trips to the Schomburg Research Center for Black Culture in Harlem, New York I started with the archives of black gay men because it was a space of comfort and, well, quite easy. I uncovered scores of written material by black gay men. However, my own “dreams” of writing a dissertation on black gay men—and specifically on Assotto Saint—were productively interrogated when a black woman colleague forced me to question my otherwise limited conceptualized of “queer genealogy.” Quite frankly she asked: “where are the women in this genealogy?” I had not thought of this question in the nascent stages of developing this project, but I knew that women of color were there because I had written—very briefly—about them in my Master’s thesis, which again focused on the social and political organization Black and White Men Together, and specifically it’s

³⁴ The novelist Junot Diaz also speaks truth to power regarding the important roles that women of color played for black (gay) male writers. See the *Salon* interview with Moya Bailey, “The Search for Decolonial Love.” http://www.salon.com/2012/07/02/the_search_for_decolonial_love/

New York Chapter, Men of All Colors Together. In response to my colleague's question though I replied, "well, I don't do women." While it was certainly a Freudian slip—it was an honest question whose response reflected my own intellectual conditioning, which was at the time influenced by much of the emerging work dubbed Black Queer Studies. Primarily, that work addressed two issues: African American Studies' rabid homophobia and heterosexism and queer theory's overwhelming whiteness. At the time, black gay men, whom overwhelmingly placed black gay men at the center of analysis, were at the forefront of Black Queer Studies. Thus, somehow I conflated black queer studies with the life and experiences of black gay men. I was unaware and not concerned by the problems inherent to these otherwise glaring "under" sights.

Shortly after that presentation I too began to seriously think about black lesbian history within formations of black queer culture in America. What I soon discovered was that black lesbian women were critical to black gay male literary and cultural productions during this time. Yet, as literary critic Sharon Holland notes, "Colored. Female. Queer. Black Female. Queer...share a simultaneity that opens them up to violence, reduction, and forgetting."³⁵ There is a persistent forgetting of the black lesbian women in theorizing about sexuality and race that concerns Holland not only because of the inherent issues of racism and male prerogative that fail the black lesbian but also because black lesbians were, historically speaking, central to much of queer and feminist political thought that is now institutionalized as (Black) Queer Theory and Feminism. In part two, I respond to this historical forgetting by starting this section with Audre Lorde's poem "Need: A Chorale of Black Women's Voices," by discussing the life activism and work

³⁵ Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 65.

of Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, and Cheryl Clarke and in chapter six, by discussing the black feminist influences on the production of black gay male writing.

Nevertheless, as I began reading black lesbian literature more deeply, I noticed two critical themes emerge in this literature: home/ community and love. Why were these themes so central to their work and why did they figure so prominently? Making my way to the Schomburg one hot summer day it occurred to me that women of color—and particularly black lesbian women—were the missing link “from Selma to Stonewall,” to borrow Michelle Obama’s turn of phrase during her speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention’s LGBT Caucus.³⁶ How did we move from Selma to Stonewall, two very important historical movements whose narratives erase black women in their focus on black men and white gay men? To address this critical missing link we might frame women of color interstitial politics through what Belinda Robnett theorizes elsewhere as “bridge leadership.” Indeed, women of color and black lesbian women in particular, expanded upon and revised ideas that undergird much of the civil rights political ideologies of the 1960s and applied them to the women’s liberation movement throughout second wave feminism.³⁷ They were also the source of inspiration for black gay men, which I discuss in part two of the dissertation; and, furthermore, they are central to understanding the movement of black liberation in the post-civil rights era, from the 1960s to the start of the new millennium.

³⁶ <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/michelle-obama-praises-husbands-commitment-homosexuals>

³⁷ Belinda Robnett, *How Long, How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Belinda Robnett, “African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization” in *African American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 101, Issue 6 (May 1996), 1661-1693.

Whereas Black Queer Studies writ large—and queer of color critique—recognize the centrality of women of color to the cultural and political projects of black gay men, few of them actually engage these women’s lives deeply, leaving unexplored the specific connections between women of color and black gay men. In other words, naming the political, intellectual, and cultural productions of black gay men is centered at the expense of exploring the lived and intellectual herstories of women of color—a critique, to reiterate, fleshed out more thoroughly in chapter five and my discussion of Joseph Beam’s writings. This dissertation seeks to render more intimately the lives and visions of black lesbians, digging deeper into their work—beyond acknowledging their importance to black gay men’s political literary production, I situate black lesbians as agents of textuality, authors of history, and advocates for political change. Black lesbians were and remain critical to multiple liberation projects in the United States and this project attempts to shed light on this aspect of truth by situating them within and against discursive practices of love the call for a critical interrogation of the beloved community.

I begin this dissertation by revisiting the 1960s and specifically discussing love in the black freedom movement. In Part One and chapter one, I place Martin Luther King Jr, Bayard Rustin, and Audre Lorde in dialogue with each other and in the process highlight the complicated ways that love impacts building and sustaining the Beloved Community. I offer Lorde’s theory of the erotic as a site to further explore and widen love as a practice of liberation and mechanism for reimagining the Beloved Community.

In Part Two—“Need: A Chorale of Black Women’s Voices”—there are the dreams of black lesbians Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, and Cheryl Clarke. In Chapter Two, is a polemic that examines the political and fiction writings of Barbara Smith. While

many celebrate Smith—and rightfully so—I attempt to show how articulating the practice of “love” as a black lesbian was not always easy because it was burdened by a politics of blackness that placed a wedge between race, sexuality, love, and home. Indeed, it is in this chapter that I offer “home love” as a framework through which to decipher Smith’s very complicated articulation of love and liberation. In Chapter two, I study the poetry of Pat Parker articulate her love as “just love.” Parker’s poetry confronted the limits of the justice system, noting in fact the ways in which it sanctioned violence against working class women, especially lesbian and black women. Chapter three discusses Cheryl Clarke’s “wild love.” Situated within and against the Black Arts poetry tradition, and at times against Lorde theory of the erotic, Clarke’s poetry graphically and explicitly depict sex between women in an effort to decolonize and thus liberate language. For Clarke, liberation concerns the ability to freely express—textually and poetically—her sexual desires for women.

In Part Three, “Freedom in This Village,” I examine the work of the black gay writer Joseph Beam. I argue that his edited volume *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), seeks to culminate the previous practices of love articulated by black lesbian feminists into “revolutionary queer love.” The dissertation concludes in an Epilogue that mediates the poetry of the black gay poet and activist Assotto Saint. I use his plays to mediate on both the success and failure of love as a practice of liberation in late twentieth century America.

“Knowing the Danger and Going Their Anyway”: The Stakes

To say, on the one hand, that black lesbian writers and activists were—within a larger community of women of color writers—critical to the black liberation project as its shifted grounds across the Civil Rights, Black Women’s, and Black gay men’s liberation movements is nothing short of dangerous; to suggest on the other hand that love was their everyday way of life, optic for political analysis, deeply tied to their literary aesthetic is even more dangerous. I argue that this work is dangerous because on the one hand it suggests a level of intellectualism, body-consciousness, embracing of blackness, and both a vocalization and politicization of sexuality that confronts the hegemonic, destructive, and otherwise loveless discourses of science histories of race and blackness. Scholars have already shown how science has erroneously attacked and attached her black female subjectivity to monstrosity while simultaneously constructing her sexuality as one in dire need of patriarchal control. Indeed, From the fascination with the female body—her buttocks and reproductive organs—in early nineteenth century discourse of race and science and notions of respectability, uplift, and the otherwise privatization of black femaleness, to the insidious and politically destructive Moynihan Report (1965), black women and women of color have had to battle political institutions and social ideologies that sought to control, silence, and finally strip of her agency. To say that in spite of all of these histories of violence that black women chose love might seem implausible; and, to suggest that black lesbians chose the liberating possibilities of love might seem downright malfeasible. Well it’s certainly true. Challenging the limiting confines of patriarchal culture, contesting public policies of (black) life—juridical, reproductive—and speaking up, out, and against the codes of sexual silence black lesbians remained steadfast in their

beliefs, hopes, and dreams of love with other women. Building loving coalitions with men, black lesbians helped sustain the momentum of liberation. This dissertation attends to that very difficult work—of surviving and thriving while black and lesbian in America. As Cheryl Clarke says in her tribute to Audre Lorde, black lesbians often knew the dangers associated with being black and lesbians in America and within the black community, but they went there anyway—because freedom and liberation was at stake for the collective black community.

“A Slow Kiss Dedication to Equality and Justice”: Interventions/ Contributions

I do not dare claim in this project that love and liberation were successful—that by studying the life and literary activism of black lesbians and black gay men we suddenly bear witness to King’s dream of beloved community as a manifestation of progress in the U.S. Black people still continue to struggle with practicing love between our selves. This project is a love offering to African American Studies—one that centers black love as an intellectual practice critical to understanding the black freedom project and the specific ways that black lesbians and black gay men remained invested in this project in the last decades of the twentieth century. When I mention the last decades of the twentieth century I do so in order to invoke a profound regime of death that I understand in two ways and that continues to make black women and black gay men invisible in memories of black life and history. First, there is the literal death of black people—many of whom were murdered by state sanctioned methods of violence. The second is historiographic death—political, intellectual, and aesthetic/ literary.

Regarding the first: the literal death of black people. There are books on those whom we've chosen to remember and lift in the name of black political excavation. Then there are many of whom died from AIDS and cancer—included in this group are, of course, black gay men and black lesbians for whom there are few books and little-to-no national public discussion on their contributions to black political life in the U.S. Many of these women and men perished under the weight of bodily illnesses for which, to this day, there are still no cures. Audre Lorde wrote her *Cancer Journals* on her dying bed; Marlon Ross produced his documentary film *Black Is/ Black Ain't* on his dying bed—a trope made visible and felt in his film, which he died making. And these are just two cases of hundreds more. As black lesbians and black gay men fought futile battles against inevitable death, they remained invested in the black freedom project; they politicized their (deadly) struggles in the name of love and liberation to highlight love's redemptive attachment to the black freedom project.

On historiographic death: That African American literature has long existed as a crucial aspect of the black freedom project—redeeming black folks, revolting against racist and otherwise monstrous depictions of black life, subverting Western notions of black (in) humanity. Recent literary criticism has categorically written off the insurgence of writings by black women and subsequently black gay men in the “post” civil rights era. Literary critics, many of whom are heterosexual black men—Kenneth Warren, Houston Baker, Phillip Richards, and Cornel West, though I hardly consider him a literary critic—have accused writers of the post-civil rights era of “betraying” King's vision as they wax nostalgic about the good'ole days when African American literature and politics was concerned primarily with redeeming heterosexual black men from the

pitfalls of racist emasculation in the U.S. In *Black Heart: The Moral Life of Recent African American Letters*, Phillip Richards writes of how his “disappointment and the failures of present-day black literary criticism” inspired a “reconsideration of an older group of black artists and scholars—Robert Hayden, Benjamin Mays, Charles Chestnut, and Langston Hughes,” authors whom he has endlessly “admired.”³⁸ In *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era*, Houston Baker’s dismissal reads: “The written words of post-Civil Rights era black public intellectuals often go against the grain of fruitful deployment of race as an analytical category, and I believe that they ultimately represent a manifest betrayal of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King and the magnificent accomplishments of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.”³⁹ In *Race Matters*, Cornel West expresses his grievance this way: “There has not been a time in the history of black people in this country when the quantity of politicians and intellectuals was so great, yet the quality of both groups has been so low...Why hasn’t black America produced intellectuals on the caliber of W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna [Julia] Cooper, E. Franklin Frazier, Oliver Cox, and Ralph Ellison in the past few decades?”⁴⁰ And perhaps most provocative and blistering of all is Kenneth Warren’s hell-raising *What Was African American Literature?* In the first line of the text Warren writes off the enterprise of the field: “Historically speaking, the collective enterprise we now know as African American or black literature is of rather recent vintage.”⁴¹ Warren reasons that because “African American literature was a postemancipation phenomenon

³⁸ Phillip M. Richards, *Black Heart: The Moral Life of Recent African American Letters* (New York: Peter Lang 2006), xiii.

³⁹ Houston Baker, *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), xii.

⁴⁰ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 53.

⁴¹ Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1-2.

that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation” and that because the Jim Crow system was “finally dismantled, at least judicially and legally, in the 1950s and 1960s” African American literature “has been...eroded as well.” In other words the end of Jim Crow means the end of African American literature—there is not African American literature after the 1960s. These declension narratives neglect and overlook the production of black women’s and black gay men’s literature throughout the last decades of the twentieth century in the United States.

Offering love as an intellectual praxis for African American Studies allows us to “break-bread” with black women, black lesbians, and black gay men who lived for the revolution too, despite so much death. Recent literary criticism that bookends African American literature at some moment in the 1960s and 1970s unwittingly—or whatever—promotes the intellectual death of African American lesbians and gays as it writes off their intellectual passions for liberation in America. This project rethinks these declension narratives and takes to heart Richard Iton’s query in his *In Search of The Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in The Post-Civil Rights Era* about the emergence of cultural politics from those otherwise stigmatized and marginalized by charismatic leadership and literature: “what does it mean that the black public sphere is seen as collapsing at the same time that lower-income constituencies, women, lesbians, and gays start to mobilize?”⁴² It means for me that we have not seriously thought about the cultural politics of love in black communities and the ways in which it served as a lifeline for many black lesbians and black gay men during these years. By attending to love in this

⁴² Richard Iton, *In Search of The Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture In The Post Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.

project, I am reminding scholars of its importance to black freedom: if we are serious about black freedom and its relationship to love, then we cannot continue ignoring the contribution of black lesbians and gays. I hope that reading love helps us rethink how we talk about African American literature, who sits at the table of that discussion, and whom we decided to include as agents of social change in the black freedom project writ large.

Celebrating & Liberating: A Note on Hagiography & Historiography

Ultimately, *Out of This Confusion I Bring My Heart* is a recovery project. Recovery work is arduous and at times challenging. Sometimes archives do not speak and when they do they tell partial stories and what Emily Dickenson calls “slant truths.” For the black gay researcher, like myself, the archive of black liberation thought can leave one with a feeling that there is something missing—that there is more to the story. Institutional memory practices associated with the traditional archive can perpetuate grand narratives that are sexist, patriarchal, racist, homophobic, and categorically exclusionary. In this work I build an archive that consists of old newspapers, archived materials, literature and poetry, as well as interviews that I conducted with black lesbians who are alive and well, fighting the good fight. While I do not presume to tell a definitive literary cultural history with these sources, they do provide me a clearer picture into the lives of black lesbians and gay men in ways that single sources would not permit and in the ways that historical scholarship on gay life activism in the U.S. negate.

Recovery work is also lifesaving. I certainly agree with the black feminist Beverley Guy-Sheftall who stated in her keynote address at the Black Feminist Think Tank symposium convened here at the University of Michigan, that: “recovery work is

essential for our wellbeing.” Black women scholars doing the very important and exciting work of excavating the lives of black women writers and activists allows them to thrive in otherwise institutional spaces that devalue such work and that do not take serious the work of black women’s herstories, feminist race work, and Women’s Studies, writ large. Throughout the very stages of conceptualizing, research, writing, presenting and thus workshopping this project a small number of folks have labeled this work “hagiography,” saying that this work is too celebratory and that I am too close to these “subjects.” I’ve been told that I need to be more critical, more rigorous, and focus less on telling a story of “saints.” I welcome and accept these critiques—they are valid. However, in its current state this project has and continues to sustain my wellbeing and scholarly interests in African American Studies—a field devoted to excavating the lives of black people in a politically tortured and humanistically violent global-transnational America.

Before participating in the “race for theory” to make legible and institutionally valid the lived experiences and intellectual acuity of black lesbians and black gay men in the U.S., the goal of this project is to understand these women and men on their own terms and the divergent ways that, to expand upon Alexander Weheliye’s formulations, “racializing,” liberatory, and loving “assemblages play in the construction of modern selfhood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical construction and decolonization of what it means to be human.”⁴³ I read and interpret the work of black lesbians and black gay men with empathy and compassion given the conditions under which they toiled. A number of these writers and activists were dying, struggled financially to support their work, juggled multiple jobs to support themselves and their

⁴³ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of The Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

families, and did not always have access to health care. They were often denied a quality of life because they bravely decided to publicly move throughout America as self-identified black lesbians and gay men. In spite of these conditions and institutional barriers, the writers and activists undertaken in this project—including those whom I do not talk about—beat onward as they took from their lived experiences—which was sometimes painful and other times joyous—the needed grist to produce their work and to develop the political consciousness that influenced their activism. It is this history, and particularly this level of commitment to life and to the question of humanity, that I celebrate in this project. This project commends black lesbians and black gay men for their efforts because many intellectual enterprises continuously fail to do so.

With that said one might question my selection of the activists and writers examined in this project. The first question many people ask when I tell them that I'm writing about black lesbian and black gay literary-activists in post-sixties America is: "Where is James Baldwin in your project?" Others glibly declare that Baldwin serves as the genesis or anchor for this project: "so you talk about Baldwin." While I engage Baldwin's literary oeuvre precisely because Baldwinian thought influenced many black lesbians and black gay writers during their times. His presence in this dissertation is a shadowy one. In chapters two and six, for example, I illuminate the direct impacts of Baldwin's work on the literary and political consciousness of Barbara Smith and Joseph Beam, respectively. Although I do not write about the Atlanta Child murders in this work, Pat Parker's *Jonestown & Other Madness* (1985) includes a poem—"Georgia, Georgia, Georgia On My Mind"—that considers the gendered dynamics of these horrific murders, and specifically the racial politics of motherhood, that Baldwin neglects

in *The Evidence Of Things Not Seen* (1985), his critical assessment of these tragedies that terrorized the city between 1979 and 1981. What I am getting at here in locating a wider genealogy of black queer writers in my work concerns meta-articulations that Matt Richardson calls “expansive historiographic literature” and what John Ernest theorizes as “liberation historiography”—a “mode of historical investigation devoted to praxis,” and specifically the “dynamic process of action and reflection.”⁴⁴ For both Richardson and Ernest, the challenge to writing any history is its truth value, what Richardson characterizes as “verisimilitude.” While there is a need to re-imagine and stretch the historical truth—and in many ways I participate in “revising tradition,” to use Richardson’s phrase, as I endeavor to radically imagine the beloved community—I take Ernest at his word when he says that liberation historiography is more than a project of recovery but one “of historical intervention.” In this project, I do not limit black queer memory to James Baldwin. Whether, I open up black queer history to Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, Melvin Dixon, Joseph Beam, and Assotto Saint—fully aware that there are many, many others—in an effort to “liberate African American [Studies] from an other-defined history” as well as respect the diverse authorities of “fragmented communities of experience” that existed in and beyond Baldwin’s times.⁴⁵ As I celebrate many black queer writers, I argue that we expand black and queer histories and our memories of these histories as we consider wider and longer histories of black lesbians and gay men.

⁴⁴ Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2013); John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: John Ernest, Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and The Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, 18.

Part I

The Core and Heartbeat of the Cosmos

Yes, the new age is coming. It is coming mighty fast.

Now the fact that this new age is emerging reveals something basic about the universe. It tells us something about the core and heartbeat of the cosmos. It reminds us that the universe is on the side of justice

--Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have a Dream*

Chapter 1

The Beloved Community and The Black Freedom Struggle On Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, and Audre Lorde

Some days it is just so hard to accept that racism can still be such a powerful dominating force in all our lives. When I remember all that black and white folks together have sacrificed to challenge and change white supremacy, when I remember that individuals who gave their lives to the cause of racial justice, my heart is deeply saddened that we have not fulfilled their shared dream of ending racism, of creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community*.

--bell hooks. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

You can't separate loving from fighting, from dying, from hurting...love is triumphant. It is powerful and strong, and I feel I grow a great deal in all of my emotions, especially in the capacity to love.

--Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister*

In the Fall of 2012, literary critic and eco-justice activist George Brosi sat down with black feminist bell hooks to discuss her work. Brosi opens the dialogue by discussing the concept of the beloved community. “It seems that in a lot of ways the beloved community is,” he states, “a concept that has come out of the struggles for liberation and in an attempt to express how the process of liberation can be infused with love.”⁴⁶ hooks’ two-part reply frames how difference and conflict, in light of King’s influence on her work, have functioned divisively between social justice movements following in the 1960s. On King as influence hooks states:

Martin Luther King was my teacher for understanding the importance of the beloved community. He had a profound awareness that the people involved in oppressive institutions will not change from the logics and practices of domination without engagement with those who are striving for a better way.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the impact of King’s concept of the beloved community on social movements does not go, from hooks’ perspective, without critique.

One of the things that has always made me sad is the extent to which civil rights struggles, black power movements, and feminist movements, have, at times collapsed at the point where there was conflict, and how conflict between people in the groups was often seen as negative. The truth is that you cannot build community without conflict.

Throughout the conversation hooks’ response only gestures towards these conflicts—she leaves it up to the reader to decode these gestures by pointing to concepts such as Christianity, community, and once again “difference” as possible sources where these conflicts fester. Whether or not she takes issue with the beloved community as a romantic construct is not all that clear. She does, however, suggest that whatever the conflict might

⁴⁶ George Brois and bell hooks, “The Beloved Community: A Conversation Between bell hooks and George Brosi,” in *Appalachian Heritage*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Fall 2012), 76-86.

⁴⁷ Brosi and hooks, “The Beloved Community,” 76.

be it transpires along the edges of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and feminist movements.

hook's formulations touch on the central concerns of this chapter: the politics of community and the "conflict" that can be both divisive and generative, love. As I hope to demonstrate throughout this chapter, love complicates claims of community, especially the beloved community. There are three interlocutors in this chapter whose visions of love and liberation are complicated by differences in their gender and sexualities: Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, and Audre Lorde. Collectively, this triage of activists promotes various ideals of liberation that reveal the difficult challenge building a purposeful and diverse beloved community. Revisiting their work reveals how they envisioned a practice of love as the basis for struggle and liberation in Black America and I argue that their work divergent understandings of this practice of love that then sets the stage for understanding the rise of black lesbian and gay culture in subsequent years that are discussed in later chapters.

The Beloved Community occupies a critical space in this chapter. While I revisit the ways that Martin Luther King Jr. articulated his beliefs about the Beloved Community, I also speak through Bayard Rustin and Audre Lorde in an effort to critique King's concept, especially as it relies on limited visions of love. As bell hooks reminds us the Beloved Community imagines society as a racially integrated space where blacks and whites co-exist in social harmony as they battle together against racial inequalities, economic injustice, and political disenfranchisement. However, the Beloved community

is a theoretical idea absent of any real people.⁴⁸ By critically interrogating the theoretical structures of the Beloved Community it is not my intention to demean King's iterations of the concept. On the contrary, with such a critique I have in mind to re-cast the Beloved Community as a rich imaginative site capable of expansion and diverse inclusion of real material subjects. Underscoring the limitations of the Beloved Community means considering and imagining how its members could or would deploy love as a practice of liberation—and this means on the one hand interrogating how the term “beloved” itself functions as a critical supplement to an otherwise mundane notion of community, and how on the other hand love facilitates—in real time—a practice of liberation in America, especially between black folks.

In my critique of the Beloved Community—reading as I do “beloved” as a supplement to “community”—I draw upon Miranda Joseph's critique of community. In *Against the Romance of Community*, Joseph spotlights the ease in which community, when invoked by scholars and activists alike, goes unquestioned. Communities are “sites of hope in a difficult world” and often function as “a utopian state of human relatedness.” Communities create boundaries between “us and them” and authenticate these boundaries “through reference to place or race or culture or identity.” When activists in identity based social movements—akin to those sited by hooks—invoke community they do so in an effort to “mobilize constituents and validate their cause to a broader public.” Categorically, community signals likeness and difference, unity and affinity, and provides a degree of protection and safety.

⁴⁸ These thoughts are influenced by Barbara Christian's long held “fear” that when theory is not “rooted in practice,” it becomes “prescriptive, exclusive, and elitish.” See Christian, “The Race for Theory” in Winston Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*

However, Joseph argues against these “romances” as she assesses the difficulties and troubles inherent in community building. Although invocations of community often emerge out of a time of crisis, or “when people imagine themselves bound together by a common grief or joined through some extraordinary effort,” they often perpetuate “oppressive practices they seek to resist.” Joseph insists that community and community building are not organic, natural, or spontaneous occurrences. In fact, community-building agendas can often cultivate dominating, exclusionary, and exploitive practices. “Fetishizing community,” she argues, “only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation.”⁴⁹ In my critique of the beloved community—like Joseph’s critique of community—I argue against the romance of the Beloved Community to open up various possibilities of practicing multiple forms of love as black women and gay men participate in the fight for liberation and justice in their communities and throughout the U.S.

A number of scholars, in diverse fields of thought, have applied King’s philosophy of the beloved community to key issues in contemporary America. There has been a continued interest in applying principles of the beloved community to the church and religiosity and a renewed focus on using the philosophy to rethink contemporary practices of social justice, especially with respect to “vulnerable populations.”⁵⁰ Preston Williams, for example, argues that problems persist in modern public policy because

⁴⁹ Miranda Joseph, *Against The Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix.

⁵⁰ Jon Nilson, “Towards the Beloved Community”: The Church’s Role in the Struggles Against Racism” in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 2010), 83-91; Peter Gabel, “From Individual Right to the Beloved Community: A New Vision of Justice” in *Tikkun*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Winter 2012), 18-20; Ruebn C. Warren, et. al, “Respecting and Protecting the Beloved Community, Especially Susceptible and Vulnerable Population,” in *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (August 2011), 3-13.

political leaders have failed to “consider love as an important and essential component of social justice.”⁵¹ Whereas Gary Herstein has traced the “Roycean Roots of the Beloved Community”—noting that the Reverend Josiah Royce was the first to coin the phrase the beloved community—Lewis Baldwin has discussed King’s black internationalism and specifically his “contributions to the uplift of the poor and oppressed in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s.”⁵² This scholarship reminds us about the importance of love as a praxis for social justice, yet it often leaves the implication of this love for black women under-analyzed.

In *Seeking The Beloved Community*, feminist critic Joy James interrogates notions of the beloved community. About the beloved community, she queries: “How is it relevant to the issues of sexual violence and exploitation of black women, children and the LGBT community?”⁵³ Whether deliberate or not, the beloved community as theory, ideological construct, and sometimes in practice, discredits the knowledge of various different communities of people, especially black women. James makes a persuasive case for black feminism as key to rethinking black suffering, activism, and the beloved community. Against many parochial claims that relegate black feminism to an outer realm of authentic black political discourse, and thus trivialize their “evocative agency,” black feminism actually “reasserts the centrality of struggles and analyses often passed over in mainstream discourse.” Black feminism, James posits, tests the limits of theory with practice, which, more than not, lead black feminists to “reject the socially

⁵¹ Preston Williams, “An Analysis of the Conception of Love and Its Influences on Justice in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.” in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall, 1990), 15-31.

⁵² Lewis V. Baldwin, *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King Jr. and South Africa* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1995); Gary Herstein, “The Roycean Roots of the Beloved Community,” in *The Pluralist*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 2009), 91-107.

⁵³ Joy James, *Seeking the Beloved Community* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 146.

constructed dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, spiritual, and the political, individual and community characteristics of Western culture.”⁵⁴

In what follows I offer a critique of the Beloved Community in an effort to highlight how its operative term, “beloved” functions as a “supplement” to community. In order to carry out what will be a claim about King’s theology of love—particularly his articulation of agape love as a dominant and exclusionary practice, I include a brief discussion of his relationship with Bayard Rustin. I revisit this relationship for two reasons. The first reason is to illuminate how Rustin’s expression of erotic love bruised his relationship with King. This rupture points to the ways in which uncritical notions of “beloved” reproduce exclusionary practices within oppositional formulations of “community.” The second reason that I turn to King and Rustin’s relationship concerns my interest in contestation on the one hand and the importance of a black feminist critique on the other.

Shortly after King’s death, Rustin engaged in strategic critique of King’s vision of the beloved community. Often couched in rhetoric that defends King viewpoints, Rustin frequently parodies the ideas of the Beloved Community, signifying on the rather counter intuitive notion of love as a method for protest politics. Rustin eschews love as a practice of liberation and makes this known shortly after King’s death and during his later years while speaking to gay activists in interviews or at public forums. As a beloved political icon in the eyes of many gay activists, Rustin’s positions against the “romance” of love as a form of political praxis, demonstrates why Audre Lorde’s voice is central to this critical discussion of the beloved community. Her critique of the 1960s discourse around

⁵⁴ Ibid., 14.

blackness and community shows why new visions and practices of love are critical to the liberation struggles of the post-60s era.

The Beloved Community

On April 4, 1968, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. In spite of this profound tragedy, reverence for his vision of a beloved community has an indelible presence in U.S. culture; it continuously inspires the celebrations of contemporary religious and spiritual institutions, activists, artists, and intellectuals as they promote and seek to enact King's legacy.⁵⁵ From the ringing of church bells across the country on the annual Martin Luther King holiday to "The Beloved Community March" (see Fig. 1) led by the effervescent actor-activist Harry Belafonte on the twenty-fifth anniversary of King's death in New York City—and more recently with the construction of the King Memorial in Washington, D.C.—these cultural productions archive King's life activism.⁵⁶ In doing

⁵⁵Emory University recently hosted a conference interrogating the intersections of race and sexuality in the context of civil rights. The conference was entitled, "Whose Beloved Community? Black Civil Rights and LGBT Rights Conference" and lasted for three days beginning on March 27, 2014. In October 1993, the poet, historian, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou spoke at the Aquarian Center in Atlanta, Ga., where she signed discounted copies of her then latest book, *Would Take Nothing for My Journey Now*; the discount, however, as advertised on the handbill, was "through the courtesy of the beloved community." In February 2012, Morehouse College, the prestigious all male historically black college located in Atlanta, established the Leadership Center. The center was created to reflect the "ideal of the beloved community." See: Cynthia Post, "Morehouse Working to Build Twenty First Century Leaders with New Center" in *Atlanta Daily World* (February 28, 2012); For the Maya Angelou Ad see, "Display Ad 37: Not Title" in *Los Angeles Sentinel* (October 14, 1993). To read more about the Whose Beloved Community Conference visit this link:

http://news.emory.edu/stories/2014/03/upress_whose_beloved_community/campus.html

⁵⁶ Akinshiju C. Ola, "Hundreds March to the U.N. for Anniversary of Dr. King Killing." *New York Amsterdam* (April 10, 1993); "Harry Belafonte to Lead March in Honor of Dr. King." *New York Amsterdam* (March 27, 1993). "Bells to Ring for King." *Los Angeles Times* (January 16, 1992).

so, they remind Americans to remain committed to the principles of non-violence, social justice, and human equality.



HONORING DR. KING'S MEMORY — This unidentified young man showed his appreciation for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at last Sunday's special march for peace in Manhattan to honor the slain civil rights leader's memory. He was among several hundred who participated in the march.

(Bill Moore photo)

Hundreds march to the U.N. for anniversary of Dr. King's killing

By AKINSHUJU C. OLA
Special to the AmNews

The speeches were short, the message long at the "Pursuit of the Beloved Community" march and rally held in Mid-Manhattan to mark the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4.

Ironically, the same evening HBO televised a mock trial of James Earl Ray, who was convicted of killing King. The jury found Ray not guilty of the murder, based on evidence disclosed over the last quarter century.

The trial was held in Memphis with real lawyers, real witnesses and an out-of-state jury. The verdict, however, has no legal weight.

The march began on 42nd Street outside the Tudor Hotel and was led by Mayor David Dinkins, Andrew Young, U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel and a contingent of school children. It proceeded up

Second Avenue to Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, where some 1,500 marchers gathered for the rally.

The march was sponsored by the New York State Martin Luther King Jr. Commission and Institute for Nonviolence. The rally began with some 100 children turning in a toy gun in exchange for an apple and a book. This was to emphasize King's message of nonviolence. Parents signed the "King Exchange Pledge," with a promise not to buy toy guns or other violent toys.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth will leave all of us blind and toothless," Dinkins told the crowd. "We know this is really symbolic, but I would encourage all parents to behave in the same fashion as these parents and become good role models, promoting nonviolence in the spirit of Martin Luther King."

(Continued on Page 32)

Figure 1

In an eloquent tribute on the life and legacy of King written on January 19, 1986, for example, the journalist John Ansboro of the *New York Times* had this to say about King:

One of the inspirational forces in the life of Martin Luther King Jr. was his enduring conviction that humanity would progress toward the Beloved Community. This conviction was extraordinary when one considers some of the many challenges to his natural optimism; namely, the physical violence he and his nonviolent demonstrators suffered, the numerous threats against him and his family, the apathy among so many white and blacks who should have been at the forefront of the struggle, the scope and depth of a racial discrimination, and the criticisms he received from some other civil rights leaders, especially for his opposition to the Vietnam war.⁵⁷

Ansboro's observations point outward as they index external social and political forces that inspired King's theorizing. The Beloved Community emerged in response to social strife, violence, and global terrorism. However, its central theoretical imagining was something much more internal: the practice of love. At the height of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, King made it abundantly clear that love was as critical to imagining the Beloved Community as was it was for the liberation of all American citizens.

In 1956, shortly after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) triumphantly convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to integrate public transportation in the state of Alabama, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King delivered an address, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," before the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social

⁵⁷ John J. Ansbro, "Martin Luther King Held a Conviction" in *New York Times* (January 19, 1986).

Change. At the core of this new age, and ever-evolving new world, exists the Beloved Community, a social constellation first articulated by King during that address.⁵⁸

Those of us who live in the twentieth century are privileged to live in one of the most momentous periods of human history. It is an exciting age filled with hope. It is an age in which a new social order is being born. We stand today between two worlds—the dying old and the emerging new.⁵⁹

Having survived the old world—global imperialism and colonialism and legal decisions that compromised their humanity, ergo *Plessey v. Ferguson*—people of color now face the daunting task of “moving through the wilderness of adjustment toward the promised land of cultural integration.”⁶⁰ Constitutional gains earmarked in the U.S. by the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and socio-cultural shifts facilitated by the Great Migration co-constitute this promising new era. Additionally, a new world order predicates itself upon a re-conceptualization of blackness embodied by the “New Negro,” which in Kings’ words manifest “a new sense of dignity and destiny.” In order to witness this new age with “a new structure of freedom and justice,” the New Negro must, however, consider a few challenges that will usher in new political possibilities hoped to improve black life in this new age. Whereas the first two challenges—imagining and articulating concerns of freedom globally and “achieving excellency in our various fields of endeavor”—are central to recognizing, practicing, and obtaining freedom, it is the

⁵⁸ I want to be very careful here so that my use of the phrase “first articulated” is not confused for originally conceived by, or any similar iteration of the phrase. King did not coin the phrase “the Beloved Community.” The Rev. Josiah Royce coined the phrase a few years before King delivers this address; sources support however that King gave the term cultural cache, making it more popular throughout his many speeches on antiracial social justice and freedom.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther King, (James M. Washington, ed.), *I Have A Dream: Writings & Speeches That Changed The World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 15.

⁶⁰ King, *I Have A Dream*, 17.

third challenge, the challenge of love, where King begins to theorize the Beloved Community.

“A third challenge that stands before us is that of entering the new age with understanding and good will. This simply means,” writes King, “that the Christian virtues of love, mercy, and forgiveness should stand at the center of our lives.”⁶¹ King spends a great deal of the speech explaining the moral and social imperative of love. When King says that, “we must blot out the hate and injustice of the old age with the love and justice of the new,” he suggests a method of non-violence that encourages folks to “inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our society.” The method of injection is auditory. “There is,” King writes, “still a voice crying out in terms that echo across the generations, saying: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you, that you may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven.”

Imbued with Christian sensibilities, love has redemptive qualities and, in King’s formulation, “might well be the salvation of our civilization.” Directly connecting love to the Institute’s motto, “Freedom and Justice Through Love,” King offers in his evangelical inflections of love a new framework to understand political resistance not as a means to an end, but as a radical tool to achieve something far more meaningful and enriching to black (and white) life in America. With the kind of cadence distinct to his pastoral orations, King says:

Not through violence; not through hate; no, not even through boycotts; but through love. It is true that as we struggle for freedom in America we will have to boycott at times. But we must remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end within itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. But the end is

⁶¹ King, *I Have A Dream*, 21.

reconciliation; the end is redemption; *the end is the creation of the beloved community* (emphasis added)⁶²

Finally, the Beloved Community and its spirit of love will, King surmises, “bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”⁶³

As he waxes philosophical about love, King eschews any form of love tainted by desire and eroticism; he does not mean love in a “sentimental or affectionate sense.” The meaning of love, King writes in *Strength to Love*, “is not to be confused with sentimental outpouring. Love is something much deeper,” he quips, “than emotional bolish.”⁶⁴ When King refers to love, he means *agape* love and plumbs the history of Greek language as a method to explicate and clarify its definition and applicability to manifesting the Beloved Community—or, as he writes elsewhere, “love in action.”⁶⁵ King offers a typology of love in which “eros is a type of esthetic love” fond of dramatic poetry and commonly understood as “romantic love.” In Platonic dialogues, eros constitutes a “yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine.”⁶⁶ *Philia*, on the other hand, “is a sort of intimate affectionateness between personal friends; a reciprocal love. On this level,” King concludes, “a person loves because he is loved.” *Agape* love, however, is the “highest level of love.” Addressing members at the Institute for Nonviolence and Social Change he states:

It means understanding redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love, which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. When we rise to love on the *agape* level we love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves us. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while

⁶² King, 21-22.

⁶³ Ibid, 22.

⁶⁴ King, *Strength to Love*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) 46.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 31-41.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 46.

hating the deed that the person does. With this type of love and understanding good will we will be able to stand amid the radiant glow of the new age with dignity and discipline. Yes, the new age is coming. It is coming mighty fast.⁶⁷

This is love as divine intervention. Indeed, agape is the love of God, King writes, “operating in the human heart.”⁶⁸

Agape love has a specific function: to engage the work of Christian principle and religious theology while advancing the cause of black freedom and the Beloved Community. Throughout King’s liberation theology, agape love works against secular practices of romantic or erotic desire between men and women. On the contrary, agape love embodies a sacredness that in a Christian-activist sense calls for a universal understanding of humanity; responding to the call of such love creates, King implies, good Samaritans whose “dangerous altruism” and benevolent acts of good will require nothing in return.⁶⁹

Yet a closer reading of King’s visions of love suggests that oppositional hate operates strategically. With and through agape love “we rise,” in King’s words, “to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.” In other words, he promotes the diction familiar with us all: hate the sin but not the sinner. Loving the person and hating the sin still permits hate to function within the quarters of the Beloved Community. More importantly, King’s vision “regulates,” Candice Jenkins might say, the intimate public sphere by, theoretically speaking,

⁶⁷ King, *I Have A Dream*, 22-23.

⁶⁸ King, *Strength to Love*, 46.

⁶⁹ King’s notion of “dangerous altruism” implies that the Good Samaritan would selflessly risk his life, social position, career, and prestige to ensure the life and wellbeing of another human being. King writes: “In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.” See “On Being a Good Neighbor” in *Strength to Love*, 21-30.

controlling the actions of its imaginary members—or the “sort of intimate affectionateness between personal friends.”⁷⁰ Indeed, the limitations of King’s vision manifest when we wonder about the members of the Beloved Community. What if, for example, an activist chooses to express love through *philia* or *eros*, or all of them simultaneously, as a practice of liberation? The trouble with King’s vision of the Beloved Community is that although it provides hope in a time of crisis, it reproduces the very exclusionary practices that, as a practice of community, it seeks to resist, subvert, and transform.

Against the Romance of the Beloved Community

In his play *Civil Sex*, Brian Freeman of the PomoAfroHomos re-stages Bayard Rustin’s arrest in California, where he was later convicted on a morals charge and sentenced to sixty days in the Los Angeles County Jail. The play opens with Senator Strom Thurmond—“the distinguished gentleman from South Carolina”—bringing attention to his Senate colleagues’ “to the presence of one article in the *Washington Post* on Sunday, August 11, 1963, by Susanna McBee.”⁷¹ From Thurmond’s perspective, McBee’s article “attempts to whitewash the deplorable and disturbing record of the man tabbed as ‘Mr. March-on-Washington himself.’”

I bring this to the attention of my colleagues in an effort to demonstrate the bias of a newspaper[,] which arrogates unto itself the moral task of lecturing others on the subject of so-called bias...The article states that he was convicted in 1953 in Pasadena, California, of a moral charge. The words “moral charge” are true. But

⁷⁰ King, *Strength to Love*, 23; Candice Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

⁷¹ Brian Freeman, *Civil Sex*, in Robert O’Hara, Harry Elam Jr., and Robert Alexander, eds., *The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21 Century*, 101.

this again is a clear-cut case of toning down the charge. The conviction was a sex perversion!⁷²

Civil Sex represents a nuanced story about Rustin's sex scandal and its political backlash. Freeman based the production of *Civil Sex* on excerpts from interviews that he conducted between January 1997 and March 1999 with close and distant friends of Rustin, activists as well as scholars and "nonfiction material" from, among other archival sites, the Congressional Record, the Library of Congress's Bayard Rustin Papers, and "the personal correspondence of Mr. Davis Platt," Rustin first lover. In short, the stage reproduction accurately reveals a story of Rustin's embattled political demise, in which as the Ralph Abernathy character says, "the movement abandoned Rustin." James Baldwin, who appears in the play as Rustin's comrade and supporter, writes a scathing op-ed in *Harper's Weekly* about King's reaction to Rustin's sex scandal. "King lost much moral credit when he allowed Powell to force the resignation of Rustin," Rustin reads aloud. Although Freeman exaggerates the conversation between Rustin and Baldwin, he does not equivocate from Baldwin's comments about King in *Harper's Weekly*.

Civil Sex highlights the outer limits of King's beloved community. The beloved community constitutes a particular kind of an imagined community, one, as King reminds us, structured on love. However, what does "beloved" offer, theoretically speaking, to "community?" How does it work? I contend that love—and particularly agape love—functions as a supplement to community, an addendum, or, in the Derridian sense, a "surplus phenomenon" that inevitably "insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*." Thus, agape love trumps community as a liberation practice. In *Against the Romance of Community*,

⁷² Freeman, *Civil Sex*, 101-102.

Miranda Joseph provides a useful reading of a supplementary reading of community. She posits that:

A supplementary reading notes the void, the absent center of any structure, suggesting that a given structure cannot be by itself coherent, autonomous, self-sustaining, or what Gayatri Spivak calls ‘continuous.’ The structure constitutively depends on something outside itself, a surplus that completes it, providing the coherence, the continuity, the stability that it cannot provide for itself, although it is already complete. But at the same time, this supplement to the structure supplants the structure; insofar as the structure depends on this constitutive supplement, the supplement becomes the primary structure itself; its own logic becomes, or at least may become, dominant, or destabilizing, a blockage to the continuity, a sign of crisis or incompleteness.⁷³

When situating King’s theory of love with and against the practice of community, love shifts from theoretical abstraction in an equally abstract community, to a complicated, dominant and destabilizing practice. In other words because agape love and its logics becomes the “primary structure” of the Beloved Community, King foregoes, if only temporarily—Rustin did serve as the principle architect and organizer for the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington—an opportunity to practice what he preached as a leader of the beloved community. King’s failure to support Rustin was not only due to the pressures from a host of other heterosexual black male advisors but because, I will suggest, Rustin chose not to confine himself to *agape* love. Regrettably, Rustin’s sexual act—*philia* love—was characterized as a “sex-scandal” and jeopardized his place in the movement. The focus here, however, is on King’s decision to distance himself from Rustin, the breakage in brotherhood under the sign of beloved community that, however short-lived, speaks volumes about how agape love became the structure “in-the-place-of” community. In other words, love subordinates and thus undermines the practice of community. We could even argue that Rustin’s silence at the March and his near

⁷³ Miranda Joseph, *Against The Romance of Community*, 2.

invisibility, as his biographer John D' Emilio reminds us, further exemplify these exclusionary practices.

When asked by the black gay activists and writer Joseph Beam (whom I discuss more thoroughly in chapter five) if he ever attempted to “add sexual orientation to the agenda of the civil rights movement,” Rustin, tersely replied: “No I didn’t.”⁷⁴ By 1986—the time of Beam’s interview with Rustin, years after King’s assassination, and indeed after a number of hard-won legislative gains that resulted from civil rights activism—Rustin continued to face questions about his relationship with King, a relationship that was nearly ended after Rustin’s infamous “sex scandal.” Although Rustin never hid his sexuality from movement leaders, he did not, his biographer John D’Emilio notes in *The Lost Prophet*, publicly display his affections for men. While in prison for example, writing to his then much younger white lover, Rustin used coded language to assure prison officials reading his mail that his object of affection was feminine and female. It was not until after what he thought was a private sexual act in the bathroom at a public park in California that political figures, like former Senator Strom Thurmond and civil rights activists Adam Clayton Powell, made a scandalous fanfare of the small matter. In the aftermath of Rustin’s sexual tryst, Thurmond “stood in the United States Senate” and “talked for more than three-quarters of an hour,” which provided delicious fodder for news talk in America—Rustin’s sex scandal headlined “all of the major [news] papers in the country including,” he states to Beam, “the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, eds., *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 2003), 278.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 279.

The proliferation of news about Rustin's sex life profoundly impacted the movement, and particularly Rustin's relationship to King. Immediately after the news of the scandal became public, King, at the advice of his advisors, severed ties with Rustin. For his part, when asked about the break in their relationship, Rustin seemed to grapple with the possibility of King's own homophobia and the culture of homophobia that characterized the civil rights movement—unsure if both played a role in King's silence after Rustin decided to part ways with King and the movement.

During the 1960s homosexuality was deemed a social stigma and, as Rustin suggests, “Dr. King had every right to raise questions as to whether prejudice to gays would affect what he looked upon as a very important movement in the moment.”⁷⁶ In other words, the “important movement in the moment” concerned a political agenda exclusive to improving black/ white race relations—issues of gender and sexuality were not a concern for black male civil rights leaders. Still though, a year after his interview with Beam, Rustin shared in another interview with the gay rights organization Open Hands that: “I found that people in the civil rights movement were perfectly willing to accept me so as long as I didn't declare that I was gay [publicly].”⁷⁷ Rustin never indicts King as one of those people. He favors, instead rhetorical subtleties. When asked about Adam Clayton Powell's threat to expose his homosexuality and accusation of a romance between he and King and specifically whether he “experience[d],” or not “many other incidents like these,” Rustin replies: “Yes, for example Martin Luther King, with whom I worked very closely, became very distressed when a number of the ministers working for him wanted him to dismiss me from his staff because of my own homosexuality. Martin

⁷⁶ Ibid., 279.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 284.

set up a committee to discover what he should do.”⁷⁸ King’s anxiety, and what Rustin describes as a state of uneasiness—which resulted from Powell’s threat to “expose” Rustin’s “so called relationship with Dr. King”—influenced King’s decision: to accept Rustin’s decision to leave. “If I was going to be a burden, [then] I would leave—and I did. However,” Rustin continues, “Dr. King was never happy about my leaving. He was deeply torn—although I had left the SCLC, he frequently called me in and asked me to help.”⁷⁹ Although Rustin made the decision to leave, King had been, he states in a 1987 interview with black gay writer Redvers Jeanmarie, “relieved.”

Rustin is careful to distinguish between King’s “private” feelings and his public stance: “My being gay was not,” Rustin shares with Jeanmarie, “a problem for Dr. King but a problem for the movement.” King’s advisory committee, led by the Reverend Thomas Kilgore of the Friendship Baptist Church, “came to the decision that my *sex life* was a burden to King”—whom, at the time, was also embattled with allegations of extramarital affairs. Rustin’s sex life motivated the committee’s final decision, which was that “Martin should ask me to leave [the SCLC].” Rustin’s rhetorical gesture, disarticulating “King” from the “Movement,” seems suspect, not just because the movement and Dr. King were, at times, inseparable in public discourse but also because Rustin himself repeatedly enacts a slippage between King and the “movement.” Disarticulating King from the movement allows Rustin to critique the movement for its anti-homophobic sentiments without directly placing King in an unsavory light. Yet, critiquing the movement provides, ironically, Rustin a way to subtly express disappointment in King.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 285.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Consider, for example, Rustin's repeated assertion that, in the aftermath of departing the SCLC, King made an effort to remain in contact with him. Speaking with Jeanmarie, Rustin asserts: "Although Dr. King had been relieved by my official leaving, he continued to call on me as Mr. Garrows makes clear in his book, *Bearing the Cross*, over and over"—and almost verbatim he shares this line with Open Hands. This motif, this recurring instance of King's benevolence, a la ensuring contact with Rustin, indeed over and over again, is, I would argue, Rustin's way of coping with his profound disappointment with both the movement and King. James Baldwin, writing in *Harper's Magazine*, captures these sentiments exactly, stating: "King was faced with the choice of defending his organizer [Rustin], who was also his friend, or agreeing with Powell; and [King] chose the *latter* of course."⁸⁰ Indeed, for Rustin the "Powell-King imbroglio was," according to John D'Emilio, "devastating." Rustin was, in the words of Dave McReynolds—whom he worked with at the World Resisters League (WRL)—"miserable," often felt "hopeless," and, during his travels to New York to work on labor rights matters, was "deeply depressed. He was," McReynolds concludes, "absolutely broken by this."⁸¹ Especially sense Rustin had "devoted himself to King's career." He drew up the plans for the SCLC, and for years had been "the invisible hand behind many civil rights initiatives," D'Emilio writes.⁸²

In the aftermath of his sex scandal Rustin became a pariah; he was immediately discarded, and ignored by scores of civil rights organizations. Indeed, he was excommunicated from the black freedom movement and thus banished to the fringes of

⁸⁰ James Baldwin, *The Price of The Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 261.

⁸¹ John D'Emilio, *The Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 299.

⁸² D'Emilio, *The Lost Prophet*, 299-300.

grass-roots communities. For example, Rustin had been expecting to play a role in a major conference organized by SNCC. However, as Ella Baker reported, the AFL-CIO—who was funding the conference—“raised objections” to Rustin’s participation, despite the fact the he had offered general counsel to the organization’s younger activists. George Meany, then president of AFL-CIO said this about Rustin: “[he] is not now and will be not connected with our movement in the future.” In the end, and perhaps most devastating of all, the threat of Powell’s sexual slander “essentially dissolved” Rustin’s relationship with King. D’ Emilio writes:

Not only did Rustin no longer have a formal role as King’s assistant in New York, but King stopped seeking Rustin’s advice, and Rustin no longer offered it. They occasionally corresponded, but the content suggested how distant they had become. “Hope all goes well with you and the hard job you have to do,” Rustin wrote in one letter the following winter. “I hope things are going well with you,” King replied a month later.⁸³

Their once vibrant friendship was reduced to disingenuous letters, written, it seems, with little passion. In fact, letter writing was their principle form of communication, for, D’ Emilio suggests, the two men ceased verbal communication with each other.

Rustin, though, never explicitly chides King. In fact, it was difficult, he writes—years after the scandal, their friendship break, and King’s assassination—for him to “know what Dr. King felt about gayness.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, like Baldwin’s op-ed in *Harper’s Magazine*, Rustin criticizes King with the “utmost discretion.” Reflecting on his years working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), Rustin asserts in his interview with Open Hands:

It was amongst the Fellowship of Reconciliation people that there was hypocrisy—more so—called love and affection and nonviolence toward the

⁸³ Ibid., 300.

⁸⁴ Carbado and Weise, eds., *Time on Two Crosses*, 293.

human family; but it was there that I found some of the worst attitudes towards gays. I experienced this personally after I'd been released from working with the Fellowship when I was arrested in California on what they called a "morals charge." Many of the people in the Fellowship of Reconciliation were absolutely intolerant in their attitudes. When I lost my job there, some of these nonviolent Christians despite their love and affection for humanity were not really able to express very much affection to me... So there are times when people of goodwill may find it difficult to maintain consistency between belief and action.⁸⁵

Rustin begins to signify on the beloved community, and particularly the practice of agape love. If one is not careful, one could easily miss the "shade" thrown by Rustin, not to one particular person, but to the whole organization—which included King. Only a perceptive reader would know that the Fellowship of Reconciliation was a principle organization involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and most importantly that it was the organization that brought King and Rustin together in coalition.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, Rustin's attention to "love," "non-violent Christians," and "good will," cleverly disguises years after the fact his feelings of disappointment over King's silence-by-omission. I say cleverly disguises because it was immediately following the Montgomery Bus Boycott that King delivers his speech where he begins to publicly formulate and envision his conception of the Beloved Community—in which non-violence, good will, and love are three central principles. Compare for example King's assertion that "With this type of love and understanding good will we will be able to stand amid the radiant glow of the new age with dignity and discipline" to Rustin's

⁸⁵ *Time on Two Crosses*, 286.

⁸⁶ Unfortunately, it was the eruption of racial terror—the bombing of King's home by the KKK—that inspired coalition between King, Rustin, and FOR. "The eruption of white supremacist violence made Rustin and other New York pacifists worry that the black community might respond in kind and unleash a race war that the oppressed were sure to lose." Anticipating such a reaction FOR sent members "on a trip to Alabama" to King in an attempt to quell the violence through Gandhian non-violence. Rustin "provoked" this trip, which then initiated his relationship to King and eventually "placed him in the midst of the most important events of the era." See, *The Lost Prophet*, 226-227.

assertion that, particularly after he lost his job at the SCLC, “some of these nonviolent Christians despite their love and affection for humanity were not really able to express very much affection for me...So there are times when people of good will may find it difficult to maintain consistency between belief and action.” Given the way Rustin’s choice of words echoes King’s articulations of love and understanding at the center for the black freedom struggle one wonders if one of those people that Rustin speaks of caustically in the abstract is King—indeed, Rustin’s “belief and actions” bears striking similarity to King’s “love and action,” suggesting an inter-textual dialogue that perhaps signifies on the limits of theory (love) when engaged in community-as-practice (action).

Let us rest here: on Rustin’s signifying act and his supplemental rhetoric where in lieu of love, he encodes “belief.” Rustin’s beliefs, his genuine feelings about his relationship to King in the aftermath of his “sex scandal,” also doubles as, via rhetorical effacement, a critique of King, generally speaking, and love in particular; and it is here, in Rustin’s effacement of love, that love itself vis-à-vis Derrida, becomes *the* structure of community-as-practice; love begins to fracture the Beloved Community’s everyday social relations.

In his essay “Dr. King’s Painful Dilemma,” written a year before King’s death, Rustin defends the many decisions made by King—in this case publicly speaking against the U.S.’s involvement in the Vietnam War—while also engaging critique: “If Dr. King makes proposals that others disagree with, they have the duty to differ with him on the merits or demerits of his proposals.” Rustin’s arguments imply that King welcomed critique, and that he “expect[ed] no less,” from anyone. Using Rustin’s words in a different context, and particularly within the context of King’s proposal on agape love—

and the Beloved Community—then one cannot ignore Rustin’s blistering critique of King delivered, ironically, in a eulogy titled “Reflecting on The Death of Martin Luther King Jr.”

Eulogies are a time of positive reflections and in his eulogy Rustin speaks beautifully about his relationship to King. However, his tone changes abruptly as begins to dance around the topic of the Beloved community. Addressing the question of “what is next” for the civil rights movement in the aftermath of King’s assassination, Rustin notes:

We are indeed a house divided. But the division between race and race, class and class, will not be dissolved by massive infusions of *brotherly sentiment*. This division is not the result of bad sentiment and therefore will not be *healed by rhetoric*...Talk of brotherhood and ‘tolerance’ might have once had a cooling effect, but increasingly it grates on the nerves. It evokes contempt not because the values of brotherhood are wrong—they are more important now than ever—but because it just does not correspond to the reality we see around us. And such talk does nothing to eliminate the inequalities that breed resentment and deep discontent (emphasis added).⁸⁷

Although Rustin concludes the eulogy by stating that ‘it us up to us, the living, black and white, to realize Dr. King’s dream,’ he says that now is the time to “put aside rhetoric that obscures real problems.” Nowhere in his eulogy to King does Rustin theorize love for its political possibilities of community building and confronting racial and economic inequalities—activists must continue to struggle for an actualizations of King’s dream without love. Love, Rustin suggests, is empty rhetoric that once, sometime ago, healed and had a cooling effect on communities in struggle.

In his eulogy, Rustin does not speak of love that played such a large role in King’s beloved community, directly. Instead, he signifies on the tropes of “brotherly sentiment,” “brotherhood,” and “tolerance.” He continues to efface or supplant,

⁸⁷ Carbado and Weise, eds., *Time on Two Crosses*, 190.

substitute, and subtract love from political protest to critique King’s proposal of agape love—which “grates” on Rustin’s nerves. It is not until 1986, when, speaking to an unspecified gay student group at the University of Pennsylvania, that Rustin candidly declares opposition to love as a practice of liberation and justice. Speaking about the links between Montgomery and Stonewall, Rustin discusses four burdens that gays must address. Of the four—overcome fear, overcome self-hate, overcome self-denial, and “not to deal with extremist who would castrate us or put us on an island and drop an H-bomb on us”—love is simply not one of them. “Our job is not to get those people who dislike us to love us,” he writes.” “Nor was our aim in the civil rights movement to get prejudiced white people to love us.” The goal of the civil rights movement was to “create the kind of America, legislatively, morally, and psychologically, such that even though some whites continued to hate us, they could not openly manifest that hate. That’s our job today: to control the extent to which people can publicly manifest antigay sentiment.”⁸⁸

Rustin does not leave evidence linking his opposition to love as a political and social justice practice to his feelings about his once public-but-severed relationship to King, but he does deploy rhetoric that strategically signifies on the limits of love as a Beloved Community practice. While King’s politics of love putatively proposed the beloved community as an inclusive practice of everyday good will, Rustin’s love for men, marked by scandal, did not receive the supportive and public love that guides the practice of the beloved community—or what King called “redeeming good will for all men.” If love came to supplant the practice of the community—the everyday relations between its members—a structuring principle of the beloved community, then it did not benefit Rustin. We must ask ourselves: Had the black Christian community—and King in

⁸⁸ Ibid., 273.

particular— publicly defended Rustin, how might that have changed Rustin’s views on King’s “Beloved Community? We are only left with Rustin’s fierce opposition to love as a political praxis, eschewing its power to continue the struggles for liberation in America.

Intimate Scrutiny: Enter Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde’s essay “Learning from the 60s” recognizes the difference between King and Rustin for their instructive possibilities. Following this line of reasoning Lorde writes: “if there is one thing we can learn from the 60s, it is how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be. For we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves.”⁸⁹ Writing years after Rustin’s critique of King’s agape love, Lorde argues that true liberation requires confronting both external forces of racism and internal forces in black communities that are destructive and divisive. Lorde writes:

In the 60s, political correctness became not a guideline for living, but a new set of shackles. A small and vocal part of the Black community lost sight of the fact that unity does not mean unanimity—Black people are not some standardly digestible quantity. In order to work together we do not have to become a mix of undistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk. Unity implies the coming together of elements which are, to begin with, varied and diverse in their particular natures. Our presence in examining those tensions within diversity encourage growth toward our common goal.⁹⁰

If the common goal of 1960s activism was liberation, then Lorde believes that these goals had not been met because of the multiple exclusions that took place, particularly regarding women and gay folks.

⁸⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Cross Press, 1984), 135.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

Although the 1960s “was a time of promise and excitement,” and an era that awakened the anger of the Black Community, it was also a time of isolation and frustration because political discourse of blackness espoused at the time upheld narrow visions of liberation and community that largely excluded the concerns of black women as well as gays and lesbians. “The existence of Black lesbian and gay people were not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black America,” Lorde says.⁹¹ “This is not a reason for despair, nor for rejection of the importance of those years. But we must,” Lorde believes, “face with clarity and insight the lessons to be learned from the *oversimplification* of any struggle for self-awareness and liberation, or we will not rally the force we need to face the multidimensional threat to our survival in the 80s.”⁹² For example the attacks on Rustin—from both racist white Americans and black activists—were an “attack against us all.” Writing a simplified version of a “hierarchy of oppression,” Lorde calls for a compassionate energy that builds upon the visions of the 1960s but are much more inclusive, wider, and capable of uniting and celebrating difference—“a vision which can encompass us all.”⁹³ Unlike King, Lorde embraces “eros” as the pulsating center of this compassionate energy—what she calls the erotic. Once black folks, especially women, understand the potential of this energy, then, Lorde writes, they will learn to use this energy “with greater precision against our enemies rather than against ourselves.”⁹⁴ Tapping into erotic energy builds better beloved communities and sustainable and livable futures where all Black Americans—including women and queer folks--survive. Lorde writes:

⁹¹ Ibid, 137.

⁹² Ibid, 138.

⁹³ Ibid., 136.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 137.

We share a common interest, survival, and it cannot be pursued in isolation from others simply because their differences make us uncomfortable. We know what it is to be lied to. The 60s should teach us how important it is not to lie to ourselves. Not to believe that revolution is a one-time event, or something that happens around us rather than inside of us. Not to believe that freedom can belong to any one group of us without the others also being free. How important it is not to allow even our leaders to define us to ourselves, or to define our sources of power to us.”⁹⁵

The Leader implied here is King—and to a degree Rustin—especially given the intertextual dialogue that occurs in the piece. When Lorde says that we cannot “believe that freedom can belong to any one group of us without the others also being free,” she echoes King’s oft-cited belief that “an injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere.” Towards this end, Lorde directly quotes King in her speech saying: “There is no such thing as a single-issue of any struggle because we do not live single issues lives. Malcolm knew this. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew this.”⁹⁶ Lorde pushes the sixties agenda further by forcing folks to deal with their feelings because they are “the sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of our ideas.”⁹⁷ Ideas, in fact, that “[points toward] the pathway to our freedom.”⁹⁸

Furthermore, the end of Lorde’s essay clearly recalls her essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” The erotic is a powerful resource that exists deeply “within each of us” and it is especially located inside women. Indeed, the erotic is “rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feelings.”⁹⁹ The erotic, once tapped, leads to individual as well as collective transformation. The “Use of the Erotic,” is Lorde’s

⁹⁵ Ibid, 141.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 138.

⁹⁷ Audre Lorde, “My Words Will Be There” in Rudolph Byrd, Johnetta Cole, and Beverly Guy-Shetfall, eds., *I Am Your Sister: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 186.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 187.

⁹⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53.

attempt to reimagine the beloved community, where she “examine[s] the whole question of loving as a manifestation.”¹⁰⁰ “Can anyone here still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?”¹⁰¹ Thus, Lorde’s thesis on the erotic complicates King’s visions of love. For Lorde, love “is a tremendous source of power” that “hit[s] the nitty gritty” and “particular” aspects of her life. Her love poems, for example, “insist that you can’t separate loving from fighting, from dying, from hurting.”¹⁰² Love also facilitates self-definition. “Hey! We define ourselves as lovers, as a people who love each other all over again; we become new again,” Lorde maintains.¹⁰³ Unlike King’s fixed agape love, Lorde’s erotic love is flexible and bends in multiple directions that help her “grow in great deal in all of [her] emotions.”¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Lorde even critiques the idea that leaders, like King and Rustin, define not only key agendas for black liberation but also the sources of power for liberation and survival. Erotic love allows women (and men) to “define [themselves] for [themselves],” or run the risk of being “crunched into other people’s fantasies [of who they are] and eaten alive.”¹⁰⁵

Throughout her critical writings, Lorde’s political philosophies of liberation and freedom hinge on what Roderick Ferguson terms “intimate scrutiny.” In “Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde’s ‘Poetry is Not a Luxury and ‘Uses of the Erotic’,” Ferguson elucidates intimate scrutiny as a mode of being that “critically engage[s] the self” in an

¹⁰⁰ Audre Lorde, “My Words Will Be There” 164.

¹⁰¹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 140.

¹⁰² Lorde, “My Words Will Be There,” 164.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁰⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 137.

effort “to set the stage for new intervention and articulations” of “social agency.”¹⁰⁶ Ferguson contends that the “self” that Lorde declares throughout her essays is not “the self of liberal individualism” but a self that attends to “structural revision.” Indeed, a self designed to produce “new visions of and efforts toward a just more compassionate world.” Ferguson’s readings of Lorde’s work—and particularly “intimate scrutiny”—is important to this project because it provides rhetorical a framework through which to situate Lorde’s contributions to the practice of the beloved community. Intimate scrutiny was the missing link between King and Rustin—there was no dialogue between the two men on the implications of agape love. Intimate scrutiny allows black people to discourse with black people about issues internal to their community. Intimate scrutiny is about black love—love between black people that requires them to discuss their feelings and any problems that may inhibit those feelings. Intimate scrutiny is the link between love and liberation that black lesbians and black gay men foregrounded in the post-60s era. Intimate scrutiny politicized the personal in an effort to widen the Beloved Community deploying, as the remaining chapters argue, multiple modes of love: home love, just love—in the interest of Black liberation.

¹⁰⁶ Roderick Ferguson, “Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde’s ‘Poetry is Not a Luxury’ and ‘Uses of the Erotic,’” in *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3 & 4, 295-300.

Part II

Need: A Chorale of Black Women's Voices

This woman is Black
so her blood is shed into silence
this woman is Black
so her death falls to earth
like the drippings of birds
to be washed away with the silence and rain

--Audre Lorde, *Chosen Poems: Old and New*

Chapter 2

“Learning from the Sixties”

Barbara Smith's Erotic Elisions and Political Awakenings

In 1985 Barbara Smith came like a fresh wind to Chapel Hill. She brought with her a vision of home unlike anything I had imagined. Home held out promises of redemption and nurturance, acceptance and love...At home we would recreate ourselves and our world, fashion a new mode of being, map a new way for living which the vision of the black freedom struggle would be realized in the daily interactions of black lesbians and gays.

--Robert Reid Pharr, *Black Gay Man*

Black lesbians have fared better in claiming visibility in the gay and lesbian community because of the women's movement...We found models of leadership in black lesbian writers like Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith, who were out there countering the imposed invisibility and silence of black lesbians.

In her seminal text, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, the black womanist Alice Walker observes a veteran black woman activist of Mississippi sharing her concerns about the end of the civil rights movement: "If the civil rights movement is dead it shore ain't ready to lay down."¹ For this particular black woman, an unsung "legendary freedom fighter in her small town in the Delta," the civil rights movement will never be dead. As long as "her skin is black. As long as one black American [woman] survives, the struggles for equality with other Americans must also survive. This," concludes the activist, "is a debt we owe to those blameless hostages we leave to the future, our children."² Born in the late 1940s and coming of age during the 1960s, Barbara Smith represents one of those "children" of the movement that inherits this "debt," particularly the responsibility to continue liberation struggles in Black America. For Barbara Smith, who became one of the leading black lesbian feminists of her day, this debt came with a heavy burden—an obligation to blackness that created tensions around public discussion of her erotic life and sexual politics.

In this chapter I focus on the life and writings of black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith. Known for her iconoclastic political viewpoints and valued for her legendary feminist activism, Smith exists as an icon in the field of Women's studies generally and Black Women's studies specifically.³ In celebrating her savvy grassroots activism, entrepreneurial agency, and visionary hope, friends and scholars alike are ever tempted to

¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), 120.

² *Ibid.*, 120.

³ Her co-edited volume would help institutionalize the field of Black Women's Studies. See, Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, *All the Women are White, All The Black Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press of CUNY, 1982).

name her a Mother of Black Feminism.⁴ Placing this otherwise deserving honorary endowment aside, it is next to impossible to reference black feminist theory and not mention or cite Barbara Smith. As the lesbian poet Cheryl Clarke says in an interview regarding the rise of black feminism in the late twentieth century: “It was all Barbara...she started it all.”⁵ With an activist career spanning more than four decades—the Civil Rights Movement, Second Wave Feminism, Black Women’s Liberation, the Gay Rights era, and currently as a State Representative in Albany, New York—Barbara Smith’s place within the annals of African American liberation struggles is undeniable. What remains rather elusive, however, are aspects of her personal life that, I find, exist as fragments across her political work. Given the scholarly investment of Smith’s life, and that she herself examined the relationship between gender and sexuality in the name of liberation, I ask: Where in the space of her public-personal life did love exist? How did she honor the debt bequeathed to her by the civil right rights movement while developing her own black lesbian subjectivity? Indeed, how does an inheritor of the civil rights movement honor its traditions while doing the work of a black feminist criticism concerned with, especially, black sexual politics?

Raising these questions reveals that Smith's black lesbian political awakenings involved a degree of struggle that I theorize in this chapter as *erotic elision*.. Smith strategically negotiated her race and sexuality by reserving frank discussion about her experiences with lesbian love to spaces of fiction. While her critical essays are devoted to discussion of blackness—conveying, in part, the very real problems of racism and sexism in U.S. culture—these essays do not go beyond discussing sexual identity; knowledge of

⁴ Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵ Interview, Cheryl Clarke. Hobart, NY.

one's lesbian or gay sexuality is the limit of Smith's critique throughout her polemics. In other words, while Smith makes room in her critical work to discuss the importance of sexuality, questions of lesbian sex and love are elided and thus reserved for the spaces of fiction. Looking at the span of Smith's oeuvre, there is a sense that race and sexuality are real problems that deserve public-political analysis while questions about eros—love and sex—are fantastic dramas that shape her literary fictions. Throughout this chapter, I argue that erotic elision represents a discursive strategy through which Smith negotiated the very difficult and at time dangerous burden of being black and lesbian in North America. Erotic elision enabled Smith to do the very hard work of liberation while allowing her to envision freedom dreams where love between black lesbians was not a marginal concept in black communities. Ultimately, Smith's erotic elisions, and her fantastic dramas, lead her to imagine home as a mode of love. Such a hermeneutics of love imagine spaces where black lesbians not only create homes for themselves but are embraced by a welcoming black, and indeed, beloved community.

The political and social conditions attached to blackness and homosexuality during Smith's days required this rhetorical negotiation. Being black and being black and gay was dangerous. Throughout her life—from the time she was a child to her emergence as a politically conscious adult—Smith witnessed black folks being slaughtered by the literal and ideological violence of racism. Physical death was a fact of anti-black racism and homophobia during Smith's early years. Regarding the latter, homophobia, it was an area that Smith had to tread very lightly. Explicit discussion of sexuality in a black cultural context *as a black woman*, could lead to either career suicide or having this aspect of one's life being over looked in death. Respectability—race, gender, and

literary—are three immutable forces that conditions Smith’s erotic elisions. Erotic elisions allowed Smith to both avoid these deaths work for liberation and have a “damn good time.”⁶

In locating Smith’s erotic elisions I center my analysis on Smith’s more recent publication to date, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (1998). My reading of this text for its erotic pulses and elisions is informed by the methods and theories of black feminism. Indeed, my choice to center this chapter on Smith’s latest collection of essays supports Patricia Hill Collins’s belief that “just as fighting injustice lay at the heart of U.S. Black women’s experiences, so does analyzing and creating imaginative responses to injustices characterize the core of black feminist thought.”⁷ Smith’s latest text uses imaginative projects, such as novels written by black women, as her weapons for social and political critique. Furthermore, my focus on Smith’s sexual politics constitutes an attempt to “stress the contradictions, frictions, and inconsistencies of Black feminist thought,” which is animated throughout this chapter as “the shifting mosaic of competing ideas” between race, sexuality, and erotic elision. In turn, these ideas emphasize the dis-junctures and tensions between the “suppression of African American women’s ideas” and their “intellectual activism in the face” of, among other things, suppressing their sexual politics, desires, identities, and practices.⁸ Given the fraught history of black women’s sexuality made legible by black feminist scholarship, I hope to make clear that discussing black women’s sexual politics requires careful analysis.

⁶ Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000)

⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Power, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2009), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

The chapter begins by pondering how the logics of debt and death, as animated by Smith's childhood memories of murders in the civil rights movement and her attendance at James Baldwin's funeral, initially register her uneasy relationship between the personal and the political, the public and the private; between race and sexual freedom. The deaths of four young black girls attending Sunday school in the South and James Baldwin's funeral might exist on opposite ends of the social spectrum, but for Smith these deaths reveal how the dangers associated with blackness and sexuality influence how she politicizes, embodies, and textually represents eros. Smith works within these limitations strategically, honoring tradition in her political discourse and using her literary imagination to deploy sexual and erotic politics to imagine possibilities of home love for black lesbians.

After thinking through the relationship between race and sexuality sparked by the moment of death, I move to examine Smith's literary projects and her short stories in attempt to illuminate how she understood her relationship to black sexual politics generally and black lesbian erotics specifically. Because these short stories are autobiographical they represent Smith's real attempt to announce the complicated ways that she struggled to understand her sexuality as a critical arm of black liberation. The chapter concludes by meditating on why considering Smith's political and creative works together has significance for understanding the relationship between love and liberation in the late twentieth century.

To Shape Prose with Clarity and Fire: On The Erotics of Death

The modern civil rights movement of the 1960s engendered Barbara Smith's political awakenings. Coming of age during these racially tense decades and thus witnessing brave African Americans actively resist oppressive racial regimes influenced Smith's radical consciousness. Despite many of the movement's pitfalls and limitations, the sixties ultimately inspired and sustained her lesbian feminist politics throughout second wave feminism. It was a decade in which death haunted her life, yet also provided her with instruction regarding how to embody and (re) present black female sexuality. Taking my cue from Sharon Holland's theory of death in *Raising the Dead*, I use Smith's reflections on death as an initial occasion to theorize about her strategy of erotic elision. By raising the dead in her writings, Smith tells the story of "death-in-life" regarding the harsh realities of racial, gender, and erotic minorities who, because they exist at such complicated intersections, are all denied a "sustainable subjectivity." Reflecting on death allows Smith to "speak from a site of familiarity," and in the process address a "plethora of tensions within and without existing culture." As I will discuss shortly, death reminds Smith of the dangers with being black, lesbian, and woman in white and "straight" America. Embracing death, however, allows her to speak from a marginalized position about the "unspoken" with language that often "slips through the cracks" of black liberation.⁹ Death evokes respectability and the complicated ways that race and sexuality exist in tandem and in tension throughout the long civil rights movement.

⁹ Sharon Holland, *Raising The Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Duke University Press, 2000), 4.

Writing years later as an adult in her essay “A Rose”—which concludes *The Truth That Never Hurts*—Smith recalls the senseless murders of young African Americans suffered under the vigilante regimes of whiteness during the civil rights era.

In 1955, although I was too little to know what it meant, I learned fourteen-year-old Emmet Till’s name when he was lynched in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. In 1957, when I was ten, I watched nine Black students attempt to enter Little Rock High School while a mob of screaming white adults attacked them verbally and physically.

In 1963, four black girls near my own age, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, were murdered when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama. More than any of the others, their deaths taught me the measure of my life in the great white schemes of things. Somebody’s daughter, somebody’s neighbor girl, somebody’s child, someone with carefully plaited hair and a crispy ironed blouse, someone whose people saw to it that she got to church every Sunday, someone like me was in the end worth nothing, was a creature to be hunted down, obliterated, and killed.¹⁰

Smith’s memory of these tragic murders is both literal and symbolic. Literal because they factually narrate real stories of death that later catalyzed the movement of the 1950s and 1960s. These memories are also symbolic in part because of the ways in which the sexualization of black gender imagined in her memories evokes fears and anxieties in the white imagination. The death of Addie Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley resonate profoundly with Smith. Unlike her description of Emmitt Till or the Little Rock Nine, Smith directs her memory and our attention toward (re) presentation on the one hand and the limits of black (female) respectability on the other, even during their age of innocence. Smith’s descriptions of the young girls’ presentation imply the care and tenderness that their families held for these young women. She focuses on the importance of hair, fashionable dress, and attending church to construct female

¹⁰ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 192-193.

innocence, and in retrospect—and years later—a degree of black female respectability. These girls were presented with care, which might not have struck Smith with any significance in her youth, but stood out as a site of significant memory in her adult years. Why do these descriptions of personal care and black female representation become important for Smith over time?

Historians document well that, beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, recently emancipated blacks aspiring for middle-class status in white America espoused, promoted, and ingrained into the consciousness of other wise “unruly” blacks the politics of up-lift to prove their social worth and citizenship rights. Black women were confined to proper gender-roles mirroring, in their social performance, Victorian ideologies of race motherhood—being a supportive wife and nurturing mother constituted the extent of her existence. Susan Kahn argues elsewhere that by the mid-twentieth century, and especially by the 1950s, those most impacted by uplift politics and respectability were adolescent black girls, who were expected to accept and perform without question up-lift and “chaste respectability.”¹¹ Smith’s memory animates the importance of respectability, suggesting its significance at the sight of senseless terror that cost four young black girls their lives. The argument here is less concerned with memory than it is in discussing how the deaths of young black girls remind Smith of the importance of black female representation inherited by those times. Smith, writing from the adult perspective with years of removal from the events themselves, recalls memories that raise questions about the links between race, gender, and respectability especially where black girls and women are of historic and political concern. As I will make clear

¹¹ Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

later in the chapter, as an adult, Smith grapples with—i.e. remaining in debt to—the politics of respectability, especially in her short story, “Home.” In this vignette, she makes explicit connections between her being raised by her aunts and the importance of respectability. In fact, I contend that she uses political discourse to construct lesbian desire beyond shame and stigma and deploys the imaginative space of fiction to undermine the traditions’ hold on black female sexuality.

Where these memories characterized her childhood, years later, as a black lesbian feminist activist, the death of black gay writer James Baldwin moves her in a different way. At Baldwin’s funeral, “The Celebration of the Life of James Arthur Baldwin,” there was the profound redaction of a critical aspect of his life that compelled much of his writing: his homosexuality. Smith reflects on Baldwin’s funeral in “We Must Always Bury Our Dead Twice,” an essay on “the disappointment this ceremony brought to those of us who are out and politically active as Black lesbians and gay men.”¹² However, before discussing Smith’s attendance at this funeral, I want to briefly highlight Smith’s relationship to Baldwin.

Although Smith never met him, the novelist and political essayist James Baldwin holds a special place in her heart, mind, and political awakening. She credits him with inspiring her literary activism as well as embracing herself as a lesbian-identified black woman. Baldwin’s autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on The Mountain* “astounded” her because growing up in post-war Cleveland, Ohio during a 1950s and early 1960s, a place rocked by battles over school desegregation, did not promise her the possibilities of living publicly as a black lesbian woman whom, in spite of all odds, aspired to become a writer. “The novel offered me the rarest gift, the gift of possibility. If John Grimes, growing up

¹² Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 76.

poor and Black in Harlem in the 1930s, who was as much of an outsider as I had ever been, could be a writer,” Smith asserts, “then so maybe could I.”¹³ Much later in her life, when she delivered the keynote address to the second National Lesbian and Gay Conference held in Chicago in 1992, Baldwin’s last novel, *Just Above My Head*, helped Smith shape the prose of her address with “clarity and fire”¹⁴; prose that, she hoped, encouraged people to make social change. “Baldwin indicates in one passage [of *Just Above My Head*] that despite his best intentions, a Black person can be quite ignorant of other people of color, that he [or she] can indeed operate from a racist point of view,” she states early in the address.¹⁵ Smith’s address confronts the degree of cruelty between black feminists, lesbians, and gays, which at the time ran “as deep as love.” Given Baldwin’s profound impact on her life, one can genuinely sympathize with Smith’s visceral reactions at his funeral.

James Baldwin’s funeral took place at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, Smith notes. According to Smith, black literary luminaries, musicians, performers, Baldwin’s large family, and scores of lesbian and gay men attended the funeral. Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, Odetta Holmes, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka were, among others, in attendance. Angelou gave the first eulogy, speaking, from Smith’s viewpoint, eloquently of her love for Baldwin. By performing traditional black spirituals, such as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” “Kumbaya” and “Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees,” Odetta vocally transformed the Cathedral into a down-home, southern black church. Morrison delivered the second tribute. “She spoke about,” Smith writes, “how

¹³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Barbara Smith, “Just Between Us: A Black Gay Dialogue” in *off our backs*, February 1982.

uniquely gentle and kind Baldwin was and said his was a ‘tenderness and vulnerability that asked everything of us.’” Amiri Baraka delivered the last tribute, speaking of Baldwin as a black revolutionary—going to the “heart of Baldwin as a person and as an artist.” In his eulogy, Baraka reminds funeral goers that, like all artists, Baldwin had “an ethical vision” for he “knew that his job was to deal with both beauty *and* truth.” Baraka concludes that “Jimmy was God’s Black Revolutionary mouth,” a conceit that raises Baldwin to a Messiah status.¹⁶

The performance of love by these estimable luminaries both satisfies and disappoints Smith. Affirming Baldwin’s blackness instilled a sense of pride in Smith, yet negating Baldwin’s sexuality proved disquieting. “Although Baldwin’s funeral completely reinforced our Blackness, it tragically rendered his and our homosexuality completely invisible. In those two hours of remembrance and praise, not a syllable was breathed that this wonderful brother, this writer, this warrior, was also gay, that his being gay was indeed integral to his magnificence,” Smith writes.¹⁷

The emergence of the black/sexual binary occupies a pivotal moment in the essay, appearing as it does with two of the most prolific writers in America: Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka. The irony undergirding their participation in the ceremony is that both writers supported controversial views on homosexuality, often denying it as a trope in their own literary productions. Yet, oddly, throughout their own literary careers, they have both relied on the logics of queer erotics to bolster their imaginings of the black condition in America. At the moment that Smith recalls Morrison’s eulogy, for example, she begins to think “for the first time that afternoon” about Baldwin as a gay man and

¹⁶ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 78-79. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

“wondered if this ‘detail’ of his being would surface.” Why align Baldwin’s sexuality as a gay man with Toni Morrison’s presence? A possible explanation justifying Smith’s rhetorical choice might be to expose Morrison’s conflicted relationship to homoerotic desire; the moment shores up Smith’s reading of Morrison’s novel *Sula* and backlash from Morrison herself.¹⁸ In an interview with literary critic Claudia Tate, Morrison rejects Smith’s reading that *Sula* is a lesbian novel. What Smith reads as a lesbian relationship between the novel’s central characters, Nel and Sula, Morrison imagines as special friendship between women. “Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*,” Morrison concludes.¹⁹ As the interview continues, Morrison claims to welcome mis-readings and interpretive leaps of *Sula*, but she does not welcome nor accept Smith’s reading.

Unlike Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka attacked Baldwin publicly on a number of fronts, though chiefly for his sexuality. In the early 1960s, Baraka viewed Baldwin as a “sensitive man” whose writings, political and literary, indexed a desire to be white. He accused Baldwin’s literary oeuvre—at the time—of lacking seriousness and critical standpoint because, he believed, Baldwin did not focus on issues that mattered to African Americans: racial oppression. Baraka held strong opinions of Baldwin’s writings which he felt were too touchy feely—a “cover to register,” writes Baraka, his “gay exotic plumage [into] the world of ideas.” In the Western literary boys club Baldwin’s writing would be the “Joan of Arc of the cocktail party,” which for Baraka would be “sickening

¹⁸ See Smith’s essay, “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” in the *Truth that Never Hurts*.

¹⁹ Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1984).

beyond relief.” Without a doubt, Baraka believed that Baldwin was not a “real black man,” because he spoke nothing of black manhood within systems of racial oppression. Baraka measured one’s commitment to the race by the content of *his* writing, which required at the time, addressing “ugly things” such as the “racial struggle.” He argues at great length and, it seems, indirectly against the themes of homoerotic desire in Baldwin’s novels, that no social issue other than race could move Black America: “Unless a man will tell you something, pass on some piece of information about the world he moves in, [then] there is little value in what he is saying.” Sexuality, and homosexuality, is a particular and individual experience incapable of transforming the plight of black people: “Some body turn [him]! And then perhaps the rest of us can get to the business at hand. Cutting throats,” Baraka concludes.²⁰

Beyond his public jeremiads against Baldwin’s literary work, Baraka generally spoke vociferously about homosexuality. Black gay activist and writer Ron Simmons captures well the tenor of Baraka’s homophobia. Simmons writes: “Amiri Baraka constantly denounces homosexuality in his writings. He despises faggots and believes being called one is the worst insult a man can suffer...faggots are the epitome of what Baraka opposes.” Simmons argues that Baraka’s homophobia and his obsessive need to publicly disavow the humanity of black gay men constitutes Baraka’s effort to prove his “manhood” to the world. He also argues that men like Baraka participate in these public attacks as a way to cope with their own personal homoerotic desires, which they fear. In essence, Simmons suggests that Baraka represses his homoerotic desires and supports this claim by discussing a number of Baraka’s poetry and plays, exposing in the process

²⁰ Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (Akashic Books, 1968), 141.

“Baraka’s dilemma.”²¹ Baraka repressed his desires, Simmons suggests, in the name of cultural capital, black authenticity, and social acceptance. Being black and gay was indeed dangerous during the 1960s.

Reflecting on Morrison’s and Baraka’s problematic history of dealing with questions of sexuality reveals how African Americans generally respond to and treat homosexuality during these times.²² In speaking for the race and asserting their authority, Morrison’s and Baraka’s silence at Baldwin’s funeral participates in a long discourse in Black political thought that shames sexuality and dismisses sexual rights as a black civil rights concern. Although one could justify this silence by placing the moment of Baldwin’s funeral within the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic—which by the time of Baldwin’s funeral had reached unprecedented heights—scapegoating would exonerate these luminaries from perpetuating the black/gay divide; such a move would allow readers to accept these authors’ overall view regarding homoerotic desire as palatable and conditional; it would mean, furthermore, accepting their performance of love not as contradiction but as symptomatic of the times. Nevertheless, Morrison and Baraka are not the only two participating in this moment of silence. Smith participates as well. In her discussion of Baldwin’s sexuality she omits Baldwin’s sexuality from the discussion of his politics except to note its existence. That is, she does not suggest that Baldwin’s sexuality has links to political discourse, but instead locates Baldwin’s political work within normative black political frameworks. “Baldwin’s constant themes were racism,

²¹ Ron Simmons, “Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals” in Essex Hemphill (ed.), *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men* (Redbone Press, 1991/2007).

²² Delroy Constantine-Simm, *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*; Dwight McBride, “Can The Queen Speak: Sexuality, Race Essentialism, and the Problem of Authority,” in *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

oppression, and injustice, all of which are integrally linked to every nuance of Black peoples personal and emotional lives.”²³ Blackness as a shared entity characterizes Smith's political oeuvre; she uses it on the one hand to authenticate her relationship to the race, and on the other to pay her debt to—work with the tradition of—black liberation discourse. Nevertheless, claiming that Baldwin was not “politicized” about his sexuality, which Smith argues “means that he did not directly challenge the pantheon of African American writers and intellectuals to understand homosexuality and homophobia as *significant political concerns*,” troubles her belief that public knowledge of Baldwin’s sexuality “would have helped alter, if only by an increment, perceptions in Black communities all over the world about *the meaning of homosexuality*” (emphasis added). I sense that Smith has a desire to value Baldwin as a bona fide race man, whom in spite of being gay advocated for, like a number of his contemporaries, black freedom with similar themes. Smith does not discuss personal aspects of Baldwin’s life—such as his love, romance, or his erotic life. How Smith wants us to consider the relationship between homophobia and homosexuality as “significant political concerns” and “the meaning of homosexuality” falls by the wayside, leaving readers to arrive at their meanings independent of her critique. She gestures toward giving shape to these meanings by linking, as she does, the politics of affect inextricably to an understanding of the social, cultural, and political plight of African American life. Writing against Amiri Baraka, Smith states: “It is not possible to write accurately about how African Americans *feel* without also writing about the social, political, and economic context in which those feelings and individual dramas take place.”²⁴ Again, she does not, however, tell us what

²³ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 78.

²⁴ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 78.

these feelings are, and nor does she ponder the contours of their existence in Baldwin's personal life. In her concluding reflections, Smith reflects on the relationship between the large-scale redaction of Baldwin's sexuality and his own silence, "the price of the ticket he paid to be accepted by the straight Black literary establishment."²⁵ One might ask if Smith's concerns do not operate similarly: citing Baldwin's principal themes as evidence demonstrates an authentic blackness awaiting the stamp of approval by race leaders of the "straight" black community. Nevertheless, Smith's interest—or lack thereof—in Baldwin's personal life raises questions about her own personal life. How does Smith leave evidence of her "personal life" in ways that could alter and politicize homosexuality? Political critique of this kind—on Baldwin's funeral—epitomizes her work. The "personal" in Smith's political writings occupies an oblique, abstract place for reasons – I believe – shaped by the discourse of black respectability inherited as a "child" of the civil rights movement.

Toward a Black Feminist Criticism & the Politics of Sex

Current debates in black feminist theory walks on a tightrope when interrogating personal aspects of black women's sexual lives. Given the history of slavery and sexual violence that defines the contours of black women's existence in America, black women have had to battle against stereotypes that misconstrue their sexuality. Feminist historians and critics have theorized for example that black woman deliberately choose an oath of silence to survive the pain of sexual violence and physical abuse from men. What Darlene Clarke theorizes as the "culture of dissemblance," a politics of silence linked to black female psychic and public survival throughout the early nineteenth and twentieth

²⁵ Ibid., 80.

centuries, has over-determined the analysis of black female sexuality in the late twentieth century. The net result of this silence constitutes what Evelyn Hammond asserts as the “wholes of black female sexuality.” Patricia Hill Collins interprets these wholes as the ineffability of the personal and writes elsewhere that, “when it comes to important issues concerning Black women’s sexuality, U.S. Black women have found it almost impossible to say what happened.”²⁶ The “sexual politics of black womanhood,” to echo Collins, limits the category of the personal in spite of the feminist politic espousing a critical relationship between the personal and the political—where, indeed, the personal *is* political. In what ways does the personal operate politically in Smith’s life?

In “Rereading Barbara Smith: Black Feminist Criticism and the Category of Experience,” Deborah Chay argues that, despite advocating for black women’s visibility, Smith’s formulations of experience ironically reproduce discourses of invisibility. She writes rather persuasively that: “Accounting for difference by reference to experience, Smith cannot then account for the ideological construction of experience itself. Black women and their difference are ‘fixed’: objectionable but finally unquestionable. Smith rightfully identifies and protests their cultural and political conditions, but cannot theorize their transformation.” To substantiate her claims, Chay re-reads Smith’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and she goes beyond critiquing Smith’s argument for not rigorously conceptualizing what constitutes lesbian identity—Chay pushes Smith on theorizing lesbian desire as a critical practice. She writes: “In spite of a certain level of confusion in her articulations of the concept, Smith basically argues for, and conducts, a reading which is itself ‘lesbian’; that is, she is able to elaborate her political agenda through her critical practice independent and irrespective of any type of claims about the text itself.” Smith’s

²⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 133.

political agenda, as she makes very clear throughout her writings, is to excavate black women's literary histories. Chay's critique of Smith's analysis largely concerns Smith's inability to recognize and write about lesbian erotic desire, which would more rigorously make visible the sexual politics of black lesbian womanhood as a crucial arm of the "political subjectivity of black women."²⁷ Essentially, Chay anticipates Laura Alexandra Harris's concept of "queer black feminism," searching as she does for the "pleasure principle" in black feminist thought. In the quest for liberation, black women have been denied pleasure, argues Harris. In her formulations, Harris contends that "the practice of liberation" has been displaced in certain communities across certain identities and that as a result of this displacement black women's sexualities have "had a long history of being denied pleasure." Harris continues: "For black women, race mandated very complicated negotiations with masculinity. In attempt to purge male identification, this brand of feminism failed to consider how pleasure might intersect and subvert the power dynamics of socially constructed gender or how racism functions."²⁸ In essence, Chay's theory of queer black feminism represents what M. Jacqui Alexander theorizes as "erotic autonomy," which under regimes of colonialism, slavery, global capitalism, and patriarchy have been denied to the black woman.²⁹ Both Chay and Harris present readings of black feminism useful for framing my analysis of Smith's political and literary writings as erotic elisions.

²⁷ Deborah G. Chay, "Rereading Barbara Smith: Black Feminist Criticism and the Category of Experience" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), 635-652.

²⁸ Laura Alexandra Harris, "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle" in *Feminist Review*, No. 54 (Autumn, 1996), 3-30.

²⁹ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Duke University Press, 2006)

Taking my cue from Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic and Evelyn Hammond's "wholes of black family sexuality," I contend that Smith's political and creative writings present a tenable middle ground. In Lorde's formulations, the erotic exists deeply within a female plane, bridges gaps between feelings of chaos and pleasure, and when shared with others has the potential to empower and transforms lives. On the other hand, Hammonds believes that black feminist politics' acceptance of the "politics of silence," results in black women's ineffability as they struggle to "articulate any conception of their sexuality"—creating these wholes. Like Hammonds, I take serious the question: "What is it like inside of a black hole?"³⁰ Erotic elision suggests that Smith is thoroughly aware of her lesbian erotics. But, to live safely in a heterosexist, lesbi-phobic, anti-feminist society as a black woman required Smith had to choose her politics carefully. In other words, Smith's erotics have a strategic life that on the one hand informs her political critique with profound nuance yet on the other hand vividly animate her imaginative projects. As I will discuss later, Smith's *The Truth That Never Hurt* represents her strongest collection of writings, yet none of her short stories appear in this collection. Here, the erotic frames the text and appears as "love" and "sexual politics," guised, however, as political frameworks for social critique. How she herself practiced and embodied this intersection, and understood the pleasurable aspects of her life, are—due to her erotic elision—not always analyzed within her own black feminist thought.

Ultimately, my analysis of Smith's political awakenings maps a discourse of black liberation and black feminism with two interrelated goals in mind: to establish a needed framework for black women's sexual politics that analyzes systems of

³⁰ Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality in Winston Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, 482-497.

heterosexist oppression and to emphasize the symbolic and structural dimensions of this oppression.³¹ In what follows, I utilize Barbara Smith as a vehicle to examine the links and limitations of a liberation politics at the intersection between race and lesbian sexuality. In so doing, I hope to convey how the meanings attached to lesbian sexuality illuminate how the structural dimensions (i.e. ideologies/traditions) inherent to liberation politics limit the ways in which Smith negotiates her queer black feminism and erotic autonomy yet inspire her home love.

The Truth That Never Hurts & the Souls of Black Women

The Truth That Never Hurts (1998) is Smith's most recent collection of essays. They represent, in her own words, her strongest writings. These writings establish her political voice and provide her with "the power to shape reality and to share that reality with others."³² Furthermore, the essays in this collection "raise questions, criticize the status quo, open dialogue, and imagine something better," with the hope of shaking things up—"troubling the water," to reference fellow black queer writer, Melvin Dixon. As a collection of essays personally assembled by Smith and previously published as "essay, articles, and reviews" in either academic journals or newspapers, the text chronicles her political awakening from her days as a young civil rights activist in Cleveland in the late 1960s, her educational strivings as a young journalist in high school,

³¹ Symbolic dimension refers to the sexual meanings used to represent and evaluate black women's sexualities. In a lesbian context this means stigmas associated with lesbian sexuality: dyke, butch, race traitor, etc. The structural dimension encompasses how social institutions are organized to reproduce heterosexism, primarily through laws and social customs. Black liberation ideologies and the civil rights movement, writ large, constitute the social institution I am imagining here to think through its influences on Smith's sexual politics. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 139.

³² Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, xii.

the benefits and struggles of obtaining an elite education at Mount Holyoke College, and her joining the women's movement as a bona-fide black lesbian feminist. Because the text delineates Smith's life in a partially linear, autobiographical fashion, it equally functions as an archive in motion fighting for the historical legibility of black women's political activism.

The Truth That Never Hurts participates in a long tradition of literary and political activism utilized by scores of black women activists: autobiography. As Margo Perkins argues, black women activists who were on account of their gender excluded from traditional leadership positions used "life writings" to advance political (i.e. liberation) struggles and to "recreate themselves as well as the era they recount," the "story of the movement."³³ As the text moves from the decades of the late 1960s toward the new millennium—recalling throughout its pages the fiery decades of the modern black liberation struggle—Smith recreates and invents herself as she imagines the black freedom narrative through a particular "love-politics" essential to black survival; a love-politics where activists can work for liberation and have "a damn good time."³⁴

Framed as a testimonial text purported to speak the "truth," Smith struggles to move beyond the liberation politics of "coming out" of the closet as a black lesbian feminist and toward a critical discussion of how personal aspects of sexuality work to inform liberation. However, in this truth telling, Smith relies on a logic of identity politics—to name oneself as this or that—in ways that tend to generalize sexual identity;

³³ Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), xiii.

³⁴ Love politics is a process of self-making that confronts, addresses, and ultimately heals the wounds of hurt. Love "restores the black female self," and Smith would use her short stories to do so. I discuss this concept more in chapter four. For more on black feminist love politics, please see Jennifer Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love Politics, and Post-Intersectionality." *Meridians* 11 (2011).

and, ironically, produce a respectable lesbian identity void of eros, of love, of sex. The “personal” as “political” have no concrete interrogations in Smith’s analysis. Smith’s chosen language throughout the text, while clear and accessible, often gestures toward, implies, and whispers the personal—she is, for good reason, very careful not to reduce, nor further expose the Black woman’s body politic to the ravishing male gaze. In short, her political analysis carefully negotiates the rather slippery boundaries between lived experience and stereotype. Because she wrote during an era when the reigning discourse about black sexuality often conflated it with pathology and sickness, and during a time when black liberation remained closely associated with up-lift and respectability politics, Smith’s writings, I argue, enact an erotic elision. Just as much as she advanced critique of sexual politics in America, in essays such as “Homophobia: Why Bring it Up?” she refuses, for good measure, to discuss the personal aspects of her or other black women’s sexuality. Acknowledging and simply announcing her sexuality—participating, to reiterate, in notions of coming out of the closet as liberation—seems enough for Smith. When asked by a white-feminist journalist whether or not she considered herself “radical,” Smith says: “I’m definitely radical. I’m not a radical feminist. I’m a feminist who is radical. When I say radical, I mean leftist, socialist. Someone who believes in revolution as opposed to reform.”³⁵ Smith does not elaborate on the distinguishing features between a “radical feminist” and “a feminist who happens to be radical.” Instead, she distances herself from whatever constitutes the category “radical feminist” by both claiming and associating her radical politics with leftist-socialist revolution and not merely “reform.” Although this interview takes place closer to the publication of *The*

³⁵ “Activist. Writer. Revolutionary. Barbara Smith: A Political Life as a Black Radical Lesbian Feminist.” *off our backs*. Vol. xxvii, No. 9 (October 1998), 1-2.

Truth That Never Hurts, Smith reveals later in the interview that her political views are invariable—they have hardly changed over the years and between the decades of the 1960s and 1990s. In other words, Smith has always separated herself from radical feminism. The question is: Why? Not only was radical feminism largely a branch of white feminism, but as a political praxis it did not shy away from articulating sexually explicit language, representation, or embodiment. Radical feminists politicized their sexuality through embodiment in ways that could be interpreted as pornographic and unadulterated. Radical feminists laughed at respectability politics and marched through streets espousing “gender-fuckery.”³⁶ Thus, for Smith to separate herself from radical feminism is also to divorce herself from an explicit sexual politics that placed women’s bodies on display.

That said, if we read closely Smith’s *The Truth That Never Hurts*, we discover that its narrative arc begins and ends on a love politics, which I argue functions at the root of her feminist politics. Divided into four sections—“Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” “Working for Liberation and Having a Damn Good Time,” and “A Rose” *The Truth That Never Hurts* begins with a gesture toward a black sexual politics concerned with love and closes with a section that forwards love with sharp clarity and critical necessity. Indeed, the first section leads with her now infamous essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Smith’s argument in this essay, that Toni Morrison’s *Sula* constitutes a lesbian novel, is well known and widely accepted.

³⁶ I am particularly drawing from the decades of the “sex wars” and especially debates around pornography. Scores of radical feminists, such as Gayle Rubin, opposed arguments that pornography functioned as a form of sexual violence for women. Rubin saw no harm in porn. However, black women were largely against further exposing black women’s bodies to the rapacious male gaze, and particularly the porn industry. See Gay Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Duke University Press, 2011).

Smith wanted to transform reading methods in African American literature—theories and textual representation of black women’s sexuality needed intervention, she recalls in an interview.³⁷ In the prefatory remarks she provides before the essay, Smith writes:

Some thought my discussion of a lesbian subtext was on the mark and others, including [Toni] Morrison, thought I was seeing something that was not there. My perspective about *Sula* was influenced by the bold new ideas of 1970s feminism. Lesbian feminist activists and theorists pointed out that the dominant heterosexist regime [in American literature] so often obscured *actual erotic connections between women* that it was important to intuit the *possibility of lesbian experiences* in order to claim our history and lives” (emphasis added).³⁸

I place emphasis on “actual erotic and experiences” and the “possibility of lesbian experiences” because they mark a central tension throughout the essay and, furthermore, exemplify Smith’s erotic elision. Not only does Smith’s language shift quickly from erotic realities to lesbian possibility, but—in her reach to sustain her arguments about the text—her notions of what constitutes lesbian identity and practice shift from “expressed emotions” to Adrienne Rich’s theory of “non-erotic connections between women.” Feminist scholars have critiqued the essay for this very slippage and lack of definition. What remains unexplored in Smith’s formulations is a defined position and relationship to the erotic. For Smith, positionality is key given that Rich’s theory of the erotic contradicts Audre Lorde’s, which, as I have suggested previously, hinges on both emotional and physical connection expressed and shared between two women. Where scholars have questioned Smith’s definition of “lesbian identity,” I wonder about the erotic contact between Nel and Sula, and the implications of its degrees of (ill?) legibility. Sula’s non-heteronormative existence and resistance to the “supposedly normal life,” her feelings about sex toward men, the laughter shared between the two women

³⁷ Barbara Smith, Interview. Albany New, York.

³⁸ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 3.

after years of separation, and Nel's emotive outcry over Sula's inevitable death, all signify the novel's lesbians sensibility, and Rich's non-erotic connection between women.

If, for Smith, being out of the closet as lesbian carries with it substantial political weight, then explicitly interrogating the erotic as a lived practice in her mind might be too-much too-soon. "I am not convinced," she writes later in the essay, "that one can write explicitly as a Black lesbian and live to tell about it." Anticipating Tricia Rose's oral histories *Longing To Tell*, Smith implies that, in her political efforts to publicly identify as a lesbian, the bravery of discussing the erotic has been, and was at that moment, taken up by a "handful of Black women [who] have risked everything for truth."³⁹ These women include Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Ann Allen Shockley. She implies, however, that she, for some unexplained reason, is not willing to risk "everything." She clings to something unknown and unseen – but what is it?

Though Smith may not discuss the erotic or sexual explicitly, refusing to unpack how it functions in her analysis, it does have various manifestations and iterations in her work. In her analysis of black women's writings, and specifically "the souls of black women," both love and sexual politics are the critical optics that guides her analysis of black women's writings. In a book review on Alice Walker's *Love & Trouble*, which anticipates "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" by a few years, Smith offers an analysis of love in black communities. For Smith, Walker's *Love & Trouble* indicates that black love exists as a troubling phenomenon half understood due to the black community's ill-advised notions of black sexual politics. Devastated by the degree "blood and violence" that serves as the backdrop to Walker's characters in her book of short stories, Smith

³⁹ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 19.

writes: “Even as a Black woman, I found the cumulative impacts of these stories devastating. I questioned the quantity of pain in these sister’s lives and also wondered why none of the men and women were able to love each other. Women love their men, but they are neither loved nor understood in re-turn.”⁴⁰ Love primarily exists between mother and child; the only successful “romance” in *Love & Trouble* occurs, Smith argues, in “To Hell with Dying,” and specifically “between the young girl narrator and the lonely, grandfatherly Mrs. Sweet.”⁴¹ Love, in a heterosexual context, represents danger and pain for the black woman, leaving the novel's protagonist emotionally destitute in the process. “Physically, loveliness can be a destructive element in a Black woman’s life, because,” Smith concludes, “it enhances her chance of being a racial-sexual victim” caught within the systematic snares of erotic patriarchy.

When love inefficiently conveys the oppressions, dangers, and near-deaths of black women’s erotic experiences, sexual politics provides a framework where Smith enters into the discourse of gendered pain. In “Sexual Politics and The Fiction of Zora Neal Hurston,” Smith discusses the novel’s central character, Janie Crawford, framed by two competing ideas: “the fundamental oppressiveness of traditional marriage” and “ennobling treatment of Black love,” aspects of the novel where Hurston genuinely writes, Smith asserts, “directly from her heart.” A crucial aspect of Smith’s review regards her reading of Janie’s freedom: “Taking Black women seriously in the novel means for one thing that Janie’s life is seen as inherently valuable. There is the assumption that she has the right to search for happiness and freedom, however she may

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁴¹ Ibid.

define them.”⁴² But Smith imagines a relationship between black partners that include desire, happiness, and freedom but is curiously devoid of actual eroticism. She writes:

Janie ultimately experiences a few years of happiness with Teacake, who works with her to build an egalitarian relationship. With him Janie gets to do many things Jody never permitted, even activities as simple as playing checkers and going fishing...she finally becomes the “glossy leaved” person she was meant to be at sixteen. The most significant activity that Janie and Teacake share is working side-by-side harvesting the vegetables on the Florida muck. The issue of work was no doubt much on Hurston’s mind since it was a conflict with her career and caused her to part with her [own] lover. [Thus] Hurston very effectively criticizes the bourgeois division of labor in marriage, particularly as it is appropriated by Black people.⁴³

Smith’s constructs an “erotic” relationship between Janie and Teacake that focuses on a politics of labor and ignores physical contact between Janie and Teacake. Janie’s pleasurable happiness, when not read as cherubic and juvenile, derives from a sense of physical labor shared with Teacake.

Sexual politics, while not defined by Smith, imply pain and negative affect and evokes a history of sexual and physical abuse black women perpetually endure. And while she notes that Janie leaves her second husband, Jody Sparks, to capture her “romantic dreams,” she does not question Hurston’s construction of romance. Neither does she discuss contact, or “the kiss,” between Janie and Teacake, a site of pleasure that balances Janie’s first kissing experience, which her protective and recently enslaved grandmother punishes her for. Black bodies in pain prime her discussion, sublimating any physical links between black bodies in pleasurable happiness and erotic freedom. She concludes her reading of Janie and the pleasurable politics of return after the murderous death of Teacake: “Janie returns to Eatonville to live out the rest of her days in peace,

⁴² Ibid., 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 36.

knowing that she has achieved what few women have, a *meaningful love* without loss of self-esteem” (emphasis added). Love functions theoretically and exists as a political viewpoint that rescues black women from the snares of pain, violence, abuse, and humiliation. Love is metaphysical, and thus offers Smith a counter-aesthetic to read against traditions that expose black women bodies through a lens of pornography and social humiliation.⁴⁴

Learning from the Sixties: A Breathing Sense of Radical Possibility

The decades of the modern civil rights movement, while often described as the “angry decades” by a number of black feminists, were instructive for Smith.⁴⁵ These were the decades, particularly the 1960s, that provided Smith “a breathing sense of radical possibility,” what she calls the “greatest gift.” Reflecting on these times, she writes:

Coming of age in the 1960s was one of the luckiest coincidences of my life...the incredible intensity and political ferment of that decade perfectly coincided with the time that I was personally discovering who I was, testing my intellect, leaving home, exploring my sexuality, and meeting more and more people who cared about the same things that I did: writing, art, and making political change.⁴⁶

Smith’s reflections symbolize the drama that animates her political ideology and creative aesthetics, sparking in the process creative tensions between the personal and the political.

These tensions encompass the tensions between ideology (home) and practice (“exploring my sexuality”), and the social (“meeting people who cared about the same

⁴⁴ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics and Black Feminist Thought*.

⁴⁵ For more on the “angry decades,” see Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1990).

⁴⁶ Smith, *Truth*, 167.

things that I did”). The order of her verse reflects a process of self-making that conveys these tensions and could be interpreted thusly: in order to discover herself, Smith must first challenge certain ideologies largely valued and learned at the source of origin and shared community—home. In order to effectively “test her intellect,” she must physically remove and divorce herself from lived experiences and ideological dimensions that shape the contours, structures, and foundations of this home. Through a practice and politics of detachment and disassociation, Smith’s exploration of her sexuality constitutes the primary benchmark she deploys to execute her challenge, to test her intellect, and to challenge the foundations of her home.

Smith’s process of political awakening requires internalizing and accepting tradition, but using the personal (the erotic/sexual) as a catalyst to question this tradition. Although the erotic does not always motivate her political analysis, it surely frames her creative aesthetic. Exploring Smith’s political writing without understanding her creative works leaves unexplored the ways that she negotiated, and sometimes with struggle, a balance between racial and sexual freedom. Notice here too that none of Smith’s short stories, of which I later discuss, appear in *The Truth That Never Hurts*—she publishes them elsewhere, implying perhaps they are not representative of her political activism.

To return us to the 1960s, Smith says again that “my political education and *commitments* were shaped by this history.”⁴⁷ She recalls this history quite vividly: “the useless carnage in Vietnam, the violence that whites visited upon Black human beings who wanted to do outrageous things like attend school, ride public transportation, and vote”; the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church; and, among other tragedies, news footage showing burnings in Newark and Detroit that were indistinguishable from

⁴⁷ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 168; emphasis added.

burning cities such Soweto and Saigon. I place emphasis on commitment because it registers as a salient element in Smith's activism—she devotes an entire essay to the idea of commitment, giving it shape and rhetorical value. Among all the essays in *The Truth That Never Hurts*, “Working for Liberation” represents one where Smith begins to give shape to a key term undergirding the text; that is, she begins to “define” liberation by chiefly articulating the intellectual labor involved in such work.⁴⁸ As implied throughout the essay, to “work for liberation”—that is, to carry forth a commitment and then to test this commitment—requires first acknowledging blackness (home). Throughout the essay, Smith primes her discussion of liberation by speaking forcefully about her blackness, which is shared. “My racial identity and North America’s response to it—i.e. racism,” she states, “kept my fate directly linked to that of every Black person alive, including Black men. Race assigns to us a shared status, certain common experiences, and a rich history and culture, despite differences in gender, sexual orientation, and class.”⁴⁹ Challenging the gendered and patriarchal logics undergirding blackness, Smith adheres (and is in debt) to the work of Negro Art—and specifically the historic purpose of black writing: propaganda.⁵⁰ In doing so she principally locates blackness as a foundational concept within her critique.

Ironically, though, the logics of commitment-work require that Smith subvert her discussion of lesbian sexual politics gestured toward in this essay. In other words, the

⁴⁸ In her review of *The Truth That Never Hurts*, Laura Flanders writes: “Smith tells us she wants it. She tells us less about what it means.” Laura finds that Smith does not clearly define her key terms populating the text. Laura Flanders, “Still Ain’t Satisfied: *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, in *The Women’s Review of Books*, Vol. 16, No. 9 (June 1999), 10-11.

⁴⁹ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 163.

⁵⁰ The black literary tradition is key for Smith for she models *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* after Locke’s *The New Negro*.

feminist in her confronts the problem of men in heterosexual relationships and other social contexts, where—for example—all the men in her family, with the exception of her two uncles, had vanished. While she acknowledges that she dated boys/men in her formative years, intrigued as she was by “male sexual potential,” she found girls “attractive too.” The language that Smith associates with men denotes sexual possibility, while she codes her desire for women simply as attraction a rhetorical flourish that allows Smith to gloss over a deeper political analysis of lesbiansism, especially the erotics of lesbianism. Smith writes about lesbianism passively throughout the essay but she forefronts substantial analyses of race, gender, and patriarchy.

Consider for example both the essay’s narrative arc and the context in which Smith writes: after receiving an urgent letter from black gay writer Craig G. Harris, she publishes the essay in the now defunct gay newspaper *The New York Native* in February 1986, for Black History Month. Smith begins the essay stating: “I have never been very comfortable around men. Although I had male lovers when I was straight, they were few and far between. My major recollections of these relationships, besides how painful and humiliating they were, was that I never really understood what was going on...I did not understand men, period.”⁵¹ If black history month allows African Americans to reflect on the history of black struggle, then one struggle that concerns Smith at the start of this essay is not only blackness but also its normative erotic logics. Why begin an essay for a gay publication during black history month by speaking of failed (heterosexual) romance? From the start race and sexual liberation—within the context of black history life, culture, and political celebration—emerge in opposition and tension. The dangers Smith associates with heterosexual relationships are vividly detailed throughout the

⁵¹ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 162.

essay, yet she does not balance these dangers with the pleasurable and safe possibilities associated with lesbian relationships. “As a feminist and lesbian, some things about my prior relationships with men became clear. I found out that it wasn’t just me, but that sexism had basically stacked the deck against me from the start,” she writes.⁵² The narrative shifts from a discussion of problematic relations within systems of patriarchy—and rightfully diagnosing this symptom as sexism—to Smith’s engagements in black feminist organizing, and particularly her appointment to the board of the National Coalition of Black Lesbian and Gays (NCBLG); here an account of her grass-roots organizing exists in lieu of any frank discussion of her lesbian relationships. While Smith openly discusses her heterosexual relationships her relationships with women fall by the way side, submerged under a political discourse about blackness, an “inestimable bond.” To be clear, Smith does propose that racism is single most oppressive issue facing all black lesbian women, but, she asserts, “it’s the most pervasive and dangerous oppression in *my* life.”⁵³ Such positioning suggest that Smith subsumes a personal interrogation of her lesbian sexual politics in favor of a discourse about race.

Speaking to an audience gathered at Harvard University to celebrate the life and visions of Malcolm X during the university’s annual Malcolm X Weekend in February 1982, black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde speaks of the 1960s as “vital years of awakening,” “of pride, and of error,” of “promise and excitement,” and a time of “great hope and expectation.” Lorde identifies herself as an inheritor of the movement via Malcolm X’s political-activist tradition, noting especially that “in the last years of his life, Malcolm X added a breath to his essential vision that would have brought him, had

⁵² Ibid., 163.

⁵³ Ibid., 163. Emphasis in the original.

he lived, into inevitable confrontation with the question of difference as a creative and necessary force of change.” The irony inherent in Lorde’s formulations concerns a now-past and negated future of Malcolm’s life—that he, like a number of black male activists of the era, feared difference and espoused a narrow, limiting blackness: “As a people we were reluctant to tolerate any diversion from what was externally defined as Blackness. In the 60s, political correctness became not a guideline for living, but a new set of shackles.” Lorde does not delineate any meaning to blackness nor does she give shape to these shackles. Instead, she implies that hetero-normativity was limiting, fearful of difference, and always served to authenticate blackness: “Black lesbian and gay people were not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black America.” Thus, the move to liberation for lesbian and gay folks who came of age during these times, much like Barbara Smith did, was “infinitely complex” and involved a two part process: to first acknowledge forebears and then to apply the lessons of the movement throughout the process of self-making and political awakening to their own activist agendas.

Lorde’s insights about the sixties and its close proximity to Smith’s own work in “Working for Liberation”—her essay was published four years prior to Smith’s publication in *The New York Native*—effectively model the degree of homophobia and the anxiety of inclusion that shaped the movement’s political era well into later decades. The complexity that Lorde references signals a strategic negotiation for lesbian or queer activists whom, I imagine, wished to participate in and (re) shape the discourse of black liberation, yet had to carefully consider a number of issues: how to publicly embody their race and sexual identity and how to politicize them with equal political might. Although a few decades removed from the hey-day of civil rights activism, Smith reconciles her

relationship to black liberation discourse by presenting a particular—dare I say respectable—notion of sexuality in an effort to not associate lesbian (and gay) desire with pathology nor “radical feminism.” Throughout her writings, and particularly throughout “Working for liberation,” she relies on the term “political,” rhetorically, ideologically, and methodologically as a tool for self-fashioning. As a category of self-making, the political allows Smith to attach herself to an embodiment of black female lesbian identity not mired by a “life-style.” That is, for a “political lesbian,” sexual desire, at least within the context of blackness, does not constitute her public identity. Reflecting on her appointment to NCBLG later in the essay, Smith writes:

My appointment to the board of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) last year has given me the opportunity to work with and to know many more of my brothers and the experiences has been for the most part wonderful. Of course, I am blessed to be in contact with highly progressive and aware Black gay men who have chosen to define their situation politically *and not merely as a lifestyle*...If there is one thing that most impresses me about our interactions, it is how much kindness there is between us. Perhaps because sexual and romantic agendas are suspended, we can all just relax and treat each other like folks. I often imagine what our heterosexual sisters and brother might think if they could see us, supposed man- and woman-haters, steadily working for liberation, and having a damn good time (emphasis added).⁵⁴

There are two parallel currents weaved throughout the essay that reflect Smith’s self-making and politics of black lesbian and gay visibility. On the one hand, the relationships that Smith appreciates and establishes with other black gay men are particular—those that are political; relationships with black gay men who are respectable and do not perpetuate the gay “life-style.” Not defining this life-style as one thing or the other, Smith relies on assumptions about gay life at the time: men who flaunt and excessively display their sexuality in ways that signify on and recall the campy, queer, sissy boy. These black

⁵⁴ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 164.

gay men and, by proxy, the black lesbians on the board, suspend their “sexual agendas,” decentralizing and downplaying any erotic politics associated with public modes of sexual identity. The second current concerns the perception (and thus reception) of what amounts to black gay men and lesbian women engaged in civil interactions. These interactions would challenge, Smith suggests, the social stigma and myths of homosexuality at the time: black gays and lesbians are not all about sleeping with each other or white men; they are not concerned with being race traitors. Instead, black lesbians work from the context of home, of politicized and respectable blackness. This, given the times, represents cause for celebration, for after all, they are practicing a form of black love. “During Black History Month 1986,” Smith writes, “Black lesbians and gay men have something special to celebrate: the growing, cohesiveness and vitality of our movement, coupled with our growing love and respect for each other. We are,” Smith concludes, “definitely progressing.”⁵⁵

One of the major conclusions that Smith draws from the 1960s is that liberation exists at the intersections between grass-roots organizing, ordinary people, and love. She writes: “One of the most important things that I learned was that actual power lies in the hands of ‘ordinary people,’ who come together and challenge authority and to make a difference.” A range of black women activists are invoked in Smith’s formulation: Ella Baker and her “bottom-up politics”; Fannie Lou Hammer, whom she met at a basement party in Cleveland in 1965; Audre Lorde, with whom she co-founded Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, as well as Pat Parker, who was one of few out political lesbian poets during her times. Smith constructs and measures this progress by shoring up the lives of other black lesbians, naming their contributions as shaping her own. Her own

⁵⁵ Ibid., 165.

personal relationship to progressive love and politics are not represented in a respectable cast. Yet, the personal constitutes a critical concern in the Combahee River Collective Statement written in 1977; a document drafted by a small group of women, including Smith. In unison they state: “Because of where I have come from, I find it difficult to accept that many Black lesbians who are so multiply oppressed are not involved in organizing on behalf of their own liberation during this period.” What serves as Smith’s own, personal liberation in relationship to progressive love as a lesbian? Let us turn to home, that space she leaves as she explores her sexuality. That space that is blackness, where she, like Janie Crawford, returns home with a meaningful sense of love.

“And If I Do Not So Desire”: On Barbara Smith’s Home Love, Part I

“I learned some important lessons about struggles at home, for which I am eternally grateful,” Smith concludes in her essay, “Doing it From Scratch.” These lessons are presented in her political writings as well as her lesser-known, creative writings, “Home” and “The Dance of Masks,” published respectively in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* and *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* edited by Joan Nestle in the early 1990s. In the introduction to *Home Girls*, Smith contextualizes the conflict and hope that reverberates throughout these short stories. Smith writes:

I learned about Black feminism from the women in my family—not just from their strengths, but from their failings, from witnessing daily how they were humiliated and crushed because they had the “mistake” of being born Black and female in a white man’s country. I inherited fear and shame from them as well as hope. These conflicting feelings about being a Black woman still do battle inside

of me. It is this conflict, my constantly “...seeing and touching/ Both sides of things” that make my commitment real.”⁵⁶

Not only do “Home” and “The Dance of Masks” revivify Smith’s commitment to the struggle, as short stories they collectively provide Smith a creative approach to confront her personal struggles at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, theory and practice, learned ideology and intellectual challenge—which are, indeed, boundaries constituting “both sides of things” that Smith navigates. In “Home,” Smith unleashes the shame and fear she internalized in her political writing as a Black lesbian. Whereas her political work elides her erotic life, Smith deploys love and eros strategically to promulgate a political statement about “home.” Conceptualizing home girls literally as “the girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with,” Smith opens the doors to these homes and allows her readers to peer inside as they imagine domestic possibilities for black lesbian women.⁵⁷

Despite being semi-autobiographical, “Home” subverts an analysis of the industrial city undergoing gentrification and hones in on the possibilities of home for two black lesbians who must survive against the danger-zones associated with heteronormative public urbanity. “I can’t sleep. I am sitting at an open window, staring at the dark sky and the barely visible nighttime gardens. Three days ago, we came here to clean and paint this apartment in the new city we’re moving to.”⁵⁸ Although Smith never names this “new city,” she subtly deploys a poetics of migration as a framework that announces the failures of urbanity. In other words, the promises and appeal of constructing the

⁵⁶ Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), xxiv.

⁵⁷ Barbara Smith, “Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement” in Beverley Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire*.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Home Girls*, 64.

domestic in the new city does not guarantee lesbian promise—the seduction of moving away from home has its physical and psychic costs, which Smith illustrates in her inability to sleep. This cost also manifests as a compulsion to regularly peer from the window, possibly in search of her “mother’s gardens.” Thus, harnessing the power of the window as an iconic symbol in African American literature, Smith announces traditional domestic spaces as stuffy, stale, and impossible.⁵⁹ Permitting fresh air to relieve the room of its anxiety-inducing stench represents more than a rhetorical gesture: it foreshadows Smith’s latter move to infuse the room with the sweetness of lesbian eroticism.

After introducing both the importance of the city and migration as spatial and historic tropes in the black imaginary, Smith sets out to introduce another classic political trope—dreaming—which has function as a way for African Americans to mentally survive regimes of economic destruction established against black progress.⁶⁰ Throughout the story Smith wakes in and out of dreams, imagining throughout their (un)conscious states ways that her family, and particularly her Aunt La Rue, might receive both her lesbian identity and her partner, Leila. In short, dreams allow Smith a portal to imagine the practice of love in black communities, and especially love between women and love between families.

Smith first imagines lesbian love within normative domestic spaces. As she and Leila labor to “set thine house in order,” they lip-synch to a radio station that plays

⁵⁹ There are many windows, porches, and doorways throughout African American literature. Here though, Smith signifies on Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, where peering out of a window in the novel’s opening scene, the central character reflects on his past to understand his present dilemma.

⁶⁰ Darieck Scott’s assessment of neo-slave narratives, and particularly Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is a recent scholarly treatment of the psychic space of African Americans. See *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York University Press, 2010).

“swing music.” Playing on the erotic possibilities of “swing culture,” Smith then imagines the year 1945 and the end of World War II as an era where lesbians both participated in the war and, along with scores of others, returned to the U.S. to build homes in the name of nationhood. Leila laughs at Smith’s post-war lesbian fantasy, stating “You’re crazy. You can bet who ever lived here in 1945 wasn’t colored and two women either.” Smith then responds with a rather lengthy elocution in defense of lesbians’ historical presence. She favors family-lore over and against historians who privilege institutionalized historical accounts of the boom in gay culture during and post this nation's historic war.⁶¹ In reply to Leila’s jocular incredulity, Smith asks: “How do you know? Maybe they got together when their husbands went overseas and then decided they didn’t need the boys after all. My aunt was always telling me about living with this friend of hers, Garnet, during the War and how much fun they had and how she was so gorgeous.” Leila then concedes, admitting that her mother teased her about “her girlfriends this and her girlfriends that. I think they’re all closet cases,” she concludes.

Coming out was central to Smith’s lesbian politics. However, as a lesbian-identified feminist, Smith rarely interrogates what constitutes the links between sexuality and love. In “Home,” Smith clues her reader to what might explain this lack of a personal black lesbian feminist love politic, which she suggests functions generationally. Trying to imagine the relationship between her mother, who died while she was still very young, and her Aunt La Rue—who had died by the time of the vignette—Smith attempts to retrieve a model showcasing the practice of love between black women. She writes:

⁶¹ She both anticipates and critiques John D’ Emilio’s essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” In this essay D’ Emilio imagines that the post-War economic boom in America allowed the formation of gay male sexual economies. The narrative does not claim such for lesbians in general and black lesbians in particular.

I wonder what they were to each other, specifically. What their voices might have sounded like as I played in the next room. *I know they loved each other, seemed like friends, but I don't have the details.* I could feel my aunt missing my mother all through my childhood. I remember the way her voice sounded whenever she said her name. Sometimes I'd do something that reminded her of my mother and she would laugh, remember a story, and say I was just like Hilda [my mother]. She never pretended that she didn't miss her. I guess a lot of how they loved each other, my aunt gave to me (emphasis added).⁶²

Smith's tensions between the voice and the voiceless, and between the imagination (i.e. theorizing) and practice, all bespeak her personal concerns about love in black communities and love between women who call these communities home. Bringing the reader's attention to the issues of lesbian love in black communities, Smith writes: "I wish Leila and I could go there, home. That I could make the reality of my life and where I came from touch." Smith does her best to make these boundaries touch. She imagines taking Leila to her childhood home where she would meet her Aunt La Rue. Their meeting would spark a convivial celebration after Aunt La Rue embraces Smith's sexuality and relationship with Leila. "Ella Baker would sing in the background," Smith imagines and, after dinner and a walk through her old neighborhood, her Aunt La Rue would speak intimately of Leila's likeness. "You're friend's so nice and down to earth. She's like one of us." The assertion of Aunt La Rue's statement emerges at a pivotal moment in the narrative: a moment where Smith's conflicts, and the boundaries manifesting this conflict, battle uproariously. As Smith begins to accept the normative logics of lesbian respectability, she at last throws respectability politics out of the window that she peers from early in the vignette. After Aunt La Rue remarks upon Leila's likeness, Smith writes: "It was like that. With her it can be like family. Until I knew her, I

⁶² Smith, *Home Girls*, 66-67.

thought it wasn't possible to have that with another woman, at least not for me. But I think we were raised the same way. *To be decent, respectful girls*. They taught us to work. And to rebel”(emphasis added). Here, Smith does not explicitly name the ‘they’ she references in her formulations, which, I believe is deliberate. This move, this play on rhetoric, this use of an abstract, generalizing, and categorizing pronoun, allows her to honor then critique her parents and the “parent movement.” She honors the tradition not by “calling it out,” per se, but by naming the relationship between decency and respectability as up-lift politics that for years has sought to shame her sexuality. Where Aunt La Rue may have interrupted what could have been an erotic moment between Smith and Leila—assuming that they were in the same room—Smith later rebels. Smith marks this rebellion in two interrelated ways. First, by literally waking up out of “the dream”—an obvious critique to the beloved community conceit made indelible by Martin Luther King— and second, by painting the story with lesbian erotics. Because Smith felt that she and Leila had to, by the end of the narrative, “live in a house like people, and not just camp,” she makes an unprecedented move and gets personal:

Tonight we made love here for the first time. It was almost midnight when we stopped working, showered, and fell aching into the makeshift bed. When I started to give Leila a single kiss, her mouth caught mine and held me there. Desire surprised me, but then I realized how much everything in me wanted touch. Sometimes our bodies follow each other without will, with no thought of how I'll put my hand here, my mouth there. Tonight there was no strategy, just need and having.⁶³

Strategy: where Smith does not write about Janie Crawford's kiss, she writes about her own. Whereas Janie's labor represents as an unfinished erotic practice, Smith completes a

⁶³ Smith, *Home Girls*, 69.

day's labor by making love with her partner. The touch desired by Smith is a conceit for a meeting of home and eros that welcomes her completely as a black lesbian.

How might a “child” of the civil rights movement, who has inherited a particular history of black liberation, practice her life as a black lesbian feminist? Smith’s writing reveals the tension between the strategy to honor tradition and fold her political ideologies into her personal life. Smith’s political essays advocate a love politic for the black community, yet glosses over the erotic politics of the personal. Her short story “Home” brings the two—erotics and politics—together.. To conclude the story, she writes: “I have been afraid. Afraid of need, of loving someone who can leave. The fear makes me silent, then gradually it closes my heart.”⁶⁴ Smith associates the loss of her mother, and scores of other women in her family, with her reluctance to articulate to erotic love publicly. While she admits that “it can take days to get beneath whatever haunts me”—chiefly, a fear associated with the danger of lesbian sexuality—love does not terrify her. Instead, she seems to fear the implication of asserting lesbian erotics within the black home, and what that might mean for the history of both the black community and a beloved feminist community.

The Dance of Masks: Barbara Smith’s Home Love, Part II

“Tonight I feel hot. I don’t mean that I feel randy, horny, whatever your euphemism is. I mean, I feel more than sexual; I feel powerful; my whole body is sizzling with something that feels outside and beyond me and yet at the same time has its beginnings in me,” Smith boldly declares in the first line of her short story, “The Dance of Masks.” Smith brings us to the body, explicitly addressing the “wholes of black female

⁶⁴ Ibid.

sexuality” and a knowing felt in her “cunt,” not her gut, “that something’s going to happen.”⁶⁵ With the extra money not consumed by bills, Smith buys “new clothes, of course” and gets a “hair-cut” resembling her dad’s: “short and back on the sides...really short, so short that no one will be able to resist running her hands over my hair, against the direction of growth.”⁶⁶ Although the short story critiques lesbian sexual communities for its unbridled obsession with identity categories such as butch-femme, it also works to name Smith’s rebellion against everything circumscribing her race, gender, and sexual expressions. Smith’s masks indicate that she has not always represented “the truth.” She fears that the truth might surface at the wrong time—a time when one might expect her to be the unstoppable and indefatigable black lesbian feminist shero. She writes:

How long can I act the cool butch? How long can I stand there looking mean and moody or bored or uninterested when my heart is racing with anticipation? How long can I pretend to them that it doesn’t matter, easy come, easy go? How long can I keep it going before I run out of steam and they realize I’m lonely and shy and embarrassed. You can see through me if you want, but be gentle with what’s underneath. In these situations I have only a patina of power, lying along the surface of my skin.⁶⁷

Smith’s refrain, “how long, how long,” remixes a canonical civil rights speech by Martin Luther King Jr, mingling together the possibilities of racial freedom with sexual freedom. Anticipating Belinda Robnettes’s *How Long? How Long? African American Women and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Smith, “with her cunt on a lead again,” presents vulnerability as a site of “woman’s power.” With this short story, Smith reveals that her public persona as a super black lesbian butch race woman overshadows a lesser-known truth about herself—a vulnerable sensitivity. While, her public exterior and private

⁶⁵ Smith, “The Dance of Masks” in Joan Nestle, ed., *Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 426.

⁶⁶ Smith, “The Dance of Masks,” 427.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 428.

interior seem to be in conflict. Yet, she wants readers to accept this contradiction as a source of power. “The meaning of contradiction,” she writes, “is not a flat negation of mutually exclusive opposites, but the energizing of molecules oscillating constantly from one extreme to the other, always in flux.” Just as her blackness provides her political pleasure, the touch of lesbian women in private and public spaces—such as the bar serving as the backdrop to the story—excites her, as well. As does lesbian love:

I danced my blatant butch’s dance for a femme once, who thought I was powerful in that angular way, but who could take me in the palm of one hand like a precious talisman and *excite me to power by simply touching me*. She could hold me like that in a doorway, in midsentence, neither in or out, neither touching or untouching. She could suspend my movement and move me to the core of my being. She could stop my breath, my heart, and in that instant of timelessness, I would die a thousand deaths, held in suspended animation, in the thrall of her femme’s powerful contradiction, and my cunt would ooz its admiration. (emphasis added)⁶⁸

Lesbian love—sex and touching—gives Smith power. Furthermore, the touch of lesbian love functions powerfully in both private and public spaces—rather speaking erotically in the private, or, it seems, politically in the public; “neither in or out,” she says.

Smith’s “The Dance of Masks” ultimately reinforces the power and freedom of choice. “In my fantasy, I can do anything and everything,” she writes, yearning for a time when “revolution” means allowing her to freely express herself as a black lesbian feminist; where she can use erotic politics as transformative discourse in the name of black liberation. Indeed, “The Dance of Masks” challenges notions of what historically accounts for the political in Black political thought. Speaking to the regime of tradition marking liberation—Black, feminist, gay—Smith asks: “Why can’t I be anything and everything just because I want it and it pleases me?” The freedom of desire and a

⁶⁸ Ibid., 429.

desirable freedom with and without tradition, racial and sexual, are all, by the story's end, Smith's persistent personal desires—her rights to life and love. These desires, however, prove to be little more than a fantasy.

A Rose

Collectively, Smith's projects in "Home" and "The Dance of Masks" imagine the unresolved struggles between racial and sexual freedom. In each, she announces the critical imperative for rethinking the links between black sexual politics and the racial logics of freedom. To be at home, or in a bar, and remain within the black liberation tradition requires a negotiation that, from Smith, remains ongoing. Throughout *Truth That Never Hurts*, Smith maintains that a resolve toward a black feminist love ethic answers the ever-looming question: "Where's the Revolution?" The revolution, I have tried to demonstrate, hinges on both the personal and political. Smith's status as black feminist icon, legendary black feminist, and other valorizations can obscure, however, her personal struggles with living privately, imaginatively, and politically as a black lesbian feminist within the civil rights and black feminist movements. Overshadowing her political legibility exists a vulnerability, a fear, and a struggle that coalesces in her writings as erotic elision: a residual of the black liberation politics and a "crack in the feminist mirror" both made legible through her biographical, political, and creative writings.⁶⁹ When hailing the political as a category for analytical assertion limits her work, she tries her luck with sexual politics and love, and finds that privileging either of these categories over the other categorically undermines her black feminist liberation

⁶⁹ Jill C. Humfrey, "Cracks in the Feminist Mirror?" Research and Reflections on Lesbians and Gay Men Working Together in *Feminist Review*, No. 66, Political Currents (Autumn, 2000), 95-130.

project. Teasing out the opposition between racial, erotic and sexual discourse animating her political and literary projects, however, does not diminish the great life of this legend. They make her whole and remind readers of the actual stakes involved when a black lesbian refuses a negotiation *between* “personal and political.” No matter how grand the struggle, Smith survives with love—she is alive and well, still working for liberation and having a damn good time. Yep: she still lives-n-loves for the revolution way up there in the plains of up-state New York.

Chapter 3
“A Young Black Poet with Fire in Her Eyes”
Pat Parker’s Biography of Justice

Like Audre Lorde, Pat Parker was out there with her black body being a dyke poet, rapping on violence, black folks’ ways, political repression, and quotidian late twentieth century madness.

--Cheryl Clarke, “Pat Parker as Queer Trickster”

That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance. Law too often seeks to avoid this truth by making up its own breed of narrower, simpler, but hypnotically powerful rhetorical truths. Acknowledging, challenging, playing with these as rhetorical gestures is, it seems to me, necessary for any concept of justice.

--Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

I am the Black woman
I am the child of the sun
the daughter of dark
I carry fire to burn the world
I am water to quench its throat
I am the product of slaves
I am the off spring of queens
I am silence
I flow as the stream

--Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*

In her most celebrated poem to-date, indeed her *magnum opus* “Movement in Black,” the black lesbian feminist Pat Parker critiques otherwise heroic male-centered social, political, and cultural narratives of African American life and history. Moving against the casual trend that locates black men as the central leaders—and “singular war hero”—responsible for the emancipation of Africans in America, Parker revises this

narrative in this five-part epic.¹ In so doing, she suggests that at every pivotal shift in the making of black modernity in the U.S., black women were also principle catalysts. When colonists “came in ships from a distant land” to chain and stockpile stolen Africans in tightly cramped vessels and package them as commodity goods to be auctioned-off in the Americas, newly enslaved black women performed acts of resistance, too. Throughout voyages across the Atlantic, they “chose to die” by jumping “overboard.” Part one of “Movement in Black” functions as a counter-narrative to antebellum fictions that cast and thus limit the social roles of black women to the black female domestic or Negro field hand. Parker dares to imagine black women as something much more.

I am the Black woman
& I have been all over
when the colonist
fought the British
I was there
I aided the colonist
I aided the British
I carried notes
stole secrets
guided the men
& nobody thought
to bother me
I was just a
Black woman²

¹ Here, I am extending Evie Shockley’s formulations regarding the epic genre and its participants. While I agree with Shockley that the epic genre is “historically constructed as a highly masculine form and one not regularly undertaken by African American poets of either gender,” I worry that she only identifies this form in three poems by black women: Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Anniad” (1949) Sonia Sanchez’s *Does Your House Have Lions* (1997), and Harryette Mullen’s “Muse & Drudge” (1995). Given that she defines epic poems as “long poems,” then most certainly Parker’s “Goat Child” and “Movement in Black”—along with June Jordan’s “Who Look At Me?”—all qualify as epic poems. Shockley does not examine black lesbian, bisexual, or queer poets which results in missed opportunities to examine either Parker’s or Jordan’s epic poems. See *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2011).

² Pat Parker, *An Expanded Edition of Movement in Black* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1999), 120.

Evoking the searing spirit of Mari Evans's poem "I Am A Black Woman," the fiery voice of Audre Lorde's "A Woman Speaks," and the groundbreaking collection of black women's writings edited by Toni Cade Bambara titled, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Parker's poem participates in—as does her poetry writ large—what began in the late 1960s as a new literary tradition of "re-calling the black woman."³ Political in its leanings, this black feminist tradition sought to address the historical contributions of black women while poeticizing their material and lived experiences.⁴

Like the black woman in Lorde's "A Woman Speaks," Parker's black woman "is treacherous with old magic/ and the noon's new fury."⁵ Her actions suggest that she, unlike the black woman imagined in Mari Evans's "I Am A Black Woman," is not passive; and neither does she mourn the loss of her mate or companion. In Evans's poem, the black woman witnesses her mate "leap screaming to the sea."⁶ Whereas Evans's black woman suffers "sweet arpeggios of tears/ written in a minor key," Parker's black woman sacrifices her own life for the good of others. She, not "Nat's swinging body," leaps over board; she too, not only a lone "son's scream all the way from Anzio/ for Peace he never knew," engages in wartime public discussions of freedom. Parker writes:

I am the Black woman
& I have been all over

³ Mari Evans's poem, "I Am A Black Woman," along with a picture of her gazing back at her reader's gaze, graces the front page of the September 1969 "Annual Poetry Issue" of the black literary journal, *Negro Digest*. Evans was the first woman ever to land on the journal's cover, marking a shift in the face and gender of black poetry and its notion of the "black aesthetic."

For further context and understanding of the reference "re-calling the black women," please see Eleanor Taylor's moving tribute to Toni Cade Bambara in the 2007 edition of *The Black Woman*. Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1970). See Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), "A Woman Speaks," 234.

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

⁵ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), "A Woman Speaks," 234.

⁶ *Negro Digest*, September 1969. Microfilm, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan

up on platforms & stages
talking about freedom
freedom for black folks
freedom for women
in the Civil War too
carrying messages
bandaging bodies
spying & lying
the south lost
& I still lost
but I was there
& I kept on moving.

With a “Movement in Black” Parker spotlights the links between black women’s dynamic labors and those who have whom historically benefited from this otherwise “free” labor. Deploying wartime imagery, Parker depicts black women as soldiers—“yeah/ the Black soldiers/ had women, too” she muses—and as nurses that attended to the health of her fellow soldiers. We see black women also engaging in the even-riskier business of carrying notes and “stealing secrets”—with “treacherous magic”—that collectively guided the male soldiers into their “wide futures.”⁷ This antebellum black woman “hailed freight & carried mail/ drank plenty of whiskey/ shot a few men too”; and, she “settled the land/ & raised crops & children.” In the post-War years—both World Wars and the Civil War—and throughout the modern Civil Rights movement, the black woman “went north,” “went down home,” was the “teacher/ in the all-Black school,” worked as the “social worker/ in the city ghetto” and was also, “the woman who/ raised white babies &/ taught my kids to raise themselves.” Yet, due to both her race and gender, the black woman—in spite of her efforts—remains absent in U.S. narratives of war, progress, and justice: “books don’t say much/ about what I did/ but I was there/ &

⁷ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 234.

I kept moving.” Indeed, “nobody” writes Parker, “thought to bother me/ I was just a Black woman.”

Historical erasure—or blatant amnesia—seems to motivate the intentions of this poem. For Parker, historical erasure compels, like scores of her contemporaries, a disruptive and feminist revision of the historical record. Although she employs a highly imaginative and figurative black woman persona in the poem, Parker’s feminist revision must be valued as a work of historical justice. In the poem, the work of justice disrupts the fictive and otherwise phallogocentric heroism that accompanies U.S. narratives of progress. Given the particular ways that black women are both recovered in these narratives and are accurately credited for their activism in the march towards equality and U.S. independence we must see “Movement in Black” as a poem concerned with restorative justice. The poem’s narrative arc illustrates this restorative justice. As the poem moves from the past to the present, its personae—this imagined black woman—shifts from a figurative to a literal subject, a shift that parallels the poem’s move from speculative fiction to historical truth; and, historical truth is the hallmark of Parker’s biography of justice.

The work of restorative justice manifests in “Movement in Black” at the very moment that Parker articulates black women’s organizational affiliations and righteously utters their names. A figurative black woman was “on the bus with Rosa Parks/ & in the streets with Martin King, “singing, crying, and praying” with the slain civil rights leader, in fact. The Black woman “was with SNCC,” CORE, in Watts “when the streets were burning,” and worked as a Panther in Oakland. She, the Black woman, was in “New York with NOW/ in San Francisco/ with gay liberation in D.C./with the radical dykes.” The

literal Black woman appears in a “roll call” of names where Parker “shout em out”:
Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,
Stagecoach Mary, Lucy Prince, Mary Pleasant, Marcy McLeod Bethune, Rosa Parks,
Coretta King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Marion Anderson, “& Billies/ & Bessies/ sweet Dinah,
A-re-tha/ Natalie,” Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Patricia Harris, Angela Davis, Flo
Kennedy, Zora Neale Hurston, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Edmonia
Lewis, “and me/ and me/ and me/ and me/ and me/ & all the names we forget to say/ &
all the names we don’t know/ & all the names we don’t know yet.”⁸

I call attention to Parker’s “Movement in Black” because it exemplifies the generative nature of her work. In no particular order “Movement in Back” records and re-records history; it functions as a work of art that simultaneously deploys Black Arts vernacularism and black feminism and sees them as co-constituted cultural and political aesthetics; and, it attends to a praxis of justice as a continued struggle for Black Americans writ large and black women in particular. Although succinct in its formulation, Parker’s quip that black women “kept moving” across liberation struggles from slavery to freedom works against narratives of civil rights and literary declension—which I referred to in the introduction of this project as a rhetorical and historiographic oversight that bookends black liberation struggles to the early 1970s. Uttering the names of legendary black women in a “roll call” exemplifies a commonly used Black Arts aesthetic. Margo V. Perkins reminds us that the roll call represents a “convention of the oral tradition that recalls the names of other freedom fighters.” Black writers, particularly those who came of age throughout the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, deploy the roll call “first and foremost as a gesture of giving names to the nameless and of

⁸Parker, *An Expanded Edition of Movement in Black*, 119-126.

resisting America's propensity for historical erasure or forced forgetting."⁹ In the context of this particular poem, naming imbues "Movement in Black" with a degree of biographic realness—signifying on biographies of actual black women cultural workers and political activists. Throughout the poem the black woman personae—figurative, literal, and as the "product of slaves"—perform multiple duties across time, throughout multiple decades, and in the name of justice. Restorative justice does not allow us to forget black women's political, intellectual, and cultural herstories.

There is, unfortunately, a tragicomic surrealness to Parker's otherwise festive oration of re-calling the black woman. "Movement in Black" literally represents Parker's own intellectual and physical labors—the remembering and writing of black women's herstories. However, and quite eerily, Parker fears her own historical erasure; indeed, she fears that her labors will be, and up to that moment have been, ignored. We see this when Parker devotes five single lines to: "and me/ and me/ and me/ and me/ and me." How are we to make sense of Parker's rhetorical choices here, indeed her self-referential anaphora? Why does Parker forcefully insist that readers remember her? Although there is no single or easy answer to these questions, they set into motion the central thrust of this chapter: to, on the one hand, explore and remember the life of Pat Parker—which, the poem suggests, she envisioned as being erased and forgotten by a larger reading public. Whether intended or not, Parker's own self-effacement—choosing "me" instead of her name—begs the question, "who was *Pat Parker*?"

On the other hand, questions regarding Parker's self-referential "me," fragmented as it is by line breaks, represent pieces of a whole that allegorically speaks to and beyond

⁹ Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography As Activism: Three Black Women of The Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 11.

her own life. I want to suggest here that these fragments of “me” represent the many pieces of her life as they are situated historically and what was then her present life. Given her multiple identities and their influences on her work, we can understand at least three of these fragments as constitutive of her race, gender, and sexuality. That Parker was both a poet-activist and a mother we can substitute these for the remaining fragments. Nevertheless, as we read each successive “me” its ephemeral nature glows with exigency: each “me” becomes a past that anticipates a future just as assuredly as the final utterance of “me” forces readers to linger on, and contend, with the present—suggesting names yet known and unknown that harrowingly conclude the roll call. Parker does not let go of this past and uses it to anchor the present and future. As a black lesbian poet and mother then Parker plays not just with the politics of feminist historical revisionism but also possibility of re-imagining the future, squarely placing women-identified women at the center of the poem’s narrative revision of justice in the U.S. We are moving toward understanding the elements of Parker’s biography of justice, which on the one hand is restorative while on the other hand it functions a hermeneutics that attends to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality.

Given that “Movement in Black” is an epic poem written by a black lesbian poet who imagines women at the center of history, it is not surprising that Parker rewrites the erotic and political of women at its center. We can contrast Parker’s figuration of the Black Woman with the one presented in Mari Evans’s “I Am A Black Woman.” Although an important figure in the Black Arts Movement, Evans recapitulates heteronormative gender relations that cast a black woman as “tall as a cypress/ strong/ beyond

all definition” only in the tragic aftermath of a sacrifice or death of a black male leader.¹⁰ Resistance to oppression, and not the sacrifice or loss of an otherwise charismatic male leader, compels Parker’s black woman into action.¹¹ But whom did Parker’s black woman leave behind? As Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley reminds us in her trenchant queer disruption of Trans-Atlantic slave studies, “African women,” like African men, “created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds” of Trans-Atlantic slave ships.¹² Although no evidence explicitly suggests that this enslaved African woman hero was woman identified—or *mati*—Parker’s speculative gestures suggest otherwise.¹³ “All slaves weren’t treacherous” she writes, “but those who were/ were more than a few.”¹⁴ By narrating treachery as a heroic act Parker subtly signifies on a key trope of Black literary studies: masculinity. Indeed, throughout political discourse of blackness in Black Arts Nationalism, “treachery” circulated as term often used by black male poets. Black Arts poets deployed treachery as a signifier to pejoratively describe their opposition to black feminists and black gay men, whom they often considered to be “traitors to the race.” Black male patriarchs vilified black women for supposedly exposing issues between black men and black women and thus “emasculating” black men publicly for all white men and women to see. Black gay men were treacherous for “sleeping with the enemy,” or white men. In the context of the poem, Parker subtly reclaims treachery for its historic power and early life within enslaved communities with the hopes, we can only

¹⁰ Cheryl Clarke Critique of black women writers as perpetuating heteronormative black gender relations

¹¹ For more on charismatic leadership as gendered narrative regime, see Eric R. Edwards, *Charisma and The Fictions of Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012)

¹² Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of The Middle Passage” in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* (2008), Vol. 14, Issue 2-3, 191-215.

¹³ For more on *mati*, see Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Parker, *Movement in Black*, 120.

surmise, of resisting the stigma associated with it and homosexuality in black communities.¹⁵ Treachery was not always a bad thing, the poem implies.

In spite of their differences, however, both Evans and Parker share the belief that the black woman “defy place/ and time/ and circumstance,” and that the synergies of her efforts—“assailed/ impervious/ indestructible”—are critical to black liberation, where black communities, Evans closes, “Look/ on me and be/ renewed.”¹⁶ Evans’s formulations return us then back to Parker’s superfluous, albeit five-line fragmented, “me.” Throughout “Movement in Black,” Parker’s personal subjectivity—“me”—disrupts heteronormative narratives of Black history and simultaneously works as a rhetorical gateway through which she carves, enters, and re-claims herself as a descendant and authoress of a distinct black feminist lineage and herstory. Attending to the erasure of black women—and possibly to an enslaved woman-identified-woman—and anticipating her own historical erasure, Parker re-calls the black woman and raises this question: how are we to imagine and articulate justice through the lived experiences of the black *lesbian* woman? How has the black lesbian woman moved in black?

¹⁵ Any number of anthologies centered on black feminist thought and literature or black gay male writings published in years following the 1970s bear witness to thunderous attacks by heterosexual black men that cast black women and black gay men as traitors to the race. Chief among them are *The Black Woman*, *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, and *Brother-To-Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara, Joseph Beam, and Essex Hemphill, respectively. Black men, for example, collectively despised Alice Walker’s film adaption of her Pulitzer winning novel, *The Color Purple*. The same generation of men also categorically eschewed Ntozake Shange’s choereopoem *For Color Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuff*. Both Walker and Shange were publicly condemned for supposedly emasculating black men and “airing” black men’s dirty laundry—and particularly their violence toward women. In the chapters on black gay male writers I more clearly discuss how writers like Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill responded to the social and culture regime endemic to a Black Arts/ Black Power masculinity that was fiercely upheld by polemical figures such as Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver.

¹⁶ *Negro Digest*

Using Parker's epic poem "Movement in Black" as a critical guide, I consider themes of historical erasure, biography, and justice as interlocking frameworks through which to situate her answers to these questions, and her contributions to liberation struggles in late twentieth century America. A key figure to emerge on the scene of black lesbian feminism throughout the 1970s Parker was considered by most to be the first openly black lesbian poet to publicly perform her work in the United States *as a black lesbian*. Unfortunately, critics have paid little attention to her life of activism, even as they have conferred a celebrity status on Parker's close friend, Audre Lorde. Lorde's voice, bravery, and legacy cannot be understated. However, the spotlight on her vaunted status overwhelmingly casts many of her contemporaries in the shadow. Parker must have been attuned to this obscurity, as "Movement in Black" offers a provocative poetics that excavates black women's herstory even as it draws from Parker's own biography and anticipates her own erasure.

Like many women of color feminists during her times, Parker drew from her personal experiences to guide her activism; her writing was both personal and political. In an attempt to provide a more nuanced reading of this oft-cited feminist credo—in ways that point us to more concrete and material elaboration of how the two concepts work in tandem—I offer forth a *biography of justice* as a framework to attend to (and excavate) Parker's life activism. On the one hand, a biography of justice allows me to do the more literal work of "doing justice" to Parker's biography—which in current scholarship mirrors the fragmentation of the 'me' in "Movement in Black." On the other hand, this framework allows me to hone in more closely on how Parker's poetry confronts and critiques a dominant conception of justice, especially given the juridical and otherwise

constitutional implications of citizenship and human rights inherent to this concept in a U.S. context. Furthermore, a focus on the work of justice highlights how Parker used poetry to critique historical erasure. Parker's poetry archived lived experiences, giving her reader, as with "Movement in Black," a people's view of the times. Through poetry, Parker preserved this history with a passionate eye concerned with the humanity of black folks, women, and working class queers. For Parker, "poetry was not a luxury," but a tool for historical preservation that butts against normative and exclusionary accounts of liberation struggles in Black America. Thus, a biography of justice offers a conceptual framework from which we might recover Parker's life *and* as a reading method to interpret and situate her literary and feminist activism across the histories of liberation discourses across social movements in late twentieth century America.

For Parker, justice enabled her to see and value the connections between her own life as a working class black lesbian feminist mother and healthcare advocate and the lives of those who collectively encompassed the socially marginalized: women of color and working class gay and lesbian communities, both of whom were overwhelmingly subjected to physical and ideological violence, governmental neglect, and political disenfranchisement throughout the conservative backlash of the Reagan/ Bush years.¹⁷ At the root of Parker's biography of justice lay a poetics of passion, care, and, love. Indeed, attending to a biography of justice throughout Parker's poetry-activism means directing our focus to the possibilities of love in her work. Towards this end, I contend that a biography of justice constitutes a hermeneutics of love that contributes to black feminist

¹⁷ Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/ Bush Years* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

political discourse that Jennifer Nash calls a “black feminist love-politics” and expands on what Margo Perkins theorizes as “autobiography as activism.”

In her analysis of “political autobiographies” penned by Angela Y. Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown Perkin’s illuminates how these three women used life stories to “recreate themselves as well as the era they recount.” Collectively, Davis, Shakur, and Brown assiduously wrote to gain “control of the historical record, control over their own public images, and control over how the resistance movement in which they [were] involved [defined and portrayed them].”¹⁸ Perkins shows how their autobiographies confronted “internal contradictions between the liberation movement’s professed ideals and its practices”—or what she identifies as the contradiction between “the call for liberation of all oppressed people” and “the simultaneous perpetuation of regressive patriarchal norms and expectations.” Further highlighting these gender tensions, Perkins writes:

Although political autobiographical texts by Black male activists, including Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Huey Newton’s *Revolutionary Suicide*, George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother’s*, Bobby Seale’s *A Lonely Rage*, and David Hilliard’s *This Side of Glory*, occasionally raise the issue of gender oppression and its impact on the Movement, their narratives (and actions described therein) generally recapitulate the very practices they profess to critique.¹⁹

Perkins contends that Davis, Shakur, and Brown categorically confronted the politics of gender and named heterosexist patriarchy as the linchpin that often excluded them—with the exception of Brown—from leadership possibilities in grass-roots organizations throughout the Black Power Movement, and notably the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army.

¹⁸ Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography As Activism*, xiii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

If autobiography extended the reach and representation of black women's activism, allowing them to critique and retell movement histories in which they participated, then it also allowed for them to connect with their communities. In other words, writing did not elevate them above the communities in which they spoke; and neither did this genre for them have as a goal to distinguish them from the people in their communities. African American autobiography, writ large, engaged in rhetorical practices that followed literary convention of autobiographical writing, yet largely eschewed the Western literary tradition of "heroic individualism." Like a number of their contemporaries, black women like Davis, Shakur, and Brown used autobiography to "evince a relational understanding of the self" where the objective of such writing was less concerned with illuminating the author's "uniqueness" and more interested in examining systematic structures of inequalities and oppressions that connected her to the communities to which she belonged. Recounting the "uneasiness political autobiographers tend to experience with the personal 'I' in Western literary tradition, Perkins, for example, explains Shakur's use of the lower-case 'i' thusly: "Shakur's use of a small 'i' suggests an understanding of self as neither more nor less important than any other." Indeed black women's use of the subjective-I helped them understand the linked fates between themselves and their larger communities. The subjective-I allowed their political autobiographies to order their individual lives as part and parcel of the larger world around them, which in turn afforded them opportunities to author biographies of the times that they lived through. In telling their own story they constructed what Perkins calls a "polyvocal people's history of the Movement."²⁰

²⁰ Ibid., xvii.

A biography of justice contributes to this literary tradition of political autobiography and insists upon poetry's auto/biographic possibilities. As Parker carves out a feminist genealogy in "Movement in Black," she situates herself within this history by deploying her personal experiences in an effort to connect with and explain the structural and systematic conditions that affect the social, economic, and political vitality of black women. In other words, the poem is and is not just about her individual story or history—she was a Black Panther, involved in NOW, the radical dykes, and gay liberation—but rather brings an analysis of personal experience into dialogue with systematic structures of inequality that led to the oppressive regimes of anti-blackness/black feminism/ and queerness that produce those very fragments of "me" articulated in "Movement in Black." By recalling the multifarious black woman, however, Parker expresses a "polyvocal" black feminist history that acknowledge a diversity of black women, in spite of (or because of) their sexual or erotic proclivities. An element that distinguishes Parker from her feminist forebears and contemporaries is that she both imbues poetry with auto/biographic possibility and affirms *the black lesbian subjective-I* during a time when so few women dared to do so, publicly. Unlike her contemporaries, Parker's lesbian identity heavily influences her work. Whereas Perkins notes that Davis's, Shakur's, and Brown's efforts to "situate their own experiences within a structural analysis of race, class, and gender oppressions," provide "rare models" of "radical Black female subjectivity," she does not elaborate on—as her formulations blatantly negate—links between black women's sexuality and radical black female subjectivity.²¹ For Parker, publicly articulating her sexuality was essential to her poetry

²¹ Ibid., xv.

writing, as her poem “My Lover Is a Woman” self-possessively indicates.²² Indeed, Parker places herself on the line—five times we see—despite this line being fraught with danger; including the danger of historical erasure, and, as we will see, all sorts of violence that accompany being black, woman, lesbian, poor, alive and “the product of slaves,” to reference the epithet that frames this chapter. “The chains are different now/ lay on this body strange/ no metal clanging in my ears,” Parker muses in her queer neo-slave poem “Questions.”²³

What follows then is biography of justice—a narrative that attends Parker’s movement in black in and out of the U.S. and one that articulates injustice endured by lesbian women under modern U.S. justice systems. On the one hand, I chronicle Parker’s life from a “Goat-Child” struggling to understand the complex literacies of racial and sexual violence in an anti-black, anti-woman capitalist society to bonafide black lesbian feminist suspicious of a modern, post-60s, U.S. Government that uncritically permits its elected leaders free-range assault on the integrity and humanity of its most vulnerable citizens. On the other hand, I illuminate the political functions of Parker’s poetry—to record life live, if you will; to address violence against women; to object to a codification of citizenship that denies women and gays equal protection under the law. Indeed, for Parker writing poetry judiciously served as an act of love and as a tool for political redress, social empowerment, and liberation for us all.

²² Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, 130.

²³ *Ibid*, 111.

Goat Child

The black lesbian feminists, poets, mothers, and activists Pat Parker and Audre Lorde were the best of friends. As Lorde recalls, Parker was “a young Black poet with fire in her eyes.”²⁴ Sadly, however, on June 17, 1989, Pat Parker died of breast cancer. In her poem “Girlfriend,” Lorde mourns Parker’s death, unable to comprehend this travesty. On March 27, 1990, Lorde writes:

It’s almost a year and I still
can’t deal with you
not being
at the end of the line.²⁵

When, Lorde wonders, “will I/ not miss picking up the receiver” and miss “the sound of her beloved voice?” Lorde and Parker were sisters in spirit, two impassioned black women who supported one another’s work and whose relationship exemplifies a type of intimate kinship that Parker describes as “Sister love.”²⁶ In “For Audre,” Parker reflects on this love, writing: “our Blackness/ our creativity/ our queerness/ our muses conspire.”²⁷ Lorde knew a Parker largely unknown to the world today, for we, unfortunately, know more about her death than her life. As Judy Grahn notes in her memoir *A Simple Revolution*, “recent anthologies and critics have identified poets who drove the [women’s] movement forward...[but] seldom include Pat Parker.”²⁸ Despite her lack of name recognition, Parker lived, as this chapter will demonstrate, a civically and creatively engaged public life.

²⁴ Ibid, 32.

²⁵ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 468.

²⁶ Parker, *Movement in Black*, 206.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution: The Making of an Activist Poet* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 183.

Unlike her literary contemporaries discussed in Perkins's *Autobiography As Activism*, Parker did not publish an autobiography—and there are very few historic or encyclopedic sources that chronicle her life. Parker does write, however, autobiographic poetry. Her epic poem “Goat Child,” stands as her most exemplary autobiographic poem to-date and I draw from it heavily as a credible and viable scholarly source. Written in three temporal frames—“1944-1956,” “1956-1962,” and “1962-1966”—“Goat Child,” chronicles Parker’s coming of age story. In part one of the poem, Parker painfully details childhood experiences with both racism and racial segregation while living Texas. The second part recalls Parker’s sexual abuse and the politics of informing her religious parents of being raped by a male family member. Striking “OUT” to California, in part three of “Goat Child” Parker affirms her identity and independence as a black lesbian woman.

Born prematurely on January 20, 1944 in Houston, Texas Pat Parker was never meant to survive; and, given the barriers of racism and racial segregation, along with socially institutionalized heterosexist gender norms, it would take a leap of faith for Parker to overcome and survive these odds. The youngest of four daughters, Parker was born with pneumonia and “consigned to an incubator for nearly three months.”²⁹ Her mother once told her that she was “a mistake” and in her poem “Dialogue” Parker suggests that her mother struggled to understand her lesbianism. In this poem a child lay dying. In her last moments the child calls out to her mother hoping that her mother’s words would sooth her fear of death and her downtrodden spirit caused by “people

²⁹ Ayofemi S. Folaya and Stephanie Byrd, “Pat Parker 1944-1989” in Sandra Pollack and Denise D. Knight, eds., *Contemporary Lesbian Writers of The United States* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993).

frowning at me.”³⁰ “Child, dear child, I must,/ Show you the way to God,/First, you learn to trust,/ and stop doing things that are odd.”³¹ After the child’s death, the mother promises in the very last line of the poem to “pray to God for your soul.”³² In this and other poems Parker hints at her relationship to her mother and father but she neglects to mention her mother’s name. In “Dialogue,” she signifies on the importance of mothering by capitalizing the first letter, suggesting a figurative and literal mother, her mother. “Yes Ma’am” mirrors a similar dialogue, except in this poem it is the mother who lays on her deathbed. Parker wishes to “say so much,” “to thank her/ to say/ I love you/ to hold her in my arms.” However, after years of not showing affection, indeed too many years of “not touching/ of not saying,” prevents her from expressing love for her mother.³³ Ironically, in other poems, such as “My Hands Are Big and Rough” and “Child of Myself”—which appear in the Liberation Fronts section of *Movement in Black*—Parker credits her parents, and “not a political consciousness,” for unconsciously inspiring her radical gender politics; which manifests as her eschewing gender norms, especially the institution of marriage. Had she listened to either of her parents, she would be “married & miserable”—and for a brief period in her life she was married, twice, to men.³⁴ To be called a “mistake” by her mother, her own flesh and blood, never—despite earnest attempts to forget—left Parker’s memory and serves as a salient memory that further inspires her to affirm her lesbian womanhood. In “Child of Myself” Parker writes “to believe first/ a mistake” only to free herself, I imagine, of this psychological violence.

³⁰ Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, “Dialogue,” 80.

³¹ *Ibid*, 80-81.

³² *Ibid*, 81.

³³ Parker, *Movement in Black*, “Yes Ma’am,” 182-183.

³⁴ Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, “My Hands Are Big and Rough,” 73-75.

i, woman, i
can no longer claim
 a mother of flesh
 a father of marrow
i, woman, must be
the child of myself.³⁵

The indented poetics that reference her parents rhetorically and literally show Parker creating space between them and her own life. The first line of the poem—“i, woman, i”—signals her individual experiences. Doubly flanking “woman,” these “i’s (also read eyes) also signal Parker’s vision, a self-declaration of her own womanhood not clouded by the ideologies or judgments of her parents. Careful not to repeat herself without much a concrete objective, Parker substitutes “must be” in place of what could amount to, when repeated, an ogling, indeed, complacent self. “Must be” rhetorically emphasizes the unavoidable truth that Parker, in order to become a self-actualized woman, must create herself a new. Indeed, becoming a child of herself translates as rebirthing her life without much of the baggage associated with parental disappointment. While Parker’s mother believed that she was a “mistake,” her father Buster Cooks was—if only for a brief period—“pissed” by the idea of having to rear yet another girl-child; he wanted a son instead.³⁶

Whatever internal wars that beset the working class household of Buster Cooks’s family they did not match the racial segregation that shaped Houston—and most major U.S. cities—at the end of World War II. The family lived in tight quarters located within a “public housing project.”³⁷ Cooks—“being a typical/ spade businessman”—lost his business shop, “too much credit—too little capital,” Parker muses on the racism that her

³⁵ Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, 76.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 49.

³⁷ Folya and Byrd, “Pat Parker 1944-1989,” 415.

father experienced within black-market economies that she describes in her autobiographical poem, “Goat Child.” In his attempts to shield his daughters from the sting of racism and urban poverty, Buster relocated his family to the “suburbs of Houston” and encouraged his daughters to “escape on the freedom train of education.”³⁸ Migrating to suburban Houston may have sounded glamorous but the living conditions for working-class African Americans were invariable. The only difference between the “two-story brick project” and their new home in Houston was “weeds and space.” Otherwise, Parker describes her suburban home vividly, if not wildly dramatically, as: “one-room—tin roof playhouse/ with tarzan making beams,/ tin #2 washtub, maggot-filled/ outhouse & super rats.”³⁹

By the time Parker was old enough to attend school, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* to integrate public schools; a decision that many white southerners were not prepared to accept—and in many cases refused to implement. Parker says she “fought her way through first grade,” a battle with teachers that continued throughout her formative school years. She rejected the teaching of high school poetry by her teachers on the basis that it’s pedagogy focused exclusively on traditional form and white men. While there is no evidence of Parker graduating from high school, sources suggest that encounters with poetry served as a turning point in her life. In addition to her mostly white high school English teachers, her first husband Ed Bullins—who was also white—did not take women poets seriously. Even worse, he found the idea of a black woman poet laughable. Parker “began crafting poetry to avoid his relentless

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Parker, *Movement in Black*, 50.

criticism and devaluing of her prose work.”⁴⁰ Parker refused to believe that only white men could write socially relevant, intellectually rigorous, and culturally valuable poetry. She would take her life experiences from both a childhood living in a racially segregated Houston and a loathsome marriage to craft poetry that led to a visceral social rebirth and unshakable commitment to addressing the needs and concern of working-class poor women. “The goat child died—/ the goat child died/ & a woman was born,” she concludes in “Goat Child.”⁴¹

A Ray of Sight From The Fire

By the time that Parker died there was a whole movement of black lesbian writers and activists. Thanks to the watershed publication of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Ann Allen Shockley, Jewelle Gomez, Bernice Johnson, and June Jordan, were, by the 1990s, popular among the black lesbian feminist literary scene. In the early days of women’s liberation, however, Parker was one of only a few black lesbian trailblazers. She helped Lorde come out “in her poetry”⁴²; she “rented an apartment and a sequence of houses that served as lesbian households nurturing activism, sports, arts, and a safer space for lesbians of color”⁴³; and she helped found Gente, a lesbian-of-color support group that “raised money for women in prison and helped publicize political activists such as Joan Little” who gained notoriety as the first woman in U.S. history acquitted of all charges for killing her rapist.⁴⁴ In a 1985 interview with the black feminist poet Kate Rushin, Parker states: “When Judy

⁴⁰ Folaya and Byrd, “Pat Parker 1944-1989,” 415.

⁴¹ Parker, *Movement in Black*, 60.

⁴² Parker, *Movement in Black*, 188.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 227.

[Grah] and I started, we read mostly in small places like book stores and coffee houses, but there was exhilaration because we were laying the ground. There was no women's culture to speak of. We had no validation for ourselves, for the culture, for anything."⁴⁵ When novelist Jewelle Gomez asserts that "Pat had the courage to be the 'first black,' the 'first lesbian,' [and the] 'first everything,'" she refers to the days when Parker stood alone in male dominated environs to read her poems.⁴⁶ "It was like," Parker states, "pioneering—we'd go to these places and stand up to read poems. [Judy and I] were talking to women about women, and, at the same time, letting women know that the experiences they were having were shared by other people."⁴⁷

Parker delivered her first public reading in 1963 at the Blue Unicorn Coffeehouse. During this era, public readings drew a mostly male audience that—like her second husband, Bob Parker—did not take women poets seriously. At the time, women poets wrote about "birds and flowers... crap," Parker says. At the height of the civil rights movement, Parker, like her male counterparts, desired to write about "civil rights and Vietnam" and political themes that spoke to the plight of African Americans at the time—"things," she tells Rushin, "that gets me in my heart."⁴⁸ At local bars, such as the Black Cat "and other North Beach venues," Parker exclusively read, as Judy Grah] recalls, "anti-racist and feminist poems."⁴⁹ It was not until the early 1970s, when Parker collaborated with Grah]n, that she began reading explicitly lesbian-themed poetry. Grah]n states: "In [1970], Parker and I read together in an upstairs room of the Addison Street

⁴⁵ Kate Rushin, "Pat Parker: Creating Room to Speak & Grow" in *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*, October 1986, 28.

⁴⁶ Jewelle Gomez, "The First Everything," in *Gay Community News*, September 3-9 1989.

⁴⁷ Rushing, "Creating Room to Speak & Grow," 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Grah]n, *A Simple Revolution*, 134.

lesbian household in Berkeley, to a small though intensely attentive audience of militant dykes and friends.”⁵⁰ Over the years, Grahn’s and Parker’s performances at local venues together solidified an unshakable friendship between them. Against her co-publishers desires to not publish Parker’s *Pit Stop* on the grounds that it was too “politically correct,” Grahn saw the book through to publication.⁵¹ Similarly, when she was approached by Olivia Records to record some of her poetry, Grahn insisted that Parker be included in the project or else she “wouldn’t do the album.”⁵² Grahn frequently leveraged her white racial capital to rebuff anti-black racism that was often a problem of the mainstream white feminist movement. Needless to say that in 1974 Olivia Records produced the LP *Where Would I Be Without You: The Poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn*.

Writing about themes that “[get] me at my heart,” Parker established what her mentee Ayofemi Stowe Folayan describes as a “passionate connection”—or what bell hooks later theorizes as “a liberatory vision of love”—between herself and the communities in which she was a member.”⁵³ Parker’s poem, “Love Isn’t,” exemplifies this vision. Here, an ethic of care compels and sustains her love for both her white female companion and “pregnant women/ with no money,” “angry comrades/ with no shelter,” “dead bodies and prison,” and “children without families.” Parker’s ethic of care includes individuals and communities from all walks of life.⁵⁴

All I can give
Is my love

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 171.

⁵² Ibid., 198.

⁵³ Ayome Stowe Folayan, “Gifts of A Mentor” in *Gay Community News*, September 3-9, 1989; bell hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 103.

⁵⁴ Carol Gilligan, *In A Difference Voice*. (Harvard University Press, 1998).

I care for you
I care for our world
If I stop
Caring for one
It would be only
A matter of time
Before I stop
Loving
The other.⁵⁵

“Love Isn’t” exemplifies what Bill Puka calls “the liberation of caring.” Here, Parker establishes a set of “coping strategies” that allows her to endure oppressive regimes that create a tug-of-war between her private life and public politics.⁵⁶ By creating a “balance of care for others with care for [her] self,” Parker enacts what Jennifer Nash theorizes as a “black feminist love ethic.” Judy Grahn, in turn, literally translates this “love ethic” as Parker reaching across gulfs to connect various communities of people together.⁵⁷ As a “flashpoint and change agent” who stood at the crossroads of the civil rights, black feminist, and gay liberation movements, Parker’s reach across these divides—according to Ann Bernard, one of Parker’s former lovers—attempts to end prejudice in America.⁵⁸ Moreover, these tender acts of care and connection ensured Parker’s “psychological survival,”⁵⁹ especially during her most trying years when she jokingly wanted to “resign” from a challenging and economically frustrating life of political activism.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Parker, *Jonestown & Other Madness*, 10.

⁵⁶ Bill Puka, “The Liberation of Caring: A Different Voice for Gilligan’s ‘Different Voice’” in Mary Jeanne Larrabee (ed.), *An Ethic of Care: Feminist Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 215.

⁵⁷ Puka, “The Liberation of Caring,” 216.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Nash, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality” in *Meridians*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2011), 1-24; Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 135 & 171.

⁵⁹ Puka, “The Liberation of Caring,” 216.

⁶⁰ Parker, *Movement in Black*, 90.

Caring for the world was no small feat. Nevertheless, Parker traveled far and wide: to Brussels, where she attended the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in 1976; and to the Caribbean in 1986, where novelist Ann Allen Shockley remembers Parker brought “the cervical cap and self-help techniques to a group of women starting a clinic there.”⁶¹ Parker was, in fact, a health care feminist. As the Director of the Oakland Feminist Women’s Health Center, she “was adamant that quality health care be accessible to all women, especially women of color and working class women.”⁶² For nearly a decade, Parker served as the Executive Director of “the Center,” which was “one of the first women’s abortion clinics in the country.”⁶³ Debbie Gregg—a friend, co-worker, and “fishing buddy” of Parker’s—recalls Parker’s contributions to the feminist health care movement. She writes:

Pat Parker spent nine years helping the Center grow and expand, and in so doing touched the lives of thousands of women and men. When Pat arrived at the Center, it consisted of the one site in Oakland, offering gynecology and family planning, pregnancy screening, first trimester abortion, self-help classes, sexual[ly] transmitted disease screening and vasectomy. By the time Pat left—in order to concentrate on her writing—the Center had expanded to six clinic sites with several new programs, serving women and men throughout Northern and Southern California.⁶⁴

Parker worked over sixty hours a week at the Center and in 1985 helped the Center survive “the anti-abortion firebombing” that occurred at the Los Angeles clinic. During this time, Parker worked day in and day out to ensure the clinic a speedy re-opening.

⁶¹ Shockley, “On Meeting Pat Parker at Spelman,” in *Gay Community News*, September 3-9, 1989.

⁶² Shockley, “On Meeting Pat Parker at Spelman.”

⁶³ Jennie McKnight, “Black Lesbian Poet Pat Parker Dies: Literary Pioneer Leaves Inspiring Legacy to Black, Feminist, and Gay and Lesbian Communities,” in *Gay Community News*, June 25-30, 1989, 3.

⁶⁴ Debbie Gregg, “A Pioneer in Feminist Health Care,” in *Gay Community News*, June 25-30, 1989.

As a member of the Center's well-regarded Speaker's Bureau, Parker "did a lot of effective outreach" to people who did not have access to quality health care. Shockley recalls that Parker spoke to teenagers at high schools throughout the Oakland area on a range of topics, including "everything from birth control to abortions to STDs." Parker also "spoke to women at the Santa Rita jail about everything from lesbianism to how to prevent and treat vaginal infections."⁶⁵ As a grass roots activist Parker was careful not to simply theorize revolution but to demonstrate revolutionary practice on the ground. As the Center's Director, Parker avoided the tendency among activists at the time: "to talk the enemy to death." As her poem "Talk is Cheap" reveals, Parker was "tired of hearing about/ confronting/ demonstrating/ trashing/ smashing/ surviving, jiving."⁶⁶ Parker thoroughly believed that revolution "is not neat or pretty or quick." Neither was revolution achieved by rioting or looting. Parker believed that revolution was not a "one step process: you fight—you win—it's over." Instead "it takes years. Long after the smoke of the last gun has faded away, the struggle to build a society that is classless, that has no traces of sexism and racism, will still be going on."⁶⁷ Parker's decade's long engagement at the Center served as the springboard to her fight for liberation struggles in California and the U.S. writ large. As the Director she remained constantly active and repeatedly compelled to action by the characters referenced in her poem "Love Isn't": the socially dispossessed and politically disenfranchised, pregnant women and homeless soldiers, murdered prisoners, and children without families.

⁶⁵ Shockley, "On Meeting Pat Parker at Spelman."

⁶⁶ Parker, *Movement in Black*, "Talk is Cheap," 101.

⁶⁷ Pat Parker, "Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick," in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, 240-241.

In the Day-to-Day Concrete

When she was not playing Mrs. Pac Man at The Connection (a women's bar located in Oakland) or working at the Center, Parker busily wrote poetry. She was, in every sense, a prolific poet. In the short decades between 1970 and 1980, Parker published four volumes of poetry: *Child of Myself* (1972), *Pit Stop* (1973), *Womanslaughter* (1978) and *Movement in Black* (1979). She published her last volume of poetry, *Jonestown & Other Madness*, in 1985, four years before her death. Parker's work was often received with mixed reviews. Some women—including feminists—believed that her poetry was more engrossing when performed live on stage, while others believed that Parker's craft continuously needed refinement. In her review of Parker's *Child of Myself*, Barbara Smith notes that some of the poems are "vague in their intentions and strained in language."⁶⁸ Cheryl Clarke often grew "impatient with Parker's seeming refusal to edit her work."⁶⁹ Overwhelmingly, feminists—including both Smith and Clarke—were supportive of Parker's poetry, often joining her in performances of poems such as "Movement in Black." Jane Rule and becky birtha's reviews of *Jonestown & Other Madness* perhaps reveal the core of Parker's aesthetic: the everyday lives of black folks, or the "day-to-day-concrete." In her review, Rule states: "If you are tired of hearing about real-world issues, pain, love, and decision, avoid this small volume at all costs and find some poetry on waterfalls and apple pie."⁷⁰ Similarly birtha writes: "each of the poems bears witness to some significant situation, some contemporary contradiction or

⁶⁸ Barbara Smith, "Naming the Unnameable: The Poetry of Pat Parker," in *Conditions: Three*, 99.

⁶⁹ Florence Howe, "Shouting it Loud" in *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, November 1999, 12.

⁷⁰ Jane Rule, "Triplets from Firebrand," in *The Body Politic*, September 1985, 37.

imbalance of power that merits our attention.”⁷¹ Parker questioned the notion of equal citizenship by highlighting a culture of quotidian violence often experienced by the socially marginalized

As the title suggests, Parker writes about the 1978 Jonestown massacre that took place in Guyana, South America, under the “leadership” of the Reverend Jim Jones. In a poem titled “Georgia, Georgia, Georgia on My Mind,” Parker grapples with the devastation wrought by the Atlanta child murders that terrorized the city between 1979 and 1981. In “On Thanksgiving Day,” Parker follows the murder trial of Priscilla Ford who, “on Thanksgiving Day” “got into her/ Lincoln Continental/ drove to Virginia Street/ in down town Reno/ and ran over thirty people/ Six of them died.”⁷² Although her defense attorney aimed for the “insanity defense,” the presiding Judge dismissed such a claim and, upon conviction, sentenced Ford to death. She was “the second woman/ executed in Nevada’s history,” her “highest/ finish in life.”⁷³

Through what Clarke describes as a “creative moment to communicate” the immediacy of tragedy and social crises, Parker frequently articulated lived experiences in her poetry.⁷⁴ Eschewing aesthetic formulas and experimentation, Parker deployed the black vernacular tradition, and like Audre Lorde, fashioned herself as a griot: creating political poetry that spoke directly to—and on behalf of—communities in which she belonged.⁷⁵ Drawing from current events, Parker created “working class poetry” that fiercely critiqued institutional inequalities, many of which had an adverse impact upon

⁷¹ becky birtha, “Speaking Out Loudly Before the Madness,” 17.

⁷² Parker, *Jonestown & Other Madness*, 29.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 34.

⁷⁴ Howe, “Shouting it Loud,” 12.

⁷⁵ Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 184.

African Americans, working class women, lesbians, and gay men adversely.⁷⁶ Among these institutional grievances, Parker remained preoccupied in particular with questions of justice. Indeed, as the following narrative demonstrates, Parker devoted a large portion of her energy addressing justice, particularly ideas of citizenship and equality under the law. Confronting justice also meant exposing representatives of the law, police, lawyers, political leaders, and judges—for their inhumane treatment of socially marginal communities. Thus, Parker’s biography of justice interrogated, in real time, theories, practices and poetics of citizenship that were inherently anti-black, opposed to women’s rights, and fervently against the human rights of gays and lesbians.

The Law

Like Martin Luther King Jr., Pat Parker had a dream, too—“a simple dream,” in fact, that imagined love and liberation as unimpeachable human rights codified by law.⁷⁷ Yet, given the legal system’s anti-black, rabidly homophobic, deeply patriarchal, and anti-womanist underpinnings, Parker’s dreams were—like her predecessor Langston Hughes—deferred. Take for example her aptly titled poem “The Law,” which dramatizes many of these contradictions. Flanked by intergenerational narratives that laud the law’s fictions as “good, fair, and just,” the law resonates differently for Parker. Unlike her parents and teachers, who encouraged her to “respect the law,” Parker—now in her “third decade”—exposes the law’s perverse underbelly. She writes:

the law
arrests the prostitute
but not the customer
the law

⁷⁶ Ibid, 183.

⁷⁷ Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, 115.

sends a rich woman
to jail on weekends
for murder
sends a porno bookseller
to jail for 30 years
the law
tries women who kill
rapists &
frees the rapist
because rape
is a “normal”
reaction⁷⁸

Unlike the murderous “rich woman” whose affluence provides her leverage to, figuratively speaking, buy the system in exchange for “weekend jail.” When a prostitute or rape-victim decides to assert a modicum of agency and self-protection within capitalist, heterosexual, and patriarchal sexual economies, the legal system leaves her vulnerable to a vicious cycle of violation. Indeed, the U.S. court system’s propensity to normalize rape often strips the victim of her humanity; in Parker's poem, the law exonerates the rapist, clearing him on all charges. Furthermore, Parker uses anaphora to underscore this repeated act of violation: the phrase “the law” recurs fourteen times throughout the poem, thus imposing its oppressive presence on the poem and its subjects literally as well as figuratively. In common parlance, the law “fucks with” vulnerable communities, represented in the poem as “the poor,” “the prostitute,” “the porno book seller,” and “women who kill rapists.” Dressed in “mini skirts” or sitting “in robes/ in court rooms,” the law dangles empty meanings of care and protection in the faces of the poor and, in doing so, royally screws them over

Indeed, the perversity of the law, or what Ruth Miller calls the “erotics of corruption,” constitutes an integrative theme throughout Parker’s poetry.⁷⁹ In

⁷⁸ Ibid., 170.

“Conflagration,” Parker wonders—in light of the Watergate political scandal—“how many matches/ it would take/ to lay a single-file trail from here/ to richard nixon’s ass.”⁸⁰ In “Where Do You Go to Become a Non-Citizen,” she explores corruption in the Ford administration by noting that: “President Ford vetoed a jobs bill/ Sent to him from Capitol Hill/ While we sit by being super cool/ He gets a \$60,000 swimming pool.”⁸¹ Although the “Bill of Rights/ guarantees us all the right” to speak, she notes in the conclusion of “Don’t Let the Fascist Speak” that: “What the Nazis say/ will cause/ people/ to hurt/ ME.”⁸² Parker’s finest critique of law and justice manifests, however, when she articulates violence against women. In “Brother”—which is about some of the black men she’s worked with in “various liberation movements”⁸³—Parker more pointedly discusses patriarchal violence against women: “Brother/ I don’t want to hear/ about how my real enemy/ is the system/ i’m no genius/ but i do know/ that system you hit me with/ is called/ a fist.”⁸⁴ In her poem, “Have You Ever Tried to Hide,” Parker also addresses the ideological violence—often caused by class differences—between black and white women and feminists: “Sister! your foot’s smaller/ but it is still on my neck,” she muses.⁸⁵ However, it is her poem “Womanslaughter” that most exemplifies her

⁷⁹ Ruth A. Miller, *The Erotics of Corruption: Law, Scandal, and Political Perversion* (New York: State University of New York, 2008).

⁸⁰ Parker, *Movement in Black*, 89.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 90.

⁸² *Ibid*, 96.

⁸³ Pat Parker, “Brother” in *Where Would I Be Without You: The Poetry of Pat Parker & Judy Grahn* (Olivia Records, 1976).

⁸⁴ Pat Parker, *Movement in Black*, 46.

⁸⁵ The epigraph to “Have You Ever Tried to Hide,” points to class differences as the ideological mechanism that aggravates the social and political relationships between white women and Black Panthers. The epigraph reads: “How do we know that the panthers/ will accept a gift from/ white-middle-class-women?” Parker, *Movement in Black*, 47.

poetics of justice, highlighting in the process, how the law works against a woman's rights to life.

Within Our Nation But Across National Boundaries

In March 1976, Parker was invited to attend the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels, a four-day conference organized by Diana Russell—a British Citizen and Berkeley, California resident—and Nicole Van de Ven, a “Belgian journalist whose mother tongue is French.”⁸⁶ Thousands of women from around the globe gathered to testify about their gendered and sexual experiences in cultural regimes of patriarchy and violence. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir's opening remarks were read in absentia and saluted the Tribunal as being “the start to a radical decolonization of women.” Soon after, Pat Parker read her then unpublished poem “Womanslaughter,” stating that she will no longer show “deference to men's courts.”⁸⁷ “Womanslaughter” is a deeply personal poem. To understand this particular piece within the global context of the Tribunal requires reading against both journalistic rhetoric that de-personalizes political womanhood and a U.S. based jurisprudence that provides no legal recourse for crimes committed against women.

The International Tribunal set as its goal to end violence against women and to dignify women's rights. Workshops and plenary sessions provided vital spaces where many women expressed feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and psychic isolation, while others discussed the institutionalized sexual violence that infringed on their reproductive rights. Russell writes: “If laws were made to serve women's interests

⁸⁶ Diana Russell and Nicole Van de Ven (eds.), *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal* (California: Les Femmes, 1976), xvi.

⁸⁷ Parker, *Movement in Black*, “Womanslaughter,” 180.

instead of men's then it would be a crime, for example, to force women to be mothers against our will by outlawing, contraception and abortion, or making them inaccessible."⁸⁸ By the last day of the conference, which ended on International Women's Day, the participants established a global feminist network that provided them with strategies to survive the gendered, capitalist, and racist systems of their respective home countries.

Overwhelmingly, however, U.S. and Canadian based journalists focused on the fact that the feminist centered gathering excluded men. Articles such as "Hookers Organizing, Women's Tribunal Told" published in the *Chicago Tribune* seemed to denigrate women for "banning men" from the conference's more intimate proceedings, which only obfuscated a key aspect of the symposium: politicizing the personal through a global perspective. On March 5, 1976, for example, the Canadian based circulation *The Globe and Mail* ran a headline that read: "600 Meet to Discuss Crimes Against Women, Such as Gang Rape and Unpaid House Work," which captured important themes of the conference. But in addition to citing the absence of men—noting that "male journalists were restricted to the opening and closing sessions and a daily briefing"—*The Globe and Mail* provided explanation on the decision to exclude men.⁸⁹ "Organizers said the reason for banning male reporters from much of the proceedings was the unwillingness of many witnesses to speak before men. Also," the article reads, "they said an earlier conference in Britain in which male journalists were admitted was ridiculed in the press."⁹⁰ The organizers sought to protect women from the ideological violence of men—a necessary

⁸⁸ Russell and Van de Ven, *Crimes Against Women*, xv.

⁸⁹ "600 meet to discuss crimes against women, such as gang rape and unpaid house work," in *The Globe and Mail*, March 5, 1976.

⁹⁰ "600 Meet," *The Globe and Mail*.

step that helped scores of women mend from the physical violence endured in cultures across the globe. The increased attention to the lack of male involvement throughout U.S. and Canadian based journals resulted in a gross failure to theorize a key strategy on display throughout the conference: “storytelling technique as methodology.”⁹¹

Limited to only portions of the conference, journalists typically reported on the prevalent use of personal testimony; they could not explain with rigorous insight why testimony functioned as a critical method of delivery. For example, *The Globe and Mail* merely reports that “two women” testified about “the cruel treatment of female prisoners in Chile and Iran.” Similarly, the *New York Times* reports that—in addition to the statements of women living in developed industrialized countries, such as the United States—“the most striking testimony came from the relatively few women at the conference from the third world.” The article goes on to state: “Their testimonies included a report on the removal of the clitoris of young girls in many Arab and African countries, and charges of sexual torture of women as political prisoners in Iran, Korea, Chile, Spain, and India.”⁹²

Despite initial confusion over this rhetorical strategy, editors Russell and Van de Ven—in their text *Crimes Against Women*, which published the conference proceedings—explain the political significance of testimony as a political act “within nations” and “across national boundaries.”⁹³ They write:

⁹¹ Adrien Katherine Wing, ed., *Global Critical Race Feminism: An International Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 5.

⁹² “Crimes Tribunal Told of Cruelty in Iran and Chile” in *The Globe and Mail*, March 8, 1976; “Feminist Parlay Ends on Optimistic Note,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1976.

⁹³ Diana E.H. Russell and Nicole Van de Ven, eds., *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribune*, xv.

Personal testimony was emphasized because of the belief that it is through sharing our personal experiences of oppression that we become politicized and motivated to struggle against that oppression and the societal conditions producing it, rather than by engaging in abstract theoretical debates divorced from our personal experiences. This focus seemed even more appropriate as a first step in moving our struggles into an international context. For us to recognize our common interests as women in combating the crimes we are subjected to, should help us more easily transcend difference in nationality, as well as culture, class, race, sexual preference, age, religion, and politics.⁹⁴

The feminist credo, which commonly asserts that the personal is political, is here placed within an international context by conference organizers. It is within this international praxis of speaking that we must situate Parker's "Womanslaughter." The poem's placement in the Love Poems section of *Movement in Black* highlights how both love and justice frames the writing of "Womanslaughter." She draws from the personal experience of her sister's life to critique the legal system for its unjust treatment toward women. In doing so, Parker demonstrates how love compels and intersectional analyses that sees race, gender, and sexuality as inherently bound to the politics of human rights generally speaking and black women's rights in particular.

An excerpt of "Womanslaughter" appears in the "Violence Against Women" subsection of The Testimony and Reports published *Crimes Against Women*. In this subsection the editors write against "widespread" narratives that "women, being the weaker, gentler sex, are gently treated by men."⁹⁵ Although careful not to suggest that all men are inherently violent towards women, the editors note that overwhelmingly "men use violence to maintain, advance, or protest a setback in their power relations vis-à-vis women...this is a simple case of abusing power."⁹⁶ As "Witness 2: U.S.A.," Parker's

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Russell and Van de Ven, *Crimes Against Women*, 110.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

“Womanslaughter” testifies to the violence of “femicide.” About “femicide” the editors note: “we must recognize the sexual politics of murder,” or what Russell defines as “the killing of females by males because they are female.”⁹⁷ Despite this long history of sexual violence, “from the burning of witches to the more widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies,”⁹⁸ femicide has, Russell claims, “rarely been the subject of feminist analysis.”⁹⁹ Parker’s “Womanslaughter” offers a strident example of femicide in its discussion of her sister’s murder at the hands of her husband. It also advances the term through a rhetorical play on legal nomenclature. The poem’s title signifies on manslaughter, a charge for murder that—depending on the degree of “intent”—is considered a less heinous crime than first or second-degree murder. While “femicide” highlights a culture of men murdering women, “womanslaughter” stretches the concept further by suggesting that women continue to be slaughtered within the patriarchal and homophobic regimes of the law. To reference Patricia J. Williams—whom I quote in this chapter’s epigraph—playing with legal nomenclature is, for Parker, necessary, “for any concept of justice.”

Womanslaughter

“Womanslaughter” speaks evocatively about the “the death of [Pat Parker’s] sister at the hand of her husband.” Parker’s anger, as a poet and sister, “swells as her sister’s husband is given a one year sentence during which time he goes to work during the day

⁹⁷ Diana E.H. Russell and Roberta A. Harmes, eds., *Femicide in Global Perspective* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 3.

⁹⁸ Russell and Van de Ven, *Crimes Against Women*, 144.

⁹⁹ Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell, eds., *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), xi.

and sleeps in the jail at night.”¹⁰⁰ I argue, however, that in addition to responding to the murder of her sister, we must situate the poem in its cultural and authorial context, namely Parker’s biography of justice. On the one hand, the poem plays on long-held fears about lesbianism and miscegenation, using both as avenues to challenge the court’s belief of justifiable murder. On the other hand, Parker signifies on these fears to illustrate, in effect, how their twinned proliferation obfuscates a regime of sexual violence that denies women effective legal protection under the law. “Womanslaughter” exposes, disavows, and condemns women’s treatment within the modern juridical state and argues for a reformulation of the law and a politics of justice that eschews an erotics of violence that readily disenfranchises women.

Published a year before the “Hearing on Rape and Violence Against Women” was presented to the State of California’s Commission on the Status of Women, “Womanslaughter,” though not presented at the hearing, discusses some of its major concerns. Written in four parts—“An Act,” “Justice,” “Somebody’s Trial,” and “Womanslaughter”—the poem, like the Hearing, confronts “indifferent and skeptical police officers, prosecutors, jurors, and judges.”¹⁰¹ In “An Act,” readers, along with Parker, discover the unexpected death of her sister Shirley Jones: “Jonesy shot Shirley/ She didn’t make it,” Parker’s eldest sister discloses over the phone. In “Justice,” Parker critiques the legal process, illuminating indifferent police officers whose lack of personal investment precipitates Shirley’s murder. Shirley Jones repeatedly calls the police to report domestic violence from which she suffers: “Hello, Hello Police/ I am a woman/ and I am afraid/ My husband means to kill me.”

¹⁰⁰ “Review(s)” in *off our backs* (December 1978), 13.

¹⁰¹ State of California Commission on the Status of Women, “Hearing on Rape and Violence Against Women,” Monday, October 31, 1979.

Parker has her sister Shirley repeating the phrase “Hello, Hello Police,” three times throughout the poem to underscore the intricate dynamics between gender, voice, and authority that weighed against her favor. As the Commission Report notes, police departments throughout the state of California—and the nation—neglected to save, log, or tally the number of domestic violence calls they received from women. The report suggests that storing these calls would have evidenced an alarming number of domestic violence calls. Furthermore, such a log would have underscored the need for overhaul in the police department’s computer system. Without these crucial resources, statistical evidence—needed to assist women’s advocacy groups in procuring funding toward shelters for victims of domestic violence—was lost. Despite this negligence, police departments throughout California refused to invest in new infrastructure to address domestic violence, and thus contributed to the growing rates of femicide throughout the state. Shirley’s repetitive pleas for help—*I am afraid... I am afraid*—fall on deaf ears: the police officer in question either does not care enough to become personally involved, or lacks the necessary infrastructure to track Shirley’s complaint history. It is not until her third outcry to the police that an officer provides Shirley with instructions:

Lady, there’s nothing we can do
until he tries to hurt you.
Go to the judge and he will decree
That your husband leaves you be.

After divorcing her now ex-husband—“a quiet man,” who repeatedly beat her during their marriage—Shirley moves into an apartment with a white female friend. Unexpectedly, however, Shirley’s husband visits this friend’s home to “beat her.”

Shirley's husband eventually murders her, a vicious act that underscores the inefficacy of protection orders, or “Interlocutory Divorce Decrees,” to prevent bodily harm.

Testimony during the subsequent trial—part three of Parker's poem, “Somebody’s Trial”—vilifies Parker’s sister. Witnesses suggest that Shirley's alleged infidelity with other men, and her interracial friendship with a white woman, deviates from the social norms of her moral duties as wife. It is implied here that such deviations condemned her to death. At a pivotal moment during Parker's retelling of the trial, she constructs a complex dialectic between race, gender, sexuality, and the law by bringing together material fodder that reproduces taboos of miscegenation and lesbian erotics. The defense’s cross-examination reads:

She slept with other men, he said
No, said her friends.
No, said her sisters.
That’s a lie.
She was black.
You are white.
Why were you there?
We were friends, she said.
I was helping her move¹⁰²

The husband then accuses his murdered ex-wife of sleeping with women, for which the defense attempts to shame her. Parker writes:

She slept with women, he said.
No, said her sisters.
No said her friends.
We were only friends.
That’s a lie.
You lived with this woman?
Yes, said her friend.
You slept in the same bed?

¹⁰² Parker, *Movement in Black*, 177.

Yes said her friend.
Were you lovers?
NO, said her friend.
But you slept in the same bed?
Yes said her friend.¹⁰³

Parker's lack of quoted material constitutes a rhetorical decision to make indistinguishable the perceptions of interracial lesbian erotics. The perspective of both the defense attorney and the husband remain inseparable; neither man understands, and perhaps refuses to understand, the supportive relationship that existed between Shirley and her white female companion. They misconstrue the fact that Shirley and her friend "slept in the same bed" for lesbian sex. As men, they do not see this act of intimacy between women as a source of critical support or feminist/ womanist/ or sisterly love. Collectively, their voices represent a systematic and patriarchal refusal that eschews practices of female intimacy during moments of crises. In a single gesture, Parker constructs a dialogue that ominously intersects race, sexuality, love, and injustice; the relationship between Shirley and her female companion—that provides a source of critical support during times of personal crisis—is the same relationship that condemns her to death.

As Parker speculates about the conversation happening in the deliberation process, she writes:

What shall be done with this man?
Is it a murder of the first degree?
No said the men?
It is a crime of passion.
He was angry.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 178.

Is it a murder of the second degree?
Yes, said the men,
But we will not call it that.
We must think of his record.
We will call it manslaughter.

Indicted on manslaughter, a lesser-offense, Shirley's husband is only sentenced to a year in jail. Like feminist legal scholars, Parker insists that the legal system favors men because, largely, men are the underwriters, interpreters, and adjudicators of the law. Ignoring standard protocol and precedent, the all-male jury decides amongst themselves to call it "manslaughter." This verdict, in turn, demonstrates a perversely skewed level of pathos for the murderous husband instead of his murdered ex-wife. The real crime, in effect, takes place behind closed doors, among a jury of the husband's peers. There, figuratively speaking, the jurors re-enact Shirley's death, metaphysically slaughtering her name, her reputation, and her memory. This, I believe, is why Parker names the poem "Womanslaughter:" to illustrate the law's patriarchal decimation of women in an allegiance of brotherhood. The law has no love for women—black, white, lesbian, or otherwise.

Pat Parker was a freedom fighter—and her most potent weapon was her poetry. In her poetry she captures her life and times without compromise. Her most critically acclaimed volume, and its title poem "Movement in Black," is a layered history, compelling yet unfinished—unfinished because from slavery to freedom a black woman's work is never done. Justice was a way of life for Parker, not some political relic of times gone. But for Parker, justice wasn't found in the law—it wasn't some abstract concept. Instead, it was attached evermore and always to both a politics and poetics of everyday love. Without justice there can be no love. For Parker "Love Isn't" divisive,

determined by race or class or gender or sexuality, and neither is it the single province of private desire—but all of these at once. She understood love and justice as deeply connected because as a working-class black lesbian feminist she embodied them, and lived them publicly. She also witnessed how the horrific codification of patriarchal normalcy violently worked against her and women like her; and, was often sanctioned by the law. Instead of fearing the dangers associated with being black, woman, and lesbian, Parker was about presence, perseverance, and preservation, performing indeed, on stages in and out of America as she rapped on violence in the name of liberation, justice, and love for women and queer folk. Her brave efforts helped to establish what was then only a nascent black lesbian feminist political and literary culture and while most have nearly forgotten her, this chapter begins an important recovery of her work that center her passion for justice.

Chapter 4
“Experimental Love”
On The Road to Liberation with Cheryl Clarke

There is the lesbian who is a lesbian anywhere and everywhere and who is in direct and constant confrontation with the heterosexual presumption, privilege, and oppression. Her struggle can be compared to that of the Civil Rights activists of the 1960’s who was out there on the streets for freedom, while so many of us viewed the action on the television.

--Cheryl Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*

Visions of black liberation which exclude lesbians and gay men bore and repel me, for as a black lesbian I am obligated and dedicated to destroying heterosexual supremacy by suggesting, promoting, and advocating that rights of gay men and lesbians wherever we are. And we are everywhere.

--Cheryl Clarke, Interview

“It’s experimental...love...it’s very experimental.”¹ This was Cheryl Clarke’s response to my question regarding her definition of love during an interview that I conducted at her home located in Hobart, New York in the summer of 2013. Whereas Clarke’s response evokes her fourth volume of poetry, *Experimental Love* (1993)—a text devoted to her “sweet nephew,” Najeeb W. Harb, and the Black lesbians Pat Parker, Mabel Hampton, and Audre Lorde—her notion of “experimental” allows her a degree of flexibility where she constantly reflects on love’s purpose in her life and larger communities by moving between discourses of love, sex, and blackness. Though she

¹ Interview with Cheryl Clarke. Hobart, New York. July 15, 2013.

admits that she is (and was) never sure about the “ramifications of love,” she is always “trying to work on it...work on the love relationships...the friend relationships.” The “experimental” in Clarke’s formulations of love signals the need to constantly “work on what it means to love one another” in and out of “love” relationships. The constant need to work on love in various contexts—romantic or platonic, or what Martin Luther King Jr. sees as *eros* and *philia*—is to work toward what Clarke calls a “liberation of community.” “What do you mean by liberation,” I ask her. “Well,” she says, “I mean anything that challenges and chips away at prevailing domination.” Liberation, Clarke asserts, concerns “anti-individualism”—a phenomenon deeply invested in the collective, or what she refers to as community. But, I ask myself silently, what is a liberation of community? What exactly is being liberated within a community? How does she want me to understand this phrase? The answer, I believe, manifests across both the interview and *Experimental Love*.

As the interview continues, Clarke subtly hints at the tension between community and the individual, seeing the individual as a necessary force for social and political liberation in (Black) America and the community as an important ideal for personal liberation. Adding to her formulations of liberation, Clarke says that she, unlike the conventions that undergird the black middle classes’ notions of gender, “did not want to live a conventional woman’s life.” “I wanted to be with whomever I wanted to be with,” she says speaking about her lesbianism. Indeed, for Clarke “personal liberation” was connected to “a liberation of community”—a phrase that echoes the oft-cited feminist credo that the personal is political. In *Experimental Love*, the liberation of community, however, seems more invested in confronting ideologies—indeed chipping away at long-

held beliefs about black gender and sexuality—that both bind together and divide black communities historically, politically, socially, and aesthetically.

Experimental Love associates love with movement. Movement is sacred. Movement is political and collective. Experimental, a referent and autonomous category, animates itself by carving out the space to move freely. “Experimental love” then is not static, but fluid. Clarke opens *Experimental Love* by making a statement on the sacred nature of movement. In the opening poem, “A Great Angel,” Clarke writes: “Oh soul, a great angel moves deep as th’Atlantic.”² She follows this experimental love poem with “Space Invocation,” which reads:

I must get to those spaces:
black space of throathole
brown space of asshole
red space of cunthole
sex space of no turning back

Stomach
take me to them
and lead me in good song³

The spiritual as erotic, and the erotic as spiritual, moves between the depth and theological materiality of the “great angel” to the erogenous zones of an embodied subject, an unassuming ‘I.’ Space invocation literally shifts “spaces”—otherwise ideological gaps—from margin to center. Although it appears in the last line of the first stanza, “space” becomes the center of not only each subsequent line, but creates spaces throughout the whole of the second stanza, spaces that seems to split the ideological—the colors—from the erogenous zones of the persona’s female body. The ideological and

² Cheryl Clarke, *Experimental Love: Poetry* (New York: Firebrand, 1993), 7.

³ *Ibid*, 8.

physical body is literally interrupted by space—which Clarke needs to enter, to go there and relish in their spiritual qualities.

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From the very beginning, Clarke experiments with the spiritual aesthetic widely known in the black literary tradition. Invocation evokes the gaps between spirituality as a trans-historic fact of blackness—which runs and moves as “deep as th’ Atlantic”—and an embodied blackness shamelessly attuned to its sexuality, “sex space of no turning back.” Clarke inflects the poem with a relentless intuition—a gut feeling evidenced in the poem by the personification of the stomach, which can both “take” and “lead.” She “*must* go to” these erogenous spaces. There is urgency about the speaker’s voice conveyed by the imperative (auxiliary verb) “*must*.” Why must she get to those particular spaces? Although the speaker does not indicate that her desires are motivated by rebellion against a system or ideology, a protest poetics undulate the poem’s concluding line. Indeed, to be led “in good song,” evokes the importance of music to protest—throughout black freedom struggles music assuages fears and keeps one’s eyes on the prize. Movement—

passage through the stomach, digesting tasteful and less tasteful ideas, shamelessly wading in the less pleasurable (and indeed shitty) aspects of ingesting life—conveys both an embodied and a physical act of movement. A cleansing of sorts that intuitively frees and liberates.

“Space Invocation,” quite literally brings the funk and more importantly allows readers to understand that Clarke’s experimental love is not invested in respectability or propriety. Clarke uses explicit language when referring to black women’s erogenous zones. If we consider that an “invocation” is often associated with spiritual or religious acts, then we experience Clarke’s speaker defying propriety—her prayers are riddled with language otherwise shunned by religious dictates: throathole, cunthole, asshole. The prayer is itself wild especially because the speaker prays for a spiritual and physical eroticism. Nevertheless, the sheer ability for a woman to express in word her desires is, I argue, Clarke’s praxis for liberation. Clarke’s love, though experimental, attempts to decolonize language so that women, especially black women, can explicitly express their love to themselves and to each other. A black woman expressing her love for her own and other women’s bodies is liberating for Clarke.

Throughout *Experimental Love*, Clarke does not pit race against sexuality; both mutually constitute her lesbian poetics. She, like Pat Parker moves in and with blackness in an effort to situate her sexual liberation within a black cultural context. Take for example her experimental love poem, simply titled “Movement.” Written into twelve movements, “Movement” signifies as a “dark symphony” as it ebbs and flows between biographies of brown girlhood, histories of slavery, histories of wars, struggles of

liberation and civil rights in the American South, and tales of lesbian desire.⁴ Refrains that evoke the violence suffered by enslaved blacks situate what was then a time in which lesbian desire threatened a woman's freedom. Expressions such as "The evening star signals a tenuous freedom and workers"—i.e. cotton pickers in the state of Alabama—"sing toward the Wednesday prayer meeting/ eager for spirits" historically contextualizes the "tenuous freedom" of lesbian desire.

I couldn't shut up and be still
Whenever I was near Xavier
My best friend
I dreamed of sleeping with her before
The relentless pressure.
Her father, Pinky, let her drive his Dodge.
Xavier was a self-hating mulatto,
Always trying o pass,
But her nose was too broad.
I loved her.
The memory shames me.

Like Parker's "Movement in Black" discussed in chapter three, Clarke's poem "Movement" strikes a musical chord where tensions between histories of blackness, enslavement, war, and sexuality sound loudly and without compromise. The movements in "Movement" lyrically express black life, which Clarke conveys through multiple experiences—various movements in black. In spite of these tensions, Clarke writes these histories as connected, relational, and not mutually exclusive. She considers, in fact, the shame of a woman's (or her very own personal) lesbian desires in tandem to the shameful history of enslavement, racism, and wars. To experiment with love, the poem suggests, is to re-consider the wholes and "spaces" of blackness, and specifically what Evelynn

⁴ James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross, eds., *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1968).

Hammonds calls the “black (w)holes” of black female sexuality.⁵ A “liberation of community,” as expressed in “Movement,” concerns addressing these wholes by taking a vested interest in sexuality without losing its historical relationship to blackness. In other words, “Movement” is an experiment with Clarke’s love for blackness and Black Arts that allows for articulating one’s experiences in any life from multiple perspectives, moving simultaneously through, across, and between the spaces of race, sexuality, spirituality, and black liberation histories. Indeed, Clarke “studied space” in her poetry and learned to be both “historical” and “hysterical.”⁶ Love, however experimental, holds these spaces together.

Returning then to the interview we might understand tensions between the individual and the community as productive for Clarke, especially since they point to her resolve for writing poetry. An experimental art form itself, poetry enables Clarke to express liberation politics while providing her a space to negotiate and resolve (or at least attempt to resolve) these tensions. Cultivating a relationship between politics and poetry, deploying the literary genre as a form of consciousness-raising, was not only instructive for Clarke but something she learned from the Black Arts Movement.

I was in College at Howard University during the Black Arts movement and I saw how poetry mobilized people. I saw how immensely important it became to the black liberation struggle...When I came out as lesbian and recognized it as another liberation movement, I deployed the tools I had learned from The Black Arts Movement to the lesbian movement and I saw how important poetry was.⁷

⁵ Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” in Winston Napier, ed., *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 482-497.

⁶ Clarke, *Experimental Love*, “Morgan Harris,” 14.

⁷ Interview, Clarke, July 15, 2013.

Clarke deployed tools from the Black Arts Movement and applied them to the lesbian movement, which she says she “recognized” as “another liberation movement.” More importantly, Clarke’s translation of the cultural politics of Black Arts into lesbian space exemplifies yet another lesbian whose activist career continued, as this dissertation argues, well beyond the 1960s. By signaling the Black Arts Movement as an instructive literary era from which she drew *loving inspiration* for her poetry and activism, Clarke also reaches back to the civil rights era of the 1960s.

In this chapter, I locate the life and activism of the black lesbian poet Cheryl Clarke in the discourse of love and liberation that emerged in the Black Arts Movement. Clarke, a self-proclaimed student of Audre Lorde, provides a more explicit conversation on love yet unexplored in this dissertation—one centered on the black female body and lesbian sexuality; a wild experimental and disruptive love. Situating her work as outgrowth of Black Arts Movement aesthetics and attending to her critically acclaimed *Living As A Lesbian*, I argue that Clarke’s praxis of wild love, while rooted in the black experience, works to liberate the black female body from colonized notions of sexuality and black respectability.

The Love That Finally Began To Shout Its Name

“I was a brown ball of a chap/ when a small light-skinned Negro working woman/ refused to give up her seat to a white bus rider,” writes Clarke in the first movement of her poem, “Movement.”⁸ Having come of age in the Civil Rights movement—witnessing Rosa Parker’s refusal to relent to fierce anti-black racism, Clarke understood early on the necessity to develop a political consciousness—it was key to her survival as well as her

⁸ Clarke, *Experimental Love*, “Movement,” 32.

“self-sufficiency and self-determination.”⁹ Before “coming out,” however, Clarke struggled to articulate and affirm herself as black lesbian because there were few positive and visible black lesbians that she could identify with. “My everyday life as a Black lesbian writer is” she writes, “marked by the struggle to be a (sexual) black lesbian, the struggle for the language of sexuality, and the struggle to not be” in the words of black feminist critic Hortense Spillers, “the beached whale of the sexual universe.”¹⁰ As she writes in her essay “Saying the Least Said, Telling the Least Told: The Voices of Black Lesbian Writers,” the struggle to be an “out” lesbian is simultaneous with “the struggles to be a conscious, black, identified (and anti-racist) black person.”¹¹ In other words, her developing racial and sexual political consciousness co-constituted each other. As a black lesbian feminist, Clarke could not fully develop one without developing the other—articulating and practicing both were critical to her understanding of individual and collective liberation in (and for) Black America.

Attending Howard University “during the black consciousness era of the sixties,” Clarke found herself in “pursuit of role models—in life and literature.”¹² She started this search by teaching herself “historic and contemporary black male literature.”¹³ Baldwin anchored her studies while “Wright, Ellison, McKay, Hughes, and [that] strange Jean Toomer” began to fulfill her yearning for black literature.¹⁴ Although she would soon discover black women’s literature, the primary group with which she would “enter into dialogue with,” Clarke found that trying to model essays, poems, and criticisms after the

⁹ Cheryl Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks: the Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980-2005* (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2006), 133.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

compulsory heterosexuality of novels, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *There Eyes Were Watching God*, a "futile effort." It was not until her later years as a graduate student at Rutgers University during the melee of gay liberation that she found a contingent of affirming self-identified and soul saving political lesbians whom all enabled Clarke to step out of the proverbial closet and into the life. Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn and Pat Parker, the "foresisters" of an "insurgent multi-cultural feminism" whom all made it possible for her to self-assuredly articulate links between lesbian love and black liberation in the 1980s. "I was among a sisterhood of lesbian poets who interpreted the love that had finally begin to shout its name and its complexity in tongues of images and viscerally writing a new cultural history" of black liberation.¹⁵ Clarke wrote poetry "as a way of entering into political dialogue" with her peers.¹⁶ In these dialogues, Clarke would shamelessly "speak the love that cannot call its name, to sing that thing not named, and give a body to that 'nameless...shameless impulse.'"¹⁷

Repeatedly however, Clarke names the Black Arts Movement as providing inspiration for her writing, once referring to its insurgence as her "mentoring movement."¹⁸ "The new black poets of the Black Arts Movement became my first literary role models."¹⁹ Like the Civil Rights Movement more generally, the Black Arts Movement began to fade. However, black lesbians, like Clarke, kept the Black Arts tradition alive and well in their poetry. "By the time black lesbian feminists became visible and active," writes Cheryl Clarke, "the Black Power/ Black Arts phase of the Afro-American freedom struggle had waned; and," she concludes, "J. Edgar Hoover's

¹⁵ Ibid, 267.

¹⁶ Ibid, 133.

¹⁷ Ibid, 263.

¹⁸ Ibid, 140.

¹⁹ Ibid., 134.

counter-intelligence program had destroyed or disabled most revolutionary black nationalist organizations.”²⁰ The decline of Civil Rights and Black Nationalist organizing ushered in for her a new cultural politics of freedom un-assailed by Hoover’s destructive counter-intelligence tactics: love. “As black lesbian feminists” Clarke asserts, “we had learned (within the various social justice movements of the nineteen sixties) to invent our political identities and histories; *articulate a ‘belonging,’ connection, and solidarity with lesbians of all colors as well as black communities*, construct a utopian narrative, and adapt a cultural logic that intersected with gender, sexuality, and class politics” (*After Mecca*, 122). Against the Civil Rights and Black Arts/ Black Power declension narratives—which are often written by historians a few years removed by the times—black lesbian poetry and poetry by black lesbians employed love as a cultural vanguard, and in doing so rearticulated and re-imagined the importance of beloved community set forth by King in the 1960s as well as the Black Arts Movement’s connections between black love and black poetry. While emergent black lesbian poetry rejected compulsory heterosexuality and static descriptions of black female subjectivity just as it rejected of “patriarchal narratives” and the “Western white aesthetic,” Clarke and her lesbian feminist contemporaries nevertheless drew inspiration from the Black Arts Movement. For Clarke, the Black Arts Movement served as a generative source from which she understood the political possibilities of poetry and understood the inherent connection between black poetry and love. The most prominent cultural source of the Black Arts Movement was its publication, *Negro Digest*—later named *Black World*. *Negro Digest/ Black World* provided a space where black artists, poets, and writers could express their

²⁰ Cheryl Clarke, *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 126.

blackness and theorize about liberation. Revisiting this publication helps to historically situate Clarke's vested interest in love.

“On The Road to Liberation”: Negro Digest & Black Poetry, 1968-1975

First launched in 1942 by John H. Johnson, *Negro Digest* was a monthly publication that gave positive press to African Americans. Barred from mainstream media in the South for example—unless they were connected to a major crime—African Americans had limited mediums through which to portray themselves as creatively intellectual, politically sentient, and dignified men and women in an America beset by Jim Crow, dealing with the tragic realities of World War II, and economically devastated by the Great Depression. Given that capitalist economic institutions were set against African American success, Johnson set out to defy the logics of black inhumanity by creating an array of print media outlets including *Jet*, *Ebony Man*, *Ebony* magazines, and *Negro Digest*. Modeled after the popular *Reader's Digest*, *Negro Digest* presented—via full-length articles and not “just digest”—culture and politics from a uniquely black perspective and as such was widely successful with monthly sales exceeding 150,000.²¹ However, due to its high production and circulations costs, Johnson ceased the publication of *Negro Digest* in 1951—by this time *Ebony* magazine was thriving, so Johnson did not consider ending his first-brainchild a major loss. The readers of *Negro Digest* demanded, however, for a revitalizing of *Negro Digest* and a decade later, in 1961, Johnson began publishing *Negro Digest* once more. This time however, Johnson

²¹ Clovis E. Semmes (compiler), *Roots of Afrocentric Thought: A Reference Guide to Negro Digest/ Black World, 1961-1976* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998).

bequeathed the editorial management of *Negro Digest* to Hoyt Fuller, “a sensitive and richly talented writer and cultural critic.”²²

In the years between 1961 and 1966 Fuller transformed the magazine into an enriching cultural purveyor of and for black cultural politics. Under Hoyt’s editorial management, “*Negro Digest* became a comprehensive publication of critical analysis and literary expression,” writes Clovis Seems. “Through the pages of *Negro Digest*,” Seems continues, “Hoyt Fuller became a major architect of the Black Arts and Black Consciousness movement of the mid-1960s and 1970s,” and was crucial to providing national visibility to “the new African-American cultural renaissance.” As historian Walter C. Daniels notes, *Negro Digest* became, “the principal journal of the growing coalescence between political and artistic activism. It was,” Daniels concludes, “a medium for illustrating the black aesthetic that lay at the heart of a new consciousness.”²³ *Negro Digest* played a fundamental role in what Howard Ramsey has called “the production of Black Art” as it assembled and presented the nation with a community of writers and critics who represented a most “complete voice of the Black Arts and Black Consciousness movement.”²⁴ In short, *Negro Digest* operated as an intellectual vehicle that melded politics and art; it functioned as a creative venue that cultivated the importance of not just theory and practice, but lived experiences as essential to the development of black political thought. *Negro Digest* gave voice to African Americans and more importantly it provided a space where African Americans poets, artists, and intellectuals were in constant dialogue with each other about the politics of the day.

²² Seems, *Roots of Afrocentric Thought*, xi.

²³ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Also see Howard Ramsey II, *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of Black Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

By 1968 *Negro Digest* had long held public forums on questions of black poetry. However, it was not until October of that year—five months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.—that the publication’s Editor devoted an entire issue to poetry, marking the beginning of the annual poetry issue. Headlined, “Black Poets and Their Publications,” the October 1968 issue published poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, Dudley Randall, Sonia Sanchez, Leroi Jones (the late Amiri Baraka), Mari Evans, and other lesser-known poets. The leading essay, however, ground the importance of poetry as a cultural vessel through which to articulate revolution. Titled, “Road to Liberation: The Fragmented Movement,” its author, S. E. Anderson, argues for a Revolutionary Nationalism rooted in black culture. Clarke notes that by the end of the 1960s “contemporary betrayals of the citizenship rights of black people” had caused profound destabilization within the black liberation struggle.²⁵ With the assassinations of King, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X the black movement and its freedom agenda were, in Anderson’s estimation, no longer coherent, if they ever had been.²⁶ Anderson noted “five major factions within the black movement” that, in their differences, stifled the

²⁵ Cheryl Clarke, “‘After Mecca’: *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 10.

²⁶ Black lesbian Cheryl Clarke paints a much clearer picture between the sentiments of betrayal and the catalyst producing black poetry at the time; death and betrayal produced black poetry. In addition to the deaths of King, Malcolm X, and Evers she notes the bombing of the 16th Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley. The decision to refuse Fannie Lou Hamer a seat at the Democratic National Convention as a representative for the interracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Convention, the slaughtering of African American civil rights “foot soldiers” in Mississippi, “the beating death” of Jimmy Lee Jackson in Marion Alabama, the shooting death of Viola Liuzzo “on the road back from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama” and the Watts riots in 1965 Los Angeles, all were the social conditions compelling black poetry writing at the time. See Clarke, “*After Mecca’: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 10.

movement.²⁷ These major factions encompasses the: Integrationist, City-Statesman, back to Africa-ism, the Black Nation Concept, and Revolutionary Nationalism. Anderson's concern for these factions is that the language used to articulate the movement's goals were eerily similar and thus caused great confusion between poets. Whereas the first two factions were invested in pleasing the mainstream and culturally hegemonic white culture, the last three placed the concerns for black people at the center. Yet, "back to Africa-ism" and the "Black Nation Concept" were both problematic: the former assumed that indigenous Africans needed their concerns tended to and taken care of by their more "civilized" American brothers and sisters, while the Black Nation Concept did not do much to thwart systems of oppression that disenfranchise blacks, and failed to realize in the process of building a Black Nation that "black people built America by their enchained sweat, blood, and brains."²⁸ Anderson argued for Revolutionary Nationalism, which he believed was the correct path for change in general and institutional change in particular. Anderson stated: "the methodology for correct Revolutionary Nationalism is comprised of reformist stages, dialogues designed to change negroes into Blacks, education, life-long commitment and consistent criticism of self and ideology...and, most important, winning the confidence of black people."²⁹ Black writers, such as Don L. Lee and Carolyn Rodgers, responded to Anderson's call by asserting the importance of the black aesthetic generally, and specifically the formation of poetry as a cultural art form through which to promote Revolutionary Nationalism. In the late 1960s, the annual

²⁷ S. E. Anderson, "The Road to Liberation: The Fragmented Movement" in *Negro Digest* (A Johnson Publication: October 1968), 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

poetry issue aligned culture to activism and became the central most visible cultural site to advocate for black freedom.

In his 1968 essay “Toward a Black Aesthetic,” poet and critic Don L. Lee asks his readers three related questions: “What is a black poet? What is black poetry? And: What is the black aesthetic?”³⁰ Lee writes first that black poetry derives from the genuine experiences of African American life and history—black poetry regards the black experience as the primordial source of influence. “Poetry, like any other art form, is meaningless, that is, has no use...unless it be a specific act...carved bleeding from history, our experiences,” writes William Keorapetse Kgositsile, Lee’s contemporary.³¹ The black poet, whom in Lee’s imagination is gendered male, will “relate the black experience—in his essence, in his true experience—which is a result of his life-style.” The black poet is “not a Negro; he is first and foremost a *black man* (emphasis in the original).” Brother and sister poets published black poetry with the reality that black poetry concerned the experiences of black men. Once the black poet has established the black man as center, he will then “move toward a concept of *peoplehood*” shifting away, Lee suggests, from the subjective-I (black man) to “the *we*, to the *us*, and to the *our*” (emphasis in the original). Lee continues: “The black poet is, at all time, in tune with his people; he is an integral part of the black community; a walking example as opposed to a walking contradiction. Black, for the black poet,” Lee concludes, is a “way of life.”³²

Lee’s position exemplifies well how late 1960s discourse regarding black literature and the black aesthetic centered on black men. Through his many contributions

³⁰ Don L. Lee, “Toward a Black Aesthetic” in *Negro Digest* (A Johnson Publication: October 1968), 27.

³¹ William Keorapetse Kgositsile, “Young Black Poets” in *Negro Digest* (A Johnson Publication: October 1968), 47.

³² Don L. Lee, “Toward a Black Aesthetic” in *Negro Digest*, 27.

to *Negro Digest/ Black World*, Lee kept an invariable stance regarding authentic black poets and critics. “The Black critic,” he writes in the September 1970 Annual Poetry Issue, which *Black World* dedicates to “a strong man called Sterling Brown,”³³ is “first a Blackman who happens to write; just as the poet, he has the same, if not more, responsibility to his community to perform his function to the best of his ability. He understands,” Lee continues, “the main dilemma of the Black writer: ‘is he a *writer* who happens to be *Black* or he a *Black* man who happens to write?’”³⁴ Black male critics—including Stephen Henderson, Amiri Baraka and Lee himself—not only determined which theme authenticated the black aesthetic but they all categorically placed black men at the center of the black experience—all concerns for black progress were viewed from the plight of the black man. As such, black poets, in Lee’s formulations, were not to concern themselves with poetry as an art form. “Today, as far as the black poet is concerned, black people come first. People. Then art...Black poets write out of a concept of art for people’s sake and not arts for art’s sake...The black poet is writing to black people and not to white [people],” Lee concludes.³⁵ Lee proposes content analysis as a reading method to interpret and understand black poetry because at stake in imposing Western formal reading practices onto black poetry is mis-interpreting the inherent value of black life. There is a pedagogical undertone to Lee’s claims: instead of teaching people how to die, black poetry will instruct “the people how to live” in the face of white racist destruction. Thus, in the final analysis, the genuine merit of black poetry concerns an

³³ Stephen Henderson, “Dedication: A Strong Man Called Sterling Brown” in *Black World* (A Johnson Publication, September, 1970), 5-13.

³⁴ Don L. Lee, “Voices of the Seventies: Black Critics” in *Black World* (A Johnson Publication: September, 1970), 24.

³⁵ Don L. Lee, “Toward a Black Aesthetic” in *Negro Digest* (A Johnson Publication: October 1968), 28.

instructive love ethic. Committed black poets, Lee writes in sight of Kgositsile's notion of "young black poets," are-always engaged in "love poetry": "Black poetry comes out of a love for one's self, what is at the bottom, a love for one's people...it is the love of one's people that is embodied in his poetry, the will to survive as a nation of black people."³⁶ Lee's observations regarding love echo Clarke's: self-love is key to both individual and collective survival. Thus, a liberation of community hinges on a love of self. As questions about the black aesthetic continued love would function, to reference Chela Sandoval, as a "hermeneutics for social change."³⁷ Indeed, as an aesthetic quality and political concept, love held a kind of staying power that challenged patriarchal dominance and ushered in a feminist critique of black aesthetics.

In his essay, "Love In The Black Arts Movement: The Other American Exceptionalism" literary critic Keith D. Leonard argues that love was at the very heart of Black Arts Nationalism, and specifically the making of a Black Nationalist subject beyond masculine, male-centered, subjectivity. Because love focused on "embracing the togetherness" of community and family, the locus of the black experience shifted from a narrow focus on the black man to include experiences of black women. In their literary productions throughout the Black Arts Movement artists posited "an open and flexible Black Nationalist subject by constituting its radicalism through its heart." This "loving" Black Nationalist subject radically "enacts both the individual openness and the resolute communalism" that "constitutes an American exceptionalist counter-narrative, complete with the counter-imperialism of masculinist racial authenticity, a counter narrative in

³⁶ Don L. Lee, "Toward a Black Aesthetic" in *Negro Digest*, 28; William Keorapetse Kgositsile, "Young Black Poets" in *Negro Digest*, 38-48.

³⁷ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of The Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

which uses of emotions—again, especially love but also anger—validate some of the terms of the political radicalism in [The Black Arts] narrative.” In other words, “power and love” co-constituted an “alternative radicalism” for the Black Arts activist-poet. Leonard goes on to cite poetry by Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni to demonstrate how these artists both refused a culture of consumerism and buy into the “larger American myth of democratic egalitarianism” and “wealth of mutual regard.” Instead, they created a wealth of their own, cashing in, that is, their “feelings” for a critical purchase of “black love.” Leonard interprets, for example, Giovanni’s assertion in her poem “Nikki Rosa” that “black love is black wealth” as a statement that constitutes and affirms “a principle of emotional health” that promotes togetherness and subsequently liberation.

Leonard’s analysis trenchantly speaks to the historical import of love—what he calls the “epistemology of affect.” By mapping love’s affect across life in Black Arts Movement, he takes us beyond the otherwise all-encompassing and overwhelming hetero-masculinist discourse of revolutionary Black Nationalisms. While he does not quite ignore the revolutionary impulses of the movement, Leonard attends to what Sara Ahmed calls the “cultural politics of emotion,” and specifically ways that love is “narrated as the emotion that energises” Black Arts poetry and becomes the “property of a particular kind of subject.”³⁸ By locating love as political force across the Black Arts Movement, Leonard encourages us to reconsider love as a “site of possibility”—pace Wahneema Lubiano—for black liberation struggles.³⁹ Love works to articulate the

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Culture Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 122-123.

³⁹ In his essay, Leonard draws from Wahneema Lubiano’s “Standing in for the State: Black Nationalism and ‘Writing’ the Black Subject.” In that essay Lubiano “identifies literary criticism as a “site of possibility” for the articulation of “the best version of the Black Nationalist subject.” Leonard sees love, as it was imagined and poeticized in Black Arts poetry, as one of these

political and national energies and needs of black folks while simultaneously improving relations between people in black communities, “producing a particular kind of subject” whose is both open to difference and takes a vested interest in community-building. Drawing upon philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Leonard avers: “love [in the Black Arts Movement] was not one thing at all, but a complex way of being with another person.” This complexity of togetherness does the work of love; it demonstrates that love “does not conquer all” yet becomes “the means to make you free.” The most effective way to explore and get closer to this freedom is, Leonard writes, “to turn to stories ourselves,” stories that are literary, textual, and indeed personal.

Leonard’s formulations on “love in the Black Arts movement” are useful to consider in relationship to Clarke’s “experimental love” for a few reasons. First they suggest that black liberation starts with the individual accepting love as tool for empowerment. Relatedly, reconfiguring ones difference, and being open and receptive to this difference, could possibly led to individual/ personal growth and transformation. A Black Nationalist subject who chose to employ and embrace love as a form of radical activism would, through writing poetry centered on being black in America, improve the dynamics between black men and women because love required stories about black men and black women. Indeed, if a revolutionary Black Nationalist subject was truly interested in validating black poetry as a liberatory tool, then he or she had to be open to and interested in promoting, in the name of love, a diversity of black experiences. Although written during the emergence of the black feminist liberation movement, Clarke’s *Living As A Lesbian* expands upon these ideas of love in the Black Arts

possibilities. See Keith D. Leonard, “Love in the Black Arts Movement: The Other American Exceptionalism” in *Callaloo*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 2013), 618-624.

Movement. She tells her own story of freedom and love by attending to lesbian feelings and actualizations—which is a crucial step on the road to liberation because in spite of all the Black Arts discourse of love over the years, representations of black womanhood, and particularly black female sexuality was steeped in compulsory heterosexuality.

By the 1970s, The Annual Poetry Issue of the *Negro Digest* continued its road to liberation by claiming and re-claiming the importance of feelings. Leading the September 1970 publication with his essay, “We Are Our Feelings: The Black Aesthetic,” Ameer Baraka (aka Amiri Baraka) asks: “what does a black aesthetic mean?” Baraka echoes earlier formulations of black poetry posited by Don Lee and Kerorapeste: “Our art [should] be ourselves as self-conscious with a commitment to revolution. The purpose of our writing,” Baraka asserts, “is to create the nation.” Aside from stating this purpose, Baraka does not offer concrete definition of “our feelings,” nor what they constitute. Carolyn Rodgers—who believed that writing black poetry “should be motivated by love”—gives in her essay, “An Exorcise: Uh-Nat’chal Thang—The Whole Truth Us,” a feminist shape to this “feeling” by articulating love through a politics and poetics of black motherhood.

In the prefatory remarks of her essay, Rodgers defines for her reader how she deploys the term exorcise: “[an] act or process of cleaning from evil malignant influences.” She then states the goal of her essay: “We seek the whole truth which is ultimate, painful, beautiful, ugly and liberating.” The white/ European literary establishment represents the “evil malignant influences.” However, Rodgers argues that in their quick and impulsive reactions to the oppressive racist regimes in America, African Americans have done less to interrogate the divisive problems existing within

their communities at the time, and particularly the strife between black women and black men. Addressing her mentor, Rodgers writes: “For Hoyt W. Fuller: Do not be disheartened. A people cannot build relevant beautiful lasting institutions until they build (create) beautiful lasting, relevant selves.” Evoking the history of slavery as the root of self-destruction in black America, Rodgers reminds her reader—and Fuller specifically—of the gendered dynamics of slavery, with respect to the black mother’s survival. “Ten years of rhetoric, of desire, of need to believe, i.e. affirm one’s humanity and loveliness, is hardly enough to cancel out 400 years of denial of self, destructiveness, apathy inertia. Many of us still love our hate of self. The hate we know, that which is familiar, taught and well learned....We grew the way we were told, the way we were forced to be. And we survived. Which simply means,” Rodgers conclude, “that they could not kill the love a mother has for her child. Half-white, bastard, or otherwise. Even though every Black mother knew that survival meant degradation, pain, distortion of self...they could not kill the mother’s love for the extension of herself. Black life.”⁴⁰ Rodgers weaves together the fabrics of motherhood, love, and generational survival—a “Corregidorian leitmotif”—to boldly formulate a feminist statement relating black women’s criticalness to black, humanity, the black aesthetic, and finally to black revolution; to undo the shame of blackness lurking below the seduction of “black is beautiful” rhetoric, which ignores the pain and suffering of the black past and, indeed, the present. “For, after all,” she insists, “the *survival of a nation rests with its women*. If a mother will not love, protect, foster, and nurture her children for life, as tragic as that life might be, her children will die. Spiritually or physically, or both.” The hopes and dreams of mothers are passed to all of

⁴⁰ Carolyn Rodgers, “Act of Exorcise: Uh Nat’chal Thang—The Whole Truth-Us” in *Black World* (A Johnson Publication, September 1971), 4.

their children, especially their daughters, whom must remember their mother's convictions. Enslaved and disenfranchised black mothers "had dreams, desires, and hopes that refused to die. Refused to be forgotten. Those dreams, desires, and hopes," Rodgers reminds her reader, "are [now] us, [whom] now speak, Black African Essence, re-incarnate."⁴¹

Rodgers signifies on the black experience, using black arts conventions to fashion a feminist politics of revision. By rooting black women within these experiences—that is by explicating the gendered experiences of slavery and black women—she dislodges black men from the center of well-worn articulations of blackness and in the process, anticipates Angela Davis's *Women, Race, And Class*. For both women "the legacy of slavery" provides "standards for a new womanhood."⁴² Rodgers aims are less oppositional than situational. With the social tide and political tone shifting in black America, from a militant male centered discourse to a certifiable black feminism concerned with emotion and feeling (as well as militancy!), scores of black women began rethinking black history and culture from the position of women. "To think that it would have been more honorable not to survive negates the beauty, the meaning of life and love. The latter of which is so often distorted, beyond recognition. Love is the key," Rodgers concludes; the "nat'chal thang." "The Whole-Truth-Us," is that Black women are the preceptors through which revolution of particular kind—black love—will manifest and suture divides in black communities, especially those between black men and black feminist women. Achieving a revolutionary nationalism, a national literature, and any sort of black nation, Rodgers insist upon in her essay, requires black women to speak to

⁴¹ Rodgers, "Uh Nat'chal Thang—The Whole Truth-Us," 5.

⁴² Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). See chapter one for more on Davis's formulations on "new standards of womanhood."

black men, like Hoyt Fuller, who in turn must listen—and they must listen out of love if the roads of black liberation are the ultimate goal. “Then from us will flow the beauty and strength of our motherland. We will unleash our passion. We will grow and move, rebuild and *repair* ourselves. And live whole, again,” Rodgers concludes.⁴³

Throughout the pages of the annual poetry issues of *Negro Digest/ Black World*, Carolyn Rodgers, along with a host of other black women poets, turned to love to challenge the patriarchal, male-centered, discourse of black poetry. Black women poets populated the movement in droves and their discourses of love illuminated their social and political love for black men. Black lesbian poets, some during the time and many later throughout the black feminist movement, continued the black arts tradition by focusing on black life but they also explored the politic of living lesbian lives despite numerous regimes of oppression. Clarke’s *Living As A Lesbian* constitutes a neo-Black Arts production that, in the name of love, takes a vested interest in liberation. Unlike many Black Arts poets though, including women, Clarke considers the nexus between racial and sexual freedom by attending to erotic female agency. Indeed, Clarke breaks herself away from “race-motherhood” that undergirds Roger’s criticisms in an effort to develop a fierce sense of erotic liberation.

In her poem, “No More Encomiums”—which is also published in *Living As A Lesbian*—Clarke writes against these motherhood poetics. Indeed, she even asserted

⁴³ I would be remiss if I did not point out that Rodgers’s feminist criticism echoes a black feminist manifesto spoken by the magnanimous Ann Julia Cooper to a “colored clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church” located in Washington, D.C. in 1886. Cooper perorates: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing, or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enter with me.”⁴³ Black feminist echoes is indeed an affect of Rodgers’s central point, which situates black women within lived experiences that if properly acknowledged can further authenticate the black literary aesthetic and propel nationalism and revolution in America to new heights.

saying in my interview with her that she no longer wished to show “deference to the mother.” Clarke’s anger emotes fiercely across the poem:

This anger so visceral I could shit it
and still be constipated
My ass is sore with the politics
of understanding the best given the circumstances.

Clarke does not divulge the details of the relationship with her mother/ lover, but her speaker clearly seems hurt over them because they limit, the poem suggests, her expression, which in turn hurts her.

Given the circumstances of her crowded life
I cannot publish this poem
She sits on her bed working her
crossword puzzle searching back over 64
years of words to fit the boxes
And me sulking over 33 years of anger
edited for the space of these lines.

When the poem’s speaker finally decides to tell her mother/ lover that her trickster ways—“in her aging she trick me”—have hurt her, she comes to a new understanding of this love for her mother/ lover. One in which she realizes that the burdens of her mother’s circumstance will no longer suppresses her erotic energies. “I had this dream of her,” Clarke writes—yep like Martin Luther King Jr. and Pat Parker—“she cursed me and/ I determined I’d tell her she hurt me...Yes, in this very dream I rehearsed the words I’d say to her—in spite of the circumstances and fuck/ the circumstances—/to finally stand up for myself, to say:/ ‘You hurt me and you always hurt me.’” Speaking of hurt—which is not fully articulated in the poem but sensibly intuited as lesbiphobia and/ or a lack of

love between two women—gives the speaker a new appreciation for her mother/ lover, whom she calls, “my champion/ my song/ my soul/ my beauty.”⁴⁴

For Clarke liberation and freedom surely mean the power to frankly articulate her physical desires for other women and embrace the power of her lesbianism. Indeed, erotic language constitutes a crucial site for black liberation because it gives Clarke the power to speak and name black women’s sexualities and desires without shame and in the name of love and liberation.

Living As A Lesbian

In her own words, Clarke asserts that *Living As A Lesbian* “served to advance a lesbian aesthetic and perspective—politically, lyrically, and unequivocally.” In fact, she “plainly wanted to advance Audre Lorde’s thesis in her piece ‘Uses of the Erotic,’ by promoting the concept of lesbian sex.”⁴⁵ The concept of lesbian sex, however, goes far beyond shared eroticism between women. Clarke’s text makes the central claim that lesbian sex becomes a source of survival for black lesbians in spite of so much racial and urban disorder. Indeed, *Living As A Lesbian* searches for eros as a life practice in spite of crippling decay, social disruption, and psychic despair.

Clarke opens *Living As A Lesbian* by stating: “14th Street was gutted in 1968.” Without much warning, Clarke forces her reader to witness crippling disrepair and social disruption. She also wants her reader to never forget the death of one of the Civil Rights Movements most visible leaders: Martin Luther King Jr. King, who was assassinated in 1968. Thus, *Living As A Lesbian* can be read as a text concerned with civil rights and

⁴⁴ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, “No More Encomiums,” 40-42.

⁴⁵ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, 141-142.

continuing the efforts for black liberation; it's a text that begins on memory and the question of *living* liberation beyond these times. Indeed, it's a text written against decline and at the intersection of racial and sexual freedom.

Themes of violence and urban decay encapsulate many of the social issues that *Living As A Lesbian* grapples with. In “how like a man” Clarke describes the intimate details of sexual violence enacted by the Ku Klux Klan, while in “Urban Gothic” she explores the mass-tragedy of police brutality. Clarke writes:

Laying cross the street from the projects –
concrete camp where 246 people of color
spend their confinement contained –
the courthouse belches dark folk
like Squibb labs belches the stench of dog

Here, Clarke emphasizes the social plight of a “246 people of color” through alliteration and specifically literary consonance. We not only read and associate “concrete camp” and “confinement contained” with scores of people of color, but we repeatedly hear the harshness, and indeed the twice freighted “belches,” of racism that both define their existence and sound loudly from anti-black institutions, like “the court house.” Liking “246 people of color”—“poor people/ black, purple, umber, burgundy, yellow/ red, olive, and tan people...On crutches/ In drag/ With child and children/ Dissidents, misfits, malcontents, and marginals, serving out our sentences on the streets of/ America/ spread-eagled against walls and over car hood—to “the stench of dog” not only dehumanizes them but also blackens their social status with darkness (“dark folks).”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 16.

In my reference of “blackening” I am drawing from Darieck Scott’s succinct readings of Fanon’s articulations of blackening in both *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of The Earth*: a process of colonial violence hell-bent on dehumanizing blackness through methods of social

Clarke's attentiveness to the social conditions of African Americans in a racist America situates the black lesbian—as both persona and narrative voice—in what black lesbian novelist Jewelle Gomez calls a “believable cultural context.”⁴⁷ Not only is the cultural context refracted through the social milieu circumscribing black life in the poem, but it also materializes as a result of Clarke's language choice, which intonates the poem with black musical impulses, especially the blues. Instead of saying laying *across* the street, Clarke rebuffs standard Western English and says laying *cross* the street. Clarke's rhetorical choice rhythmically enacts the value of Black English Vernacular as a viable—and dare I say “authentically cool”—linguistic Black Arts practice to articulate the black urban experience. Stated differently, Clarke spits rhymes about the “same circumstances that have shaped our Black society over the past 400 years.”⁴⁸ Thus, to live as a lesbian, and specifically to remember and to write history as black lesbian, requires that Clarke situate her life within these racial, cultural, linguistic, performative, and historical contexts. These contexts, in turn, help Clarke elucidate how black history and culture shapes her social and political subjectivity as a black lesbian. Yet, a closer reading of the opening poems in *Living as a Lesbian*—“14th street was gutted,” “Wearing My Cap Backwards,” “How Like a Man,” “Urban Gothic,” and “Auction”—reveals a trivialization of the black female body, and particularly the black lesbian body, as a subjugated member of the community. Clarke echoes these sentiments elsewhere writing: “The black lesbian is not only absent from the pages of black political analysis, her image as a

erasure. See, Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ Jewelle Gomez, “A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbian Fiction by Women” in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 114.

⁴⁸ Gomez, “A Cultural Legacy Denied,” 117.

character in literature and her role as a writer are blotted out from or trivialized in literary criticism written by black women.”⁴⁹ With a lesbian raconteur, Clarke simultaneously illuminates and subverts this tendency throughout *Living As A Lesbian*.

In the first poem of the *Living As A Lesbian*, Clarke recalls “the death of Otis Redding,” who died just a year before the gutting of 14th Street. In a different poem that appears much later in the volume, though still similarly vexed by urban strife, Clarke asserts that “her lover” left the city “without warning” but “for a less carcinogenic zone.”⁵⁰ Despite the poem's intimate subject, Clarke does not establish a temporal specificity in “since my lover left the city.” When did her lover leave? Did she experience the gutting depicted in 14th Street? Was she one of the “246 people of color” “belched” out by the courthouse referenced in “Urban Gothic?” The lesbian persona in “since my lover left” embodies an *a historical* subjectivity; if it were not for Clarke’s allusion to a “carcinogenic zone,” readers would be left wondering about the poem's temporal placement because she, like her neighbors on 14th street, left the city, too, in 1968. In spite of Clarke’s allusions, the lesbian materiality amounts to an urban myth because in these poems she is imagined outside of time and space. At the very moment that she is created, she voluntarily distances herself from the community and the buildings that “we had known all our lives.” The flight of her body as it absconds to a place elsewhere does not, it seems, have the same value as the memory of Redding’s dead body. The currency of a black man’s dead body has more value—the body is named and socially situated—than a living body that is female, unnamed, and lesbian.

⁴⁹ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, 72.

⁵⁰ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 69.

Early in the text we, we must assume that the black lesbian body has also been removed, gentrified, nearly burned, and belched out by the courthouse alluded to in “Urban Gothic.” Such assumptions guide our hopes that the black lesbian's fate is intertwined and enmeshed with the urban community described throughout *Living As A Lesbian*. In addition to their focus on post-emancipated urban spaces and African American communities, these poems politely whisper into the reader's ear important concerns about the invisible life of the black lesbian who is, after all, the raconteur of these narratives. It is not until the poem, “Acceptance” that Clarke’s lesbian persona negotiates with blackness vis-à-vis the black past:

You say to me, ‘I need you to let me die,’
and months of denial are transformed into
acceptance. I begin to see your funeral
barge carried off the Cape into the primordial
Atlantic.⁵¹

As if needing permission to compartmentalize the history of blackness as indexed by slavery—facilitated by the “primordial Atlantic” and further embodied by the “Ashanti pendant” placed in the hand of the dead—the speaker performs a ritual of respect for the dead: she dresses the “ears and wrists” with “the aboriginal/ turquoise and coral” to ensure “healing and protection.” The poem's imagery captures the speaker's passion for this history of blackness by attending to the importance of ritual colors. Rather than simply commemorating the dead, however, the oral tradition and its ceremonial rites seek “perpetuity and regeneration.” Clarke—and/ or the persona she creates—does not break with the past as the poem may suggest. This ritual of death allows the lesbian persona to, in the words of literary critic Sharon Holland, “speak about the unspoken—to name the place *within* and *without* their cultural milieu where they have slipped between the cracks

⁵¹ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 20.

of [black] language.”⁵² Indeed, the lesbian persona’s acceptance speech marks a pivotal moment in the volume: Clarke’s own “perpetuity and regeneration” which manifests in the very next poem, “living as a lesbian on the make.” In this poem, Clarke begins to tell her story in earnest, cultivating in fact her personal history from the black past in order to contextualize her present and *presence*, and to dream of a hopeful future.

An Act of Resistance

In her essay, “The Everyday Life of Black Lesbian Sexuality,” Clarke writes: “I learned early that ‘love’ (read *sex*) was something I had best not mess with. Love was best left to Hollywood and television” (emphasis in the original).⁵³ Clarke’s mother consumed “movies, television, and books” that promoted heterosexual sex, and specifically black female sexual passivity. However, Clarke’s “earliest concept” of love opposed heterosexual normativity. “My earliest concept of how I wanted my sexual life to be was free from obligation to a partner, namely a husband.” Although her mother tried to suppress her own daughter’s erotic energies, it manifested in platonic relationships between she and her girlfriends, who would gather once a month on Sundays in the Clarke household and revel in the spirit of excitable female friendships. These friendships cultivated Clarke’s erotic sensibilities and helped her to realize that she “wanted to be in the company of women.” In that moment Clarke began her dreams of “being the lover of women, and those dreams,” she writes, “would become poetry.”⁵⁴

⁵² Sharon Holland, *Raising The Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2000), 4-5.

⁵³ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, 227.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

Clarke's poem, "Of Althea and Flaxie," which she published in her first book of poetry, *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* (1983), represents her earliest example of where her lesbian desires and dreams converge. Clarke writes:

In 1943 Althea was a welder
very dark
very butch
and very proud
love to cook, sew, and drive a car
and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman
who met her everyday after work
in a tight dress and high heels
light-skinned and high-cheekboned
who love to shoot, fish, play poker
and did not give a damn who knew her 'man' was a woman.

Althea and Flaxie, the poem's two heroines, are bold women. In the decades between the 1940s and 1970s, the two affectionately pronounce their love for one another. What's more, they do so without the fear of public retribution. During these decades, Althea and Flaxie do not fear McCarthyism and its insidious "witch hunts"; and neither were they victimized by pathologizing discourse about "inversion."⁵⁵ Within black feminist literary history, we can imagine Althea and Flaxie as the bona fide lesbian prototypes of Nel and Sula; or that they represent the dreamy relationship Celie and Shug nearly accomplished; and that perhaps they knew of Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield's erotically torturous "friendship."⁵⁶ Despite similarities with their literary sisters, however, Althea and Flaxie distinguish themselves by a willingness to buck social mores—"in 1950 Althea wore

⁵⁵ In eighteenth and nineteenth centuries discourses of modern human civilization, social scientists, doctors, therapists, and psychologists all associated blackness and homosexuality with mental perversions and other social sicknesses. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering The Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Vernon A. Rosario, *Science and Homosexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵⁶ These are of course black women characters in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Nella Larson's *Passing*.

suits and ties.” Here, the two women relish in their performance of butch-femme gender roles even as “people openly challenged their flamboyance.” Their “practice of love,” or what Teresa De Lauretis calls the “embodied component of desire,” is evident in how they publicly flaunt their relationship.⁵⁷ When the girls bragged over break of their sundry loves

Flaxie blithely told them her old lady Althea took her dancing
Every weekend
And didn’t give a damn who knew she clung to a woman.

When the boys on her shift complained of their wives,
Althea boasted of how smart her ‘stuff’ Flaxie was
And did not care who knew she loved the mind of a woman.

In the introduction to her semi-autobiographical *The Days of Good Looks*, Clarke writes that "Of Althea and Flaxie" “established a mythology/ genealogy of black lesbian love and solidified my reputation as a black lesbian poet.” Clarke’s reputation as a black poet centered sexual freedom and her virtuosity in articulating black women’s sexual agency. “With the publication of my second volume of poetry, *Living As A Lesbian*, I quarreled with,” Clarke admits, “this dismissal of sex. As long as my freedom to be sexual with women is endangered and under attack, as long as lesbian sexuality is the most invisible sexuality, politically, my poetry must be a medium for the sexual politics of lesbianism,” she concludes in her essay, “The Everyday Life of Black Lesbian Sexuality.”⁵⁸

Living As A Lesbian, Clarke asserts, “established me as a sexual outlaw, when really it was (is) the poetry that is the ‘outlaw.’”⁵⁹ Over the years, Clarke’s reputation as a “sexual outlaw” would distinguish her amongst her contemporaries. Her poetics, seen in

⁵⁷ Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, 231-232.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

exemplary poems such as “Vicki and Daphne,” were unapologetically erotic. At a time when many black women poets coded their sexual desires through strident metaphors in exchange for cultural visibility, capital gain, and acceptance within the social economies of expressive arts, Clarke boldly rejected such compromises. Take, for example, her description in “Vicki and Daphne” of Vicki’s anticipation for her lover’s arrival home: “Where is Daphne? Surely she’d be home soon so Vicki could/ take off her clothes and complain about her aching pussy.”⁶⁰ Clarke’s literary corpus—as evidenced in poems like “Vicki and Daphne” and “Of Althea and Flaxie”—argue not for a “dismissal of sex” but for more robust language practices that firmly imagine and assert black lesbians within larger histories of black social life (on 14th street), political resistance, and linguistic decolonization—or what she calls speaking in “pigs latin.”⁶¹

In *Mutha is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*, La Monda Horten Stallings argues that critical and theoretical approaches to black women’s sexuality in the twenty-first century celebrate only limited expressions of black female sexuality. Stallings posits that despite recent critical work on black female sexuality—she notes the work of Evelyn Hammonds, Evelyn Higginbotham, Darlene Clarke Hine and Tricia Rose—there still remain gaps in an exploration of black women’s sexuality theorized against and beyond silence and dissemblance. Towards this end, she writes:

What remains clear is that century after century Black women’s discussions about sexuality in critical and creative efforts, as well as in real life and fiction, have been marred by the notion of silence, secrecy, and whispers. Some Black women may have been longing to tell, but there were those Black women who have been telling, and in the telling, they have been bawdy, explicit, and downright

⁶⁰ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 47-49.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12

shameless in their expressions of sexual desires, despite reprimands they have received. It is those voices that we still have trouble celebrating.⁶²

In spite of her commitments to black women's liberation, and her career as a prolific writer, scholars have not celebrated Cheryl Clarke's voice. Clarke's radical black female sexuality constitutes what June Jordan theorized in the early 1990s as "a new politics of sexuality." Placing emphasis on "new," Jordan directly contests the silence that characterizes sexuality in America. Public discussion of sexuality can, Jordan argues, move folks "out of the shadows of our collective subjugation" and closer to Clarke's liberation of community.⁶³ Coming years later, Stallings describes this movement in her own work as "wildness." Wildness does not perpetuate the "stereotypes of wild women" associated with the jezebel, wench, tragic mulatto, or trollop caricatures. Instead, this embodiment and performance of sexuality is "a radical Black female subjectivity that consciously celebrates autonomy and self-assertion in the invention process of self."⁶⁴

Clarke's "wild" "new politics of sexuality" manifest throughout her work by naming herself as a lesbian. Writing in her essay, "New Notes on Lesbianism," Clarke describes this self-identifying philosophy as a political act of resistance that in turn subverts narrative regimes of invisibility. She writes:

I name myself "lesbian" because this culture oppresses, silences, and destroys lesbians, even lesbians who don't call themselves "lesbians." I name myself "lesbian" because I want to be visible to other Black lesbians. I name myself "lesbian" because I do not subscribe to predatory/ institutionalized heterosexuality. I name myself "lesbian" because I want to be with other women (and they don't have to call themselves "lesbians"). I name myself "lesbian" because it is a part of my vision. I name myself "lesbian" because being woman

⁶² LaMonda Horten Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Ohio State University Press, 2007), 4-5.

⁶³ June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die* (New York: Basic/ Civitas Books, 2002), 132.

⁶⁴ Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word*, 3.

identified has kept me sane. I call myself “Black,” too, because Black is my perspective, my aesthetic, my politics, my vision, my sanity.⁶⁵

Naming herself as a lesbian performs an “act of resistance” to the sexist, homophobic, and patriarchal culture of her early years as an emerging lesbian feminist, a radical act that recognizes black women’s historical struggles to claim and own their sexuality. Although Clarke mentions her blackness in a few lines, it too governs her political resistance. Thus, blackness and sexuality are immutable historical and cultural contexts that shape both her political life and the production of *Living As A Lesbian*.

Throughout her work, Clarke dedicates her poetry “to all the women hidden from history whose suffering and triumph have made it possible for me to call my name out loud.”⁶⁶ Although Angelina Weld Grimke does not occupy a critical center in any of her poetry, Clarke gestures towards Grimke as pioneering poet who—in light of Gloria Hull’s “historical, critical, and textual assessment” of Grimke’s revelatory “explicitly woman-identified poems”—has made her work possible.⁶⁷ Grimke’s silence and secrecy, instilled in her during the Harlem Renaissance, further inspires Clarke to “live the text out” very loudly. A brief turn to the life and work of Grimke helps to situate Clarke’s radical black female subjectivity as a significant contribution to the history of black women’s poetry in the U.S.

Writing about the “buried life” of black lesbian poet Angelina Weld Grimke, Gloria Hull posits that Grimke “lived her life in virtual isolation.”⁶⁸ Curious about what it

⁶⁵ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, “New Notes on Lesbianism,” 85-86.

⁶⁶ Ibid, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” 27.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 160.

⁶⁸ Akasha Gloria Hull, “Under the Days’: The Buried Life and Poetry of Angelina Weld Grimke” in Barbara Smith, *Home Girls*, 80.

meant to be “a Black Lesbian/ poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century,”

Hull asserts:

First it meant that you wrote (or half wrote)—in isolation—a lot which you did not show and knew you could not publish. It meant that when you did write to be printed, you did so in shackles—chained between the real experience you wanted to say and the conventions that would not give you voice. It meant that you fashioned a few race and nature poems, transliterated lyrics, and double-tongued verses which—sometimes (racism being what it is)—got published. It meant finally that you stopped writing altogether, dying, no doubt, ‘with your real gifts stifled within’—and leaving behind (in a precious few cases) the little that managed to survive of your true self in fugitive pieces.⁶⁹

In Grimke’s lifetime, black artists deployed African American expressivity as propaganda to “uplift the race” and contest stereotypical depictions of blackness. The “criteria” and “blue print” for Black Art was often, however, determined by men. Chief among these “taste makers” were W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Richard Wright. Unfortunately, the logics undergirding these criteria disavowed an expression of gender and sexuality, placing black women in complicated binds; as a result, black women writers like Grimke were “triplely disfranchised.” As black, woman, and lesbian, there was, Hull argues, “no space in which she could move”—hence the importance of Clarke’s poem “Space Invocation” discussed earlier in the chapter. The literary convention of the day imprisoned Grimke and contemporaries Georgia Douglas Johnson and Alice Dunbar Nelson.⁷⁰ She wrote in hushed and muted tones that favored double-entendre, as opposed to a more explicit, honest rhetoric. In this way, Grimke subsequently eschewed the very subject matter that inspired her craft and stimulated her imagination. In her final analysis, Hull writes that “Grimke lived a buried life...[she] was defeated. Flattened. Crushed. She

⁶⁹ Akasha Gloria Hull, “Under the Days,” 77.

⁷⁰ Gloria Hull, *Color, Sex, Poetry: Three Women Writes of The Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 1987).

is a lesson whose meaning each person will interpret as they see fit and are able. What she says to me is that we must work, write, [and] live, so that who and what she was never has to mean the same again.”⁷¹ Hull encourages black women writers to use more explicit language that honestly gives voice to their desires and sexuality.

Despite the parallel emergence of the black women’s liberation movement and the sexual revolution—in which Grimke did not participate—there was, Clarke explains, evidence of what Deborah McDowell also saw as “the changing same.”⁷² Although the times were different, black women’s sexuality often continued in silence and shame. In her essay, “She Still Wrote Out the Word Kotex on a Torn Piece of Paper Wrapped Up in A Dollar Bill,” Clarke provides “an overview of various linguistic expressions of sexuality, sexual identity, and the erotic” in black women’s poetry written after 1969—the year of the Stonewall rebellion, which public historian David Carter believes “sparked the gay revolution.”⁷³ This period signified “a variety of expressions speaking to sexual experience, desire, identity, and gratification,” which Clarke believed benefited black women because they were able “to evince an explicit consciousness of ourselves as sexual beings.”⁷⁴ However, despite this new movement toward sexual liberation, Clarke contends that her contemporaries—whom she names as Toni Cade Bambara, Mari Evans, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Gayl Jones, Silla Bouce, Toi Derricotte, and Ntozake Shange—often express black women as “heterosexual sexual beings” with notably few exceptions. Indeed, Clarke argues that—in spite of the proliferation of erotic

⁷¹ Hull, “Under the Days,” in *Home Girls*, 81.

⁷² Deborah McDowell, *The Changing Same: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁷³ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, p. 156; David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked The Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

⁷⁴ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, 158.

discourse that attends to black women's sexuality—black women's sexuality and lesbianism remains fraught with danger, fear, and loss, and often relies on coded language to produce its affect.

Critiquing Mari Evan's "I Am a Black Woman" and Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping" for a reliance on hyperbole in their "references to ancient African Kingdoms," Clarke disparages both poet's rhetorical choices. She writes: "While we as poets have linguistic options aplenty to feel so deeply about so many things, our metaphors of sexuality, sexual desire, sexual need, and sexual gratification are often not adventurous. We are usually tied to the values of heterosexual sex and sexual monogamy." In her critique of Ntozake Shange's *nappy edges* (1978) and *A Daughter's Geography* (1984), Clarke indicts Shange for continuing the style of "love poetry" that characterized the black poetry of the 1960s as:

Replete with allusions to Africa, the South, black music, and musicians, black historical figures, and metaphors of love and sex as natural wonders and ancient monuments and latter-day revolutionary movements and third world landscapes. Shange is consistently male-identified in terms of her muses and sexual references in poetry, despite her flirtation with the theme of lesbianism in *Sasafrass*, *Cypress*, and *Indigo*.⁷⁵

As a political lesbian and black poet, Clarke contends that poets—especially black women poets—are "obligated to liberate our sexual discourse, as well as our sexuality from flowers, collard greens, and okra, from nights in Tamaris, from fierce animals, and some black male musician's tenor solo."⁷⁶ Clarke turns to the "erotic" as her method of choice to imagine a more liberated and explicit black female sexuality.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 180.

In a reflective essay on the life and legacy of Audre Lorde, Clarke asks: “Who else has taught us that sex energy is life energy?”⁷⁷ For Clarke, Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” profoundly impacted her sexual politics as a black lesbian. The erotic provided Clarke the necessary language to politicize her sexuality; most importantly, it enabled Clarke to discuss every aspect of her body without shame or fear. Like Lorde, Clarke viewed the erotic as a power that existed deeply and spiritually within the female body. Unlike Lorde, Clarke advocates for the value of the “pornographic,” directly opposing a black feminist stance that Jennifer Nash argues underestimates the ecstatic pleasure women derive from scenes of sexual engagement.⁷⁸ Lorde’s theory of the erotic, which opposes “the pornographic,” does not account for the ways in which black lesbian women create their own economies of desire in spite of the patriarchal gaze. Like Althea and Flaxie, Clarke doesn't give a damn who's gazing: the power ultimately resides in the electric charges between women. In Clarke's poetry, these electric charges manifest in explicit imagery and language.

Furthermore, Clarke believes that Lorde often relies on sexual metaphors to discuss female eroticism in her poetry, which Clark critiques for their “hermetic inaccessibility.” Consider for example Lorde’s brief poem “Woman,” published in *The Black Unicorn* (1978). According to her biographer Alexis De Veaux, *The Black Unicorn* represents a “literary transformation” where Lorde discusses “bonds with women as intersections of the political, personal, and erotic.”⁷⁹ The poem reads:

I dream of a place between your breasts

⁷⁷ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁸ Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁷⁹ Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 216.

to build my house like a heaven
where I plant crops
in your body
an endless harvest
where the commonest rock
is moonstone and ebony opal
giving milk to all of my hungers
and your night comes down upon me
like nurturing rain.⁸⁰

In “Woman,” Lorde imagines perpetual, orgasmic ecstasy between women. Clarke would contend that Lorde’s rocky metaphors—“moonstone and ebony opal,” along with phrases like “your night comes down upon me”—may obscure the poem’s intentions. Because the poem starts with explicit language, the reader can surmise that Lorde intends her metaphors to enhance the poem’s eroticism; readers know that, somewhere between “breasts” and “milk,” the speaker and her object of desire will meet in physical ecstasy where “night comes down upon me/ like nurturing rain.” This concluding metaphor belies a general sense of “wetness” and, in particular, the female orgasm. In contrast, Clarke’s poetic language appears much more direct. Take for comparison two poems in which Clarke and Lorde turn their attentions toward religion. Lorde’s poem “About Religion”—also published in *The Black Unicorn*—recalls “Black shiny women/ spicy as rocking pumpkins/ encased in stiff white covers/ long sleeved/ silk against brick.”⁸¹ Clarke’s “palm leaf for Mary Magdalene,” on the other hand, sensuously envisions a lesbian nun masturbating to a leaf she believes once belonged to Mary herself.” The nun

⁸⁰ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 297.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 316.

“stroked her unfrocked breasts/ and shoulders with it/ tied my wrists to hers/ with it and took my forgiveness.”⁸²

For Clarke, the erotic enables her to subvert the tradition of the day, where black feminists do not “use language that depicts sex graphically for fear of being judged as ‘politically incorrect,’ or irresponsible.” “I think,” Clarke asserts, “[that] black women writers—poets and fiction writers—could stand to lose some primness, some fatalism, and one dimensional sexual perspective: one man (or woman), one body, one way, and fade out to flowers.” She then concludes: “I say throw way the Kotex, forget the tampon, and BLEED!” Clarke’s *Living As A Lesbian* achieves such bleeding. In the process, she punctures the erotic and shifts it “away from [its] traditional moorings.”⁸³

No More Encomiums

Throughout Clarke’s poetry, a sense of history informs the underpinnings of her work. Imagining black women’s role in this history, in particular, remains a central concern. Concerning a palm reader—who is a witch—Clarke writes:

The old black witch keeps her sources well
and does not tell me everything at once
holds back the unwholesome forecast.
retells the ravaged past.
closes her misty eyes to the lines,
tightens her fist against her teeth,
draws her breath
gives me back my hand
and does not tell me everything
at once.⁸⁴

⁸² Cheryl Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 28.

⁸³ I am alluding here to the work of Chela Sandoval and her definition of love as “punctum” and “a hermeneutics for social change.” See Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁸⁴ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 33.

Invested in the silent aspects of black women's history, the poem—via the palm reader's reticence—articulates Clarke's overarching concern: buried lesbian herstories. As a result, Clarke must carve out and, when necessary, invent her own space; she must reclaim her body while remaining attentive to its corporality as a site of ritual—remembering and retelling black histories. Understanding the necessity of remembering, respecting, expanding, and creating history reasonably justifies why Clarke follows her poem “Acceptance” with “Living as a Lesbian on the Make,” which deliberately shifts the text away from singular narratives of black experience towards tales complicated by sexuality and lesbian eroticism.

The phrase “living as a lesbian” constitutes the volume's blues refrain, its jazz scat. Blues and jazz artists—notably Charles Mingus, Stevie Wonder, B.B. King, Jimmy Rushing, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith—populate the volume. These artists, and the direct lines that Clarke cribs from their albums, imbue her poetry with fluidity and movement, as well a lyricism that further substantiates Clarke's interest in the Black Arts tradition and significantly writes her as a lesbian blues poet. Indeed, these music icons inter-animate the volume just as much as the refrain “living and a lesbian” recurs in this text. Thus, jazz and blues music provides the text with a sultry and seductive soundtrack, which then sets the stage for an erotic Black Arts theatre embodied by Clarke's living lesbian(s); where, indeed, Clarke scats multiple iteration of her lesbian life: “Living as a Lesbian on The Make,” “Living as a Lesbian in the Journal,” “Living as a Lesbian Underground: A Futuristic Fantasy,” “Living as a Lesbian Rambling,” and “Living as a Lesbian at 35.” In this way, Clarke tracks the movement and growth of a black lesbian. Like black music, these poems express pain, lust, desire, intimacy, and eroticism in

diverse registers with nuanced meanings. In the end, however, “living as a lesbian” functions as a lyrical and rhetorical framework to re-imagine African American life, history, and freedom from the unique perspective of a black lesbian.

In the first iteration, “Living as a Lesbian on the Make,” Clarke imagines a closeted black lesbian whose deeply aware of her sexuality yet silently contests hetero-normative spaces. Clarke writes: “Straight bars ain’t so bad/ though filled with men/ cigarette smoke/ and juke noises.”⁸⁵ Here, the unnamed (though ever observant) lesbian persona turns to “a martini straight up and jazz” to achieve a little comfort in an environment indelibly changed by urban renewal. Clarke then introduces an enchanting young woman who captures the speaker's attention.

Alone she came in denim and a
magenta tee
hair cut to a duck tail
ordered Miller’s and smoked two
cigarettes
sat at a table close but distant
was pretty and I was lonely
and knew she was looking for a woman.⁸⁶

Here, Clarke imagines an elusive lesbian. Without name and without voice, Clarke facilitates the construction of this nearly invisible and mythic lesbian (object). She enters the bar alone, without context, appearing like the lover who “escapes the city for less carcinogenic zones,” almost from thin air. She radiates light given off by her “magenta tee.” Her non-traditional hairstyle signals a butch aesthetic. The woman sits at a distance, which means that for some reason she wishes to either preserve or protect herself (or both) from the male gaze that populates the bar. Nevertheless, the focus here remains on

⁸⁵ Clarke, *Living As A Lesbian*, 21.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

constructing both the material lesbian body and its perception; Clarke's persona "knew" that the woman wearing a "magenta tee" was "looking for a woman." As Clarke begins to reimagine space, she not only queers this space with a lesbian raconteur—she also constructs a lesbian body as central to the re-making of place and space. Crafting this lesbian persona represents a reversal of the gentrification process, wherein Clarke endows her subject with the agency to reconstruct the otherwise decimated black lesbian body within heteronormative spaces. Unfortunately, by the poem's conclusion, this woman vanishes, sending the persona into a blues state of mind; our raconteur is left being serenading by the "saxophone flugelhorn bass and drum/ hitting familiar riffs."

To both explore and expand the brevity of such fleeting experiences, Clarke often retreats to the journal-poem to invent and observe lesbian social worlds. In poems such as "Journal Entry: Sisters," "Journal Entry: The Weekend My Lover is Away," "Journal Entry: The Last Post Card," and "Fall Journal Entry: 1983" Clarke attempts to capture and savor the unspoken desire between women. These desires, in turn, hang in a delicate balance between life and death, literally; distance and separation act as crucial lifelines for these women, where journals provide the safest space for shared female desire to live and survive. Consider Clarke's poem "Journal Entry: Sisters." Despite sharing a "seductive friendliness," the poem's eponymous subjects "talk very little" in attempt to keep their love hidden and discrete. Clarke writes: "There's your sister. Better go now," says the pretty one making herself small in the booth...Her friend slides past her out the booth."⁸⁷ Their secrecy shields and protects them. Public knowledge—even exposure—of lesbian life can be deadly, as in the case of Sharon, the tragic heroine of "Fall Journal

⁸⁷ Ibid, 26.

Entry: 1983” who “fell/ jumped/ or was pushed/ from” either her fourth or sixth floor window.⁸⁸

The journal-poem genre that Clarke deploys in *Living As A Lesbian* culminates in her poem "Living as a Lesbian in the Journal." Although the journal-poem enables Clarke to archive her feelings and observations of lesbianism, they alienate her own experiences with women. These poems become archival artifacts for a future lesbian past. In "Living as a Lesbian in the Journal," Clarke time-stamps each stanza: "3/18," "3/19," "3/20," "3/21," and "3/21 (late)." Over this five-day period, Clarke records events scattered across her (or the persona's) daily life. Like the jazz-scat artist, each entry/stanza represents a different timbre or musical note that reflects the entry's mood. What's more, each stanza contains "runs" that go from high to low. Take for example the opening stanza, "3/18." In just three lines, the speaker's emotional register dramatically pivots from high to low: "...and I hate for the party to be over: the anticipation, the long/ drives, the coffee, the women who like me, the hard, fast sleep/ the food. Truth is I don't want to be by myself."⁸⁹ The first two line breaks—between "long/ drives" and "sleep/ food"—reflects excitement. Clarke inflects the last line, however, with blues notes; the persona does not want to be alone and much prefers—even craves—the excitement of shared female company. This pattern of high and low—these scats—continue throughout the poem-journal. In entry "3/19" the speaker shares her excitement for an upcoming "adventure to Africa" with her lover; in the subsequent entry, she then relishes in the bliss of praying to "Moms Mabley, Big Maybelle, and other lesser known fat or skinny/ black

⁸⁸ Ibid, 52.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 54.

or yella, grinning or toothless madonnas—live or dead.”⁹⁰ Despite her enthusiasm, Clarke’s persona disparages Aretha Franklin’s decision to sing in South Africa during (what the reader must assume is) the Apartheid regime. “How could she sing in South Africa,” Clarke queries on “3/21.” There is no sense in these journals that Clarke observed any shape or form of female eroticism. Instead, she archives anxiety, struggle, uncertainty, and fleeting practices of desire.

These journal-poems effectively archive both “signs of struggle” and “signs of triumph,” thereby providing future readers with the necessary tools to excavate the lesbian persona from its imprisonment “underground.” In “Living as a Lesbian Underground: A Futuristic Fantasy,” this is precisely Clarke’s point. Although lesbians must constantly negotiate space, dodge social dangers, and often conduct their lives shrouded in the secrecy offered by “basements/ attics/ and tents,” this poem encourages women to resist the impulse to hide and to cultivate, instead, a fierce sense of conscious resistance. Clarke writes:

So...don’t be taken in your sleep now.
Call your assailant’s name now.
Leave the building empty
The doors unlocked
And raise the windows high
When they pass by.
Leave signs of struggle
Leave signs of triumph
And leave signs.⁹¹

Clarke’s final sign, her ultimate act of resistance, constitutes her boldest statement of the volume: lesbian sex. In “Living as a Lesbian at 35,” Clarke argues for a sexual freedom that is critical to living her life as a lesbian. The poem, although brief, makes a huge

⁹⁰ Ibid., 54-55.

⁹¹ Ibid., 76.

impact. The poem is erotic, pornographic, lusty, wild, and necessary to Clarke's mission of black lesbian affirmation. Clarke—as preserver, as story-teller, as archivist, as an observer of black life and (in)humanity—finally strikes out as a lesbian. Here, she snatches back her body as an erotic site. The opening stanza reads:

In my car I am fishing in my pocketbook
Eyes on the road
For my wallet
In my mind I am fishing in your drawers
Eyes on the road
For your pussy.
High speeds evoke fucking.
Depending on your mood you come.
It goes on:
I do too from you
Over the wheel
Hand between my thighs
Eyes on the road
And the end of all: sex.⁹²

If the final stop on Clarke's road to liberation is "sex," it is therefore imperative that the reader embraces this aspect of lesbian life. Here, Clarke slyly imbues lesbian sexuality with tangible value, as indexed by the subject's wallet—if in fact we assume that this mundane object contains its usual material: identification card, cash, credit cards, and other meaningful assets. The wallet then becomes the panties, which further imagines an intersection between eroticism and capital. Where the erotic appears as both a mode of travel and place of destination, it also functions as a sacred entity salvable in spite of so much blight. In her last poem in the volume, "Kittatinny," Clarke imagines that which lay between her thighs as a holy and sacred space. Still on the road to liberation, she writes:

In my car, by the road, in a tent, in a pit
stop, and practice a funkier art,
Kittatinny Tunnel of that holy place you let me hit.⁹³

⁹² Ibid., 91.

Clarke brings into focus the lesbian woman's sacred body. In early poems, such as "Palm Leaf for Mary Magdalene," where the persona "[tongues] the holy ghost" of Mary Magdalene's "sex," or in "Vicki and Daphne," where Vicki anxiously awaits to massage Daphne's "aching pussy," and even in her poem "Sexual Preference," where the "queer lesbian" persona "does not prefer cunnilingus," Clarke imagines a (black) woman's erogenous zones as a site of "ecstasy" within a lesbian economy; where, in spite of the vestiges of decay that surrounds her, she relishes in the pleasure of an unbound erotic life. At age thirty-five, the lesbian persona/Clarke is not restricted by space or place. Indeed, putting behind her the tragedy of "14th Street," she strikes out with her desires on, I imagine, a very long, and never-ending, road to freedom.

Though, if we turn briefly to Clarke's essay, "The Failure To Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," then we don't have to imagine her freedom dreams. In that essay Clarke directly address "black macho intellectuals and politicians, [the] heirs of Malcolm X, who have never expanded Malcolm's revolutionary ideals beyond the day of his death [and] who consciously or unwittingly have absorbed the homophobia of their patriarchal slavemasters."⁹⁴ When she attended the First National Plenary Conference on Self-Determination in New York City in December 1981, Clarke was dismayed by the rabid homophobia espoused by activists at this "historic meeting of the Black Liberation Movement." The conference pamphlet revealed in homophobic discourse. Beliefs that "Revolutionary nationalists and genuine communists cannot uphold homosexuality in the leadership of the Black Liberation Movement" and "the

⁹³ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁴ Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks*, 62-63

practice of homosexuality is an accelerating threat to our survival as a people and as a nation,” angered Clarke. “It is ironic,” she writes, “that the Black Power movement could transform the consciousness of an entire generation of black people regarding black self-determination and, at the same time, fail so miserably in understanding the sexual politics of the movement and of black people across the board.” Indeed, Clarke contends that activists, in the Black Liberation Movement—and notably “Chairman Baraka, Imamu, LeRoi Jones” and black feminists such as bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, and Mary Helen Washington—all failed to consider the “boundless potential of human sexuality” because they have uncritically adopted “Western institutions of heterosexuality” and “the Christian fundamentalist” notion of love, sex, and procreation. In their different ways, these otherwise iconic black intellectuals and activists espouse that sex is a “sin” and procreation its sole purpose—articulated, for example, in the Black Liberation pamphlet as birthing “new warriors for liberation.” “Why must the black family be so strictly viewed as the result of a heterosexual dyad,” Clarke queries.⁹⁵

Addressing the sexual politics of black liberation is not only the first step at healing the psychological damages that have resulted from years of enslavement, but it will advance black liberation struggles into necessary direction, perhaps the direction that the living lesbian seems destined to arrive at in the final poem in *Living As A Lesbian*. “Homophobia divides black people as political allies, it cuts off political growth, stifles revolution, and perpetuates patriarchal domination,” Clarke asserts. Eliminating homophobia in black communities begins by, she continues, “engaging in dialogue with the advocates of gay and lesbian liberation” and “understanding how [homophobic] attitudes prevent the liberation of total community.” As a black lesbian committed to

⁹⁵ Ibid., 67.

liberation struggles Clarke states that she is “dedicated to destroying heterosexual supremacy by ‘suggesting, promoting, and advocating’ the rights of gay men and lesbians wherever we are.” Thus, throughout her work, as evidenced in *Living As A Lesbian*, her goal is to, unlike many of the “scathing analysis of the black political community after 1965,” address “the issues of gay liberation, black lesbianism, [and] homophobia vis-à-vis the black liberation [and] the women’s liberation movement.” The liberation of community requires individuals to recognize and embrace an understanding of their sexualities. When we address the colonization of our minds, our bodies, and even our languages we get a few steps closer to freedom. As we get in touch with ourselves—what we desire, who we desire, and why—it enables us black folks to embrace a love that is finally about togetherness, a beloved community. What Clarke discovered on her personal road to liberation is that her individual desires and the collective desires of black folks were one in the same: freedom.

Part III

Freedom in this Village

let there be planted the seeds for an intellectual,
moral and social revolution out of which a new culture can be formed; out of
which a new civilization can be fashioned; out of which a new world can be
hewn; wherein the black man can walk confidently and unafraid in that truth
and that light which is freedom.

--Adrian Stanford, *Black and Queer*

Chapter 5

“Words from the Heart”

Joseph Beam, *In The Life*, and Pro-Feminist Imaginaries

It’s a dangerous secret. There are black people in this world who love themselves and *love each other*...Love teaches us how to believe in and create the world that we actually deserve.

--Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Queer Relative”

He burned out
his pure life force
to bring us dignity,
to bring us a chance
to love ourselves
with commitment.
He knew the simple
spilling of seed
would not be enough

to bind us.

It is difficult
to stop marching, Joseph,
impossible to stop our assault.
The tributes and testimonies
in your honor
flare up like torches.
Every night
a light blazes for you
in one of our hearts.

--Essex Hemphill, "When My Brother Fell"

In his op-ed "Weaving the Future of Black Gender Politics," published in a November 1989 issue of *Gay Community News*, the black gay writer Craig G. Harris "sets a feminist agenda for black gay men." By the early 1990s, Harris had established himself as a key figure on what was then an insurgent Renaissance of black gay men's writings. He had, by this time, published his work in the first anthology devoted to black gay male writings, *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986)—which was edited by Joseph Beam. Additionally, Harris contributed to both the lesbian journal *Ache* and the British-based circulation *Black Gay Male*; he was also member of *Other Countries*, an East Coast based writing collective that passionately believed that "the lives, voices, and visions of Gay Men of African heritage are inherently valuable."¹ Harris's op-ed then continued to speak directly to black gay men. However, what set this essay apart from his earlier work was that it responded to a social concern that had long troubled previous social and political movements: separatism and the seduction of single-issue politics. More than anything Harris wished to illuminate the inherent "links and lineage"—*al a the*

¹ *Other Countries, Black Gay Voices* (New York City: Other Countries, 1988), 1

black visual artist Paul Goodnight—between black lesbians and black gay men.² That is, Harris reminded his readers of how the activism of the former was crucial for the emergence and visibility of black gay men’s cultural politics and activism in the last decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, Harris’s manifesto represented one of the earliest documents of black gay men’s writings that adopted a pro-feminist politics in an effort to develop and sustain a transformative black gay agenda.

With the unapologetic tone that served as the hallmark of his literary pieces—particularly “Cut Off From Among Their People” and “I’m Going Out Like A Fucking Meteor”—Harris did not mince his words. “Black men must,” Harris asserted in *GCN*, work in coalition with Black lesbians [so that we] learn from each other, and... to tackle the bias we encounter from our heterosexual sisters and brothers, and [to collectively address] the many difficult problems facing the overall Black community.” Harris insisted that black gay men be “mindful of the issues” that impacted black women lives at the time. “More Black Gay men must come to the realization that their oppression is inextricably linked to the oppression of a wide range of disenfranchised people, but most importantly, that of Black Lesbians and Black heterosexual women,” Harris writes. It is “essential” that black gay men actively and visibly participate in the Anti-Rape movement with the understanding, he argued, that “what motivates sexual violence against Black women motivates incidents of fag bashing.” Furthermore, Harris argued that it was imperative that black gay men compassionately support the Equal Rights Amendment with the “realization that a capitalist system which denies parity of worker’s compensation on the basis of gender, is the same system which disburses unequal pay on

² Harris describes Goodnight’s piece, “Links and Linkages” as “formidable” writing: “The painting depicts a mother cornrowing her young daughter’s hair. The daughter in turn, is combing out the gray strands of her grandmother who is crafting an intricate quilt.”

the basis of race, and further, will,” he predicted, “deny employment on the basis of sexual orientation/ affectional preference.” Lastly, Harris said that black gay men must involve themselves in the Pro-Choice movement and “see the direct correlation between a woman’s right to decide not to complete the gestation process—and likewise, to be protected from the forced obstetrical interventions—and the rights of HIV-infected Black gay men to drug therapies through clinical trials.” Harris believed that by adopting a pro-feminist agenda black gay men would contribute to creating sustainable and “powerful” social justice movements dedicated to the liberation of Black American citizens. Harris, black lesbian poet Pamela Sneed remembers, “worked tirelessly on the frontlines against the AIDS epidemic at GMHC.” During his “off hours,” though, Harris was “a true diva who smoked long thin cigarettes and drank champagne between trips to the hospital and bouts with KS and pneumonia.”³ Sadly, Harris died from AIDS in 1992.

Like scores of black gay men writing during what historians and activists consider “the age of AIDS,” Harris’s voice would be silenced at the pinnacle of his career. However, it is *the life* of black gay male writers that is the focus of this chapter; lives sustained by vital relationships to black lesbians and black feminist ideology. Donald Woods’s poem “Sister Lesbos”—also a contribution to *In The Life*—exemplifies the vitality of these coalitions. Beginning the poem with “For Audre” Woods writes:

I call you sister distinctly, loudly
We are family of a real kind

³ GMHC stands as the abbreviations for the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, one of the first organizations devoted to addressing gay men’s battle with AIDS, what was then known as KS, or Karposi’s Sarcoma. See “Black Gay Writers Celebrate 25-Year History: Art from Adversity,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeJLISnFkiU>

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fruits of the flower pushed sun-ward
through wide cracks in concrete.
March on sister, giving brothers poems
and your sisters that warm love.

What we've shared
is the strength
to be apart
what we seek
is the strength
to be together
liberation to love ourselves
fiercely, in the family way.⁴

Audre Lorde, among others—Barbara Smith, Cherrie Moraga—was central to black gay men's political consciousness and literary productions throughout the 1980s. Women of color feminists inspired poetry by black gay men, encouraged black gay men's activism, and helped fortify familial family bonds between black lesbians and black gay men; indeed, that sense of “togetherness” prevalent among Black Arts poets discussed in the previous chapter.

Both Harris's and Woods's entry onto the insurgent Renaissance of black gay male writings was facilitated, however, by no one other than “black gay genius” Joseph Beam.⁵ Beam's groundbreaking text *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986) set into motion an unprecedented rise of literature emblematic of what literary critic Charles Nero articulates as a “black gay aesthetic” and re-called the importance of love in black communities when black male political arts centered on redeeming revolutionary black manhood through narrow and heteronormative performances of black masculinity. Beam wrote against revolutionary discourse of black masculinity by asserting in his oft-cited

⁴ Donald Woods, “Sister Lesbos” in Joseph Beam, ed., *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Washington, D.C: Redbone Press, 2007), 68.

⁵ Steven Fullwood and Charles Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam's Call* (New York: Vintage Entity Press, 2014).

manifesto “Brother-to-Brother: Words From The Heart” that “black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties.”⁶ Just as much as Beam’s *In The Life* shifted the grounds of the Afro-American literary aesthetics, “troubling the waters” we might say a la Melvin Dixon—one of Beam’s contemporaries—its manifestation result from his relationships to black feminists, and particularly black lesbian feminists. *In The Life* adopts a pro-feminist love politics that Beam deploys throughout his writings in an effort to confront the deep emotional chasm that divided black communities; a chasm that disallowed black men to embrace and publicly express their love from other black men. In his literary pursuit, Joe sought to change that. As Barbara Smith shares in an interview, “Joe was committed to justice and liberation” and expressed these concerns through what his comrade Gil Herald describes as “life and love.”⁷ Indeed, love and liberation are the cornerstones of Beam’s life writings and motivated him assembling, editing, and publishing *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology*

Whereas previous chapters have identified key black lesbians who were crucial to the rise of black lesbian and gay literary and cultural politics in the post-civil rights era, this chapter plays back that importance by focusing on the life writings of black gay writer and activists Joseph Beam. Beam edited *In The Life*, the first anthology devoted to black gay men’s writings. As a historic volume that assembled together a number of black gay male writers, activists, and performers, *In The Life* facilitated a proliferation of black gay male literature. Contributors like Craig Harris and Essex Hemphill would, after its publication, go on to create literary collectives that led to scores of novels and

⁶ Joseph Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words From the Heart” in Beam, ed., *In The Life*, 180-191.

⁷ See Barbara Smith and Steven Fullwood, “On Joseph Beam: A Conversation” and Gil Herald, “You Have Got To Tell The Story: Recalling My Brother/ Sister Joseph Beam” in Fullwood and Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius*.

anthologies published by and for black gay men; Hemphill, for example, went on to edit what Beam conceived as the follow up anthology to *In The Life, Brother-to-Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*. With Beam at the center of this chapter, I highlight another form of love that characterizes his writing: *revolutionary queer love*. Revolutionary queer love resulted from the coalitions that Beam established with women of color feminists. My notion of revolutionary queer love echoes Alexis Pauline Gumb's assertions that black lesbians loving black gay men, and black gay men loving black lesbians is a "queer thing." Black people loving black people irrespective of their gender expression, sexual identities, and other identities of difference, is queer—and this is the exact mode of love that constitutes the heart of this chapter. I attach revolutionary to her turn of phrase so as to remind readers of Beam's intent: to expand/ disrupt discourses of revolutionary nationalism espoused by black activists during the 1970s. Indeed, I agree with Gumbs's notions of queer that she articulates her essay, "Queer Relative: Joseph Beam, Audre Lorde, and the Diasporic Poetics of Survival in the 1980s"

Queer, as I use it, means that which disrupts the reproduction of a social narrative that says that Black life is worthless, and therefore anyone's life can be expended and exploited based on the logic that you can apply different values of life, different monetary value to people's time. Queerness, the absurd conclusion that you can render different cash values to actual divine energetic contribution that is every being's life. That which is queer is that which interrupts that narrative and demonstrates another meaning of life. My shorthand name for that other way of life is love. Loving Black people is an incredibly queer thing."⁸

Queer love allows every member in the black community to love each other in an effort to combat otherwise internalized divisive logics that pit black women against black men, gays against straights, lesbians against gays, so forth and so on. However, it's

⁸ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Queer Relative: Joseph Beam, Audre Lorde, and the Diasporic Poetics of Survival in the 1980s" in Steven Fullwood and Charles Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius*, 220.

important to note Beam's revolutionary queer love because of its feminist impulses. While Gumbs's formulations rely on queer as an interpretive framework to understand the disruptive poetics of Lorde and Beam's coalitions, queer studies can often foreclose/disregard/ ignore its feminist genealogies. As I noted in the Introduction of this project, by way of Sharon Holland, "queer" often forgets the black female queer. As we shall see, Beam developed his revolutionary queer love by establishing relationships with black women and thus developing a pro-feminist consciousness articulated in his writings as a pro-feminist imaginary. An essential aspect of Beam's writings, a pro-feminist imaginary does the critical work of love by allowing black gay men to confront gender violence, patriarchy, homophobia, and the sexual politics of community. As evidenced in the concluding line of Woods's "Sister Lesbos," pro-feminist imaginaries articulate love as the heart of liberation: "What we seek/ is the strength/ to be together/ Liberation to love ourselves/ fiercely, in the family way."⁹

Scholars in Black Queer Studies have gestured towards black women's key role in the development of black gay culture in the post-Civil Rights era. In his conclusion to *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson writes:

Black queer male formations during the 1980s and 1990s implied such an understanding of history and society, one that upheld the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class as an extension of the epistemic maneuvers of black feminist formations. In doing so, black queer men aligned themselves with the critical practices of women of color feminisms and positioned themselves against the normative itineraries of cultural and revolutionary nationalisms.¹⁰

Ferguson goes on to cite Essex Hemphill's writing in his introduction to *Brother-Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*: "As a result of their courage, black women also

⁹ Woods, Sister Lesbos, in Beam, ed., *In The Life*, 68.

¹⁰ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 142.

inspired many of the black gay men writing today to seek our own voices so we can tell our truth. Thus, we are at the beginning of completing a total picture of the African American experience.” Whereas Ferguson gestures do not specifically name these black women or adequately address the specificities of black gay male literature that more concretely highlight how black gay men “positioned themselves against the normative itineraries of cultural and revolutionary nationalism,” literary historian Robert Reid-Pharr names black lesbian feminists Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Donna Kate Rushin and invokes Cheryl Clarke’s *Living As A Lesbian* to critically re-imagine possibilities of home, love, and freedom for black gays and lesbians. In *Black Gay Man*, Reid-Pharr writes:

In 1985 Barbara Smith came like a fresh wind to Chapel Hill. She brought with her a vision of home unlike anything I had imagined. Home held out promises of redemption and nurturance, acceptance and love. Home was populated with brothers and sisters so unlike my own ‘natural’ family in their politics, their progressiveness, and their passion. At home we would recreate ourselves and our world, fashion a new mode of being, map a way of living in which the vision of the black freedom struggle would be realized in the daily interactions of black lesbians and gays. In coming home, I told myself, I would finally be able to articulate that which I had known all along, the centrality of the black woman, the black-faggot, and the so-called black underclass, and especially the black lesbian to the project of redeeming America. Armed with strong doses of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Cheryl Clarke, and Donna Kate Rushin, I felt, for a brief moment in my life, as if I knew which direction to place my feet, saw clearly the road before us.¹¹

Referencing, in his concluding remarks, the award winning volume of poetry, *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets*—edited by the gay Afro-Haitian poet Assotto Saint—Reid-Pharr paints a most illustrious picture of the influences and confluences of black

¹¹ Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 153-154.

women both in the development of his own black gay political consciousness and on the works of at least one-hundred other black gay men.

Reid-Pharr's formulations more explicitly articulate "nurturance, acceptance, and love" as key practices through which black gay men, like women of color, "positioned themselves against the normative itineraries of cultural and revolutionary nationalism." Beam's *In The Life* and his essay "Brother-to-Brother: Words From the Heart," attempt to untangle and demystify the supposed forbidden relationship between black manhood and the politics of emotion. Throughout his writings Beam deliberately, and quite beautifully, dreams of a Black American man who embraces and expresses love as a life practice in a decolonized, anti-sexist, and non-heterosexist cultural context. Beam's visions of love emerge, though, from personal experiences with rejection, pain, and at times depression. His loneliness and self-imposed social alienation led him, in many ways, to the work of women of color and to his own practices as a writer. In this chapter, I argue that Beam's anthology *In The Life* and his essay "Brother-to-Brother: Words from The Heart" are the products of Beam dealing with his own loneliness and rejections. Beam grappled with the difficulty of rejection by black gay men a lot during his life—black gay men whom he desired romantically and sexually and those whom he admired and viewed as role models. However, this rejection helped Beam to re-imagine loving black men above and beyond contexts of sexual desire. His personal letters reveal that what became of his broken heart was a visceral desire to vision love as a black life survival practice. In his work Beam imagined a type of love that strengthened the social bonds between black men as well as a love that enabled black men to express an emotion that nurtured and sustained the beloved community. Indeed, just as Beam's love eschewed violence

between black women and other black gay men it also repurposed revolutionary rhetoric. As Beam's essay argues for love between black men, it also argues for a revolutionary love between black people as a practice of liberation.

“Our Lives, Our Loves, Our Visions”: Joseph Beam’s Words From the Heart

When *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* was published in 1986, readers met the volume with enthusiastic praise. On a trip to Philadelphia, Barbara Smith gave a copy to Toni Cade Bambara as the two passed each other at a local train station!¹² Even better: ordinary black women and gay men from across the country flooded Joseph Beam's mailbox with effusive congratulatory letters. In January 1987, a few months after the anthology's publication and in the midst of vacationing, Audre Lorde penned a heartfelt note to Beam. She writes:

Dear Joe,

Happy New Year! I took In The Life to Carriacou with me to read—What A Treat! I am so glad that book exists, Joe, it gives me a lot, the pieces themselves, and a lot of hope and satisfaction, too, that it exists. The ending of one kind of isolation. I think it represents an incredible piece of work, and I congratulate you in particular, but all the other men also who worked on it. It's such a joy to me to read your work and Essex [Hemphill] and Donald [Gaines] and Melvin Dixon and Assotto Saint, and I can't name them all right now because I'm on the train from Boston, but the flavor of the reading returns to me as I write this and its very fine! Thank you!...I can't tell you how much it means to me that all of you guys exist and are doing your work. I can't begin to tell you, my brother. Maybe some time I can.¹³

“In the hands of Afrekete,” Lorde inspirits her post-script and signs off simply as “Audre.”

¹² Fullwood and Stephens, *Black Gay Genius*.

¹³ Audre Lorde, “Dear Joe” (January 1987). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

From its inception, Audre Lorde provided constant support to Beam as he endeavored to manifest what was until then a vision, a fledging dream. Sometime in March 1984, Beam telephone Lorde at her Staten Island home to conduct an early morning interview with her, prearranged by Sidney Brinkley, Editor-in-Chief for *Blacklight*, a “popular black gay and lesbian magazine published in Washington, D.C.”¹⁴ As a contributing editor to *Blacklight*, Beam jumped at the opportunity presented by Brinkley to interview Lorde because her work deeply inspired him. Over the course of the interview, they discussed a range of topics: “the invisibility of black lesbians in mainstream and gay publications in general, [Lorde’s] work with Kitchen Table Press as creating an institution for women of color, [and] the importance for gay men of color to create their own institutions.”¹⁵ Regarding this last discussion point, Beam asked Lorde: “What words of inspiration, or advice, do you have for Gay men of color who have been silent? How do we begin to write about our experiences?”¹⁶ Lorde responded with a two-fold reply. First, she stated: “I’m not sure whether or not Black Gay men have been silent or whether they just don’t have the venues.” She intimated however that in spite of these odds, institutions like the D.C. based *Black Heart Collective* offered black gay men opportunities to develop and publish their work—which pleased her. She then states: “Gay men of color need workshops and discussion groups as well as magazines. Art does not exist in a vacuum. There is the necessity for Gay men of color to examine the *truths with their experience which can be shared* and at the same time develop a *vision of some*

¹⁴ Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2004), 339.

¹⁵ Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 339.

¹⁶ Joseph Beam, “An Interview with Audre Lorde” in Joan Wylie Hall, ed., *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 131.

future which those truths can actively shape because this is the function of any art, to make us more who we wish to be” (emphasis mine).¹⁷

Over the years spent getting the book project off of the ground and into Alyson Publications, Lorde also shared creative advice with Beam, supported him financially, and she inspired in him an unprecedented conviction. Before Beam could ever realize, Lorde predicted the critical import of the anthology, saying throughout their many correspondences how *In the Life* was vital to the support and survival of other black gay men who struggled to love their whole selves during those times racist and homophobic times. Lorde’s hope came to fruition in a personal letter written to Beam by Chuck Tarver of Wilmington, Delaware. *In the Life* moved Mr. Tarver powerfully and almost to paralysis, it seemed. As if with an unsteady hand, Mr. Tarver started by saying: “It took me a while to write this letter.” After easing into the letter with affectionate platitudes, Tarver gained a rhythm that allowed him to share his genuine feelings and reactions to *In The Life*. He writes:

Your book, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, meant a lot to me. So much so that I sent a copy to my best friend. It’s the type of book that I as a Black gay man have been looking for. Hopefully, it is the beginning of the dialogue long needed by Black gay men. It would be nice if it spilled over to Black men who aren’t gay as well.”¹⁸

There is no clear relationship between Tarver and Beam.¹⁹ Tarver, at the time of this letter, was a “black gay married man” of eight years. Although he wrote the letter to Beam, he addressed it to Alyson Publication, then located in Boston, Massachusetts. With

¹⁷ Beam, “An Interview with Audre Lorde,” 131.

¹⁸ Chuck Tarver, “Dear Brother Beam.” (Date Unspecified) Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

¹⁹ There are no other correspondence between Beam and Tucker; Tucker’s letter to Beam is the only correspondence I found in the Beam Papers.

all of his complications and his desires for “seeking my own truth,” *In The Life* facilitated Tucker’s self-acceptance and improved his relationship to his wife: “Several things which I have learned about myself were reflected in the book...[among them is] the process of discovery [which] has made me aware that I need men and women,” he writes. Reading the anthology inspired his resolve to widen his social relations. For Tarver, establishing social relationships with men and women were crucial pre-requisites for developing a way of life that invited a healthy relationship between his family and himself. “Several poems really touched me,” Tarver writes, noting among them Essex Hemphill’s “For My Own Protection” and Phil Robinson’s “When I Stopped Kissing My Father.” A. Bill Jones’s essay, “A Father’s Need; A Parents Desires,” encouraged Tarver to re-imagine his relationship to his “most wonderful son,” whom he had an “unusually close relationship with.” Among all the pieces though composed in the anthology, it was Beam’s essay “Brother to Brother: Words From The Heart,” that deeply touched Tarver. “I agree with you, ‘Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties.’ It is something which we will all have needed and [have] all been denied. This search for love,” he concludes, “has caused us to do destructive things to ourselves and our women.”²⁰

Written by a black man living a very complicated life, Tarver’s letter captures a significant number of Beam’s goals for publishing *In the Life* and his most powerful essay to date, “Brother to Brother: Words From the Heart.” With both projects, Beam labored endlessly to construct a community of black men that welcomed, not denied, their presumably threatening and pathological sexual identities. By speaking with each

²⁰ “Dear Brother Beam.” Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

other about their lives, feelings, and emotions as black men, Beam hoped such dialogue would both improve their relationships with each other and other members of the black community, including as Tarver notes, women and children.

Returning once more to Tarver's conclusion, imperative for Beam was addressing and redressing the utter and complete destruction of black lives during the divisive decades of the 1980s—a residual effect of historical violence from slavery and reconstruction to the failures of the Civil Rights era and the rise of conservative politics in the Reagan era. But, violence also came from within, in the zealously heterosexual discourse of Black Nationalism and its narrow construction of what literary historian Marlon Ross terms, “the black masculine.” At the apex of his literary and activist career, Beam witnessed black lives being destroyed by conservative governmental machinations *and* within black communities and institutions that espoused a narrow gender politics mirroring white middle-class respectability. Black leadership politics across the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts movements called for a stylized alchemy of gender performance that eschewed sexual dissidence and specifically named homosexuality and feminism as poisonous venoms that caused social entrenchments in Black America. Iterated differently, homosexuals and lesbians retarded race progress, perverted blackness, and devastated the normative black family structure; and, because it was presumed that they slept with white men and women, homos and lesbians were by default—and defect—race traitors. The black community was torn asunder; the black home broken but not because of “black matriarchs” but from the long history of slavery and the rise of the conservative right; and by the 1980s black gay men, especially those living with HIV and AIDS were, “cut off from among their people” because of how the

black community viewed homosexuality²¹ Beam wrote, much like Pat Parker, with fire in his eyes. He was deeply concerned about the State of Black America: “We must begin to speak for our love and concern for each other as vigorously as we argue party politics or the particular merits of an athletic team,” he intimates in “Brother to Brother.”²² Beam’s writings—his “words from the heart”—concern love, generally speaking, and black love specifically; love existing and among black people and black communities; a love, finally, that emerged from a personal space of loneliness.

The Heart of Loneliness

In a 1991 article published in the *Washington Post* entitled an “Anthology of a Mother’s Grief,” Joseph Beam’s mother, Dorothy Beam, reflects on his death—he was her only child. In the process, she sheds light on her son’s love life, or lack thereof. Although Beam decided to hide his HIV status from his mother, his love life was her central concern. “He never had a real true lover. He was always out there searching for someone he could love and who would love him. He had a few affairs, but” continues Dorothy, “they were not as sincere as you would have wanted them.” Beam’s mother would have certainly acted as matchmaker for her beloved son. However, as she admits, “I didn’t know anybody. I didn’t know how to approach anybody, and nobody had approached me.”²³ It is not exactly clear how Beam’s mother felt about his sexuality and his literary career prior to his death. His personal letters suggest that their relationship was respectful—Beam included her in every aspect of his literary career. For reasons

²¹ Craig H. Harris, “Cut Off from Among Their People” in Joseph Beam, ed., *In The Life*.

²² Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart” in *In The Life*, 184-185.

²³ Jacqueline Trescott Washington, “Anthology of a Mother’s Grief: By Finishing Her Gay Son’s Book, She Comes to Term with His Life” in *The Washington Post*. August 17, 1991.

unexplained Beam assumed that she slowly lost interest in reading his writings, a notion he conveys to fellow black gay poet-activist Essex Hemphill in a letter written to him in December 1985. “Have you shown your mother *In The Life*,” Beam asked Hemphill. “I’ve had the habit of showing my mother everything I’ve written but I think somewhere along the line she has either stopped reading it or simply doesn’t comment upon.”²⁴ The ambiguity of his letters reveals a level of grief, if not sadness in Beam’s life—he would soon channel this sadness into a desire for revolutionary love between black men.

Dorothy’s sense of Beam’s love life was not too far from the truth. Beam was quite lonely and with the exception of Essex Hemphill, expressed his feelings to very few people. I suspect that Beam entrusted Hemphill with his feelings because he desired him, confessing that the motivation penning one letter derived from selfishness and “the desire for a soul mate.”²⁵ In this very letter, written late in the evening on April 14, 1986 Beam’s sketched a male bust with half of his face completed. The sketch visually illustrated Beam’s internal feelings of incompleteness. Beam shares his mother’s observations with Hemphill, writing:

Several months ago my mother sent [me] a rather telling, poignant letter. She said, what my articles said to her was that I was *unloved*. In a family that deals on the level of propriety and pretense, I was much surprised. I knew she was right and could only hope that my reader, my audience, as such, didn’t pick up the same vibe. I sometimes think that I’m searching for the love my father didn’t give me, but that’s far too simple and perhaps too Freudian. Yet it may be true: the man that I’ve connected to most deeply, Stanley, resembles my father: Darker than me, husky, [and] strong but gentle.²⁶

²⁴ Joseph Beam, “Dear Essex” (December 14, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

²⁵ Joseph Beam, “Essex” (April 14, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

²⁶ Joseph Beam, “Dear Essex” (November 2, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

Beam goes on to share that Stanley—a male friend—and he have not had sex in months, not since earlier that year in February, and only, one thinks, after a night of cocktails at an unidentified club; Stanley drove home immediately afterwards, denying Beam’s invitation to sleep over.

The letter’s grave tone reflects Beam state of reality: “I walk through these days on the verge of tears,” he says. Beam’s emotion stems from feelings of undesirability on the one hand and exploitation, on the other. As a gifted writer, folks appreciated his talents and abilities to develop their own creative skills-sets. However, few folks deemed Beam worthy of romantic love. “No one wants to touch this baby. He writes well and does wonderful things, but don’t touch him. Maybe it has always been that way. Maybe that is why I function the way that I do. If I’m good at what I do, they’ll all love me. Being loved for what one does as opposed,” he speculated, “to who one is.” Beams was admired, appreciated, and sadly exploited as a gifted writer. His self-deprecating tone illuminates that sadness of romantic rejection that, Beam implies, characterizes his love life and “like mercury accumulates in the body [and] in the heart.” As Beam focused on his writing to cope with his loneliness, he spent very few days in the public, deliberately avoiding, he says to Hemphill, “a single shard from a cutting remark”—and ironically alienates himself from the community he desperately attempts to build with the publication of *In The Life*.²⁷ Most days, Beam retreated to the safety of his home in Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square, dying a “slow crib death” as he wrote heart-wrenchingly beautiful prose and read and wrote personal letters whose content spoke about personal loneliness that he avoided discussing publicly. Letters from Steve, for

²⁷ Joseph Beam, “Dear Essex,” (November 2, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

example, populate Beam's personal letters and they do the kind of work for Beam that is something close to an erotic catharsis and epistolary love. They also reveal how—in the face of literary manipulation—Beam began to capitalize on the poetry of rejection, deciding in fact to imagine love between men beyond sexual or erotic indulgence; and love that would eventually manifest as revolutionary love.

Letters from Steve: An Epistolary Muse

“There seemed to be no rush to speak of how we cherished one another's friendship.”²⁸ Throughout the spring of 1984, Beam began assembling a variety of ideas that inevitably manifested as “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart.” Based on his interactions with black male prisoners, personal reactions to the lack of organizing among black gay men in Philadelphia, and as a result of his personal correspondence with Steve—an ex-Vietnam soldier. Beam extracted from this archive of lived experience material that eventually informed his writing of that now iconic essay on love between all black men. In spite of flirting with—and often dreaming about—the idea of having sex with Beam, for whatever reasons, Steve rejected his homo-erotic desires for Beam; he also rejected Beam's sexual advances. At rare moments, though, Steve hedged all bets to court Beam romantically. Steve's fear of accepting his sexuality caused the onset of his own depression, perpetuated his erotic repression, and caused his internalized hatred and self-deprecation—all of which fueled his obsession with an unobtainable woman, one “Ms. Sherry.” Steve's refusal to accept his sexual desires—which seem bi-curious at best—negatively impacted his treatment of Beam in public, standing him up on many occasions and being, their exchanges suggest, a cock-tease. Steve exploited Beam's

²⁸ Beam, “Brother to Brother,” in *In The Life*, 186.

desire for him—an act of manipulation deployed to impose an intellectual relationship between them. Steve admits this much, writing in one letter: “I suppose I want our relationship to be purely a literary one.”²⁹ Despite desiring a romantic relationship with Steve, apparently Beam thrived on such a relationship because he continued correspondence with Steve for years. Beam and Steve corresponded for at least two years beginning in 1984—a time directly coinciding with the moment Beam began imagining both “Brother to Brother” and *In The Life*. Letters abound and are ostensibly initiated by Steve, revealing to some extent his own use of the erotic. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s recalcitrant Hester Prynne laboring at her needle, Steve clearly derived pleasure from the act of writing Beam, his labor for love. “The first time I ever used [a] type writer was to send a letter to you! That means something,” Steve shares in a letter to Beam.³⁰ In this very letter, Steve writes Beam a poem titled “Sax Man,” which reads:

on a Saturday crowded corner
that afternoon i picked him
out of the rest

saw him standing
smiling
waiting for me

never having seen him before
yet on my way to meet him
again

never having heard him blow
still I was listening with
my mind and soul

²⁹ Steve, “Copping Out” (Date Unspecified). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

³⁰ Steve, “To Be Continued...” (January 16, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

was touching his in midflight³¹

Sax man waxes sentimentally as a blues poem, lamenting, as its persona does, over his internalized fear of his erotic desires for the “sax man.” Clearly, Beam symbolizes the “Sax Man,” a seductive artist whose creativity Steve dramatically politicizes, desires, and fears. Steve sketches numerous poems of these kinds, which as artistic expression functionally allows him to vocally sublimate, yet ironically bespeak, his erotic longings for Beam. Indeed, as a body of work, they could be frame as a form of “love poetry,” perhaps even literary porn, as they were written from Steve on what he describes “auto-erotic pilot” mode. Perhaps this explains why Beam allows their continuance—they represent their unspoken mutual love and their *love-making*.³²

Nevertheless, at some moment, maybe after accepting Steve’s rejection in early 1984, Beam began exploring possible links between friendship and love within black men social communities. That is, Steve’s rejection did not devastate Beam to emotional paralysis, as is often the case with unrequited romance. Quite the contrary, its affect compels Beam to further imagine not only what constitutes love, but how he, as a black gay man, understood the practice of love within and beyond sexual desire—love between men beyond notions of “homosexuality.”³³ Beam’s correspondence with Steve underscores his personal conviction to affirm love as a practice for friendship—and more importantly King’s notion of *philia*, or brotherly affection.

³¹ Steve, “To Be Continued...” (January 16, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

³² Steve says that when writing these letters, he’s always on an “auto-erotic pilot” mode. Steve, “Joe” (April 2, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

³³ For more on “homosexuality” see Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 2008).

Beam and Steve met on a festive occasion: a poetry reading by Chicana lesbian feminist and poet, Cherrie Moraga. Some time in the late spring of June 1984 and at the invitation of Beam, Moraga performed her poetry at the Painted Bride Theatre, then a jive venue showcasing emerging and established poets in the “city of sisterly and brotherly love,” Philadelphia.³⁴ Steve credits feminist writers for inspiring his creative sensibilities. June Jordan, Patti Smith, Anais Nin, and Ntzoake Shange—whose poetry resonates with him profoundly—constitute some of these inspiring influences; because of those writers Steve says, “I felt in my gut.”³⁵ In other words, feminists taught him to write from deep within. *I need to be loved/ & haven’t the audacity to say/ where are you/ & don’t know who to say it to*, speaks to Steve’s personal dilemma just as much as echoes the dramatic schematics of Shange’s “lady in blue.”³⁶ As her performance reach its finale that night, Moraga explained to her audience that poetry serves as way to reveal secrets, which “struck a nerve” in Steve.³⁷ One can only imagine the poems encompassing her performance repertoire that evening. Perhaps Moraga read from what was then her latest publication, *Loving in the War Years*. A few poems come to mind: “Fear, A Love Poem,” “Loving In The War Years,” and most assuredly, “Loving On The Run,” whose protagonist must have spoken directly to Steve: “they don’t catch on/ them seeing your words/ like the body of a darker brother/ you sayin/ ‘I know what that feels like’/ being shitted on/ and they believing you/ about your allied place on the block/ about the war

³⁴ Marc Stein, *The City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

³⁵ Steve, “June Ruminations” (June 21, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

³⁶ Ntzoake Shange, *For Color Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuff*, (New York: Scribner, 1975), 45.

³⁷ Steve, “June Ruminations” (June 21, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

goin on/ they believing you/ because you know you got/ no reason/ to lie to them,” writes Moraga.³⁸ In this poem, Moraga imagines her persona as a master trickster skilled at performing a politics of mimicry in the name of belonging. This performance nevertheless masks deep fears of ex-communication based on lesbian erotic desires. As an ex-Vietnam soldier Steve could surely relate to these fears and admits to such performances. “For the past 15 years, I have learned,” he writes, “how to successfully conceal, suppress or internalize anger, pain, and depression...[I’ve] gotten so good at it that I’m sure few people I consider friends don’t know me at all.”³⁹ Steve considered Beam his one and only true friend, a category of kinship that led to affective relations between the two. Through these letters, Steve negotiated an epistolary friendship that sustained his own survival and helped contribute to Beam’s intervention in black literary politics during the 1980s, one centered on the emotional needs between black men.

Steve was a voracious and astute reader who held a deep interest in the work of French Philosopher George Gurdjieff. He was also fond of American novelists, especially Nathaniel Hawthorne. As an amateur poet, however, Steve lacked a sense of style and creative voice. He often wrote poems about interracial love between black men and white women gown awry—a re-mastering, if you will, of Amiri Baraka’s work, where in lieu of Dante we are introduced to “The Systems of Steve’s Hell.”⁴⁰ Because Steve feared embracing, at least publicly, gay culture, he short-changed himself on building a literary

³⁸ Cherrie Moraga, *Loving In The War Years*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 1983/2000), 20

³⁹ Steve, “Joe” (April 2, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁴⁰ Steve also admired Amiri Baraka’s work. He begins one letter: “Thanks very much for the PBQ’s and the [Audre] Lorde pieces. She is someone I was totally unfamiliar with. I guess that’s not saying much though since I’m still digging [Amiri] Baraka and trying to learn where he is at while there’s so much more writing out there.” See Steve, “Friday June 22, 1984.” Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

archive that could cultivate a more thorough sense of his black “queer” self. In his formative years, he avoided Baldwin, disregarding ironically, his father’s interest in this astute intellectual: “he is a writer I’ve avoided reading for the most part...because he is gay,” he says to Beam.⁴¹ His friendship with Beam, however, fostered a critical change in his intellectual development. Beam sent to Steve recent works by women of color feminists and black gay men with the intention of helping Steve understand the complicated dynamics and radical potential of his and sexuality. Over time, Beam sent Steve literature written by Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, James Baldwin (much to his chagrin), Essex Hemphill, and Alice Walker—whose novel *The Color Purple*, he, like a number of headstrong, deeply patriarchal black men at the time, hated. Yet, this literature came in handy, as illuminated in two compelling letters Steve writes to Beam between June and July 1984.

Apparently Steve hated his job working for Marshall’s department store, describing his labor as “volunteer slavery” to Beam in June 1984. Understandably, given such a description that perverts the notion that one would ever enslave themselves voluntarily, we might understand why lunch breaks—however short—excited him. Lunch breaks freed Steve from the surveillance of an all-white work environment dominated by women whom he fantasized have rough sex with (i.e. Sadomasochism and Bondage) before murdering them. In his poems such as “Wet Dream” and “Subliminal Necrophilia” Steve takes Eldridge Cleaver’s ruminations in *Soul on Ice* to the far extreme as he imagines how pleasurable murdering his co-workers seems; these are co-workers, whom, sadly and quite similarly to the “plantation mistress,” taunt and emasculate him

⁴¹ Steve, “Joe” (June 27, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

sexually when they were not, according to Steve, trying to ride his jock.⁴² “Death makes the cock grow harder,” he writes in “Subliminal Negrophilia,” a sinister parody on the adage, “distance makes the heart grow fonder.”⁴³ Nevertheless, lunch breaks were his escape. Having a beer “at this bar” that’s close by Marshall’s generated a productive conversation for Steve. In this bar conversation, his contributions reflect conversation he had with Beam:

Today on lunch-break I shot over to this bar that’s close by and had a couple of beers, something I don’t usually do while working...the bar tender and this other cracker were talking about writing so I was listening...there wasn’t anybody else in the place...so I asked the one guy if he was a writer and he said no, not really but he’s got some poems and he dug up his old journal recently and he’s starting to get back into it so yes, he’s a writer I conclude...and he’s talking about John Updike and Herman (who I like myself) and Papa Hemmingway...so I started talking out of my ass...this guy was in his forties I guess...I mentioned Kerouac who kicked my but when I first found out about him...and I said something like “It seems to me that there are two kinds of writing or that two types of *writing that come directly from experience and writing that is just imagination* and that Kerouac was mostly imagination although it was based on fact” (emphasis added).⁴⁴

Writing from experience, as opposed to “just the imagination,” is, in a Lordean sense, “not a luxury.” In the letter and in this precise passage cited herein, Steve invokes an argument long associated with women of color feminism that the most useful writings are derived from personal experiences. Steve goes on to lodge a structural critique of

⁴² Steve shares with Beam that a “pretty white woman,” co-worker at Marshalls handed him a “church type ladys [sic] hat” and said “here Steve here’s a hat for you.” Steve continues to write: “She laid the hat down near where I was working and walked away smiling...this literally happened and I was mad. I stood there and mumbled ‘yeah’ and tried to figure out what the hell she meant by her little joke or whatever it was.” Steve would experience similar taunts at work while at Marshalls suggesting that folks perceived him to be gay. In another letter, while on a lunch break another white woman flirts with Steve before suggesting that he had personal knowledge of homosexuality. See, Steve, “Friday June 22, 1984.” Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁴³ Steve, “Joe” (December 19, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁴⁴ Steve, “Joe” (July 8, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

canonical American and Western literature. Although, he shares his interlocutors notion that writing melds fact with fiction—what Lorde names “biomythography”—Steve vehemently disagrees with the centrality of white male novelists and the American tradition: “and the cracker mentioned James Joyce and some other white writer [whom model this blending] but I can’t remember who...I didn’t mention Ishmael Reed or any of the *sisters and the brothers* who have moved the whole scene so much more further from some old stuffy crackers like John Updike or who the hell else...I wish you would have been there to straighten those crackers out,” Steven concludes with a tinge of glee (emphasis mine).⁴⁵ That Steve wishes that Beam could have personally been there suggest the centrality of Beam’s influence of Steve critical intervention during that moment.

A month prior to this bar incident, Steve read literature on or about James Baldwin that Beam sent to him. “Rereading the Baldwin pieces,” Steve writes to Beam in June 1984, “a couple of things stand out more than before. The question of human affection, of integrity, in my case, the question of trying to become a writer are all,” Steve quotes Baldwin, “linked to the question of sexuality.”⁴⁶ To Beam, Steve writes about sending letters to his lady friend Sherry while they were in the army together. An unrequited love interest at best Sherry, unlike Beam, seldom responded to these literary overtures Steve writes, “I must have sent her a letter every month for damn near a year,” before he realized her lack of interest. In contrast, Steve derived a sense of pleasure from his correspondence with Beam defining in one letter their relationship as “something kind

⁴⁵ Steve, “Joe” (July 8, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁴⁶ Steve, “Joe” (July 12, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

of special,” while in another admitting that he “feels good” when he receives letters from Beam.⁴⁷ At this point, Steve had not accepted his bisexuality, but he was very aware of his sexual interest in Beam. Reading Baldwin, and precisely an interview conducted by Richard Goldstein—the document Beam sends to Steve—enhanced Steve’s perception of sexuality. As Clarence Hardy notes, throughout his conversation with Goldstein, James Baldwin demonstrates just how central love and physical intimacy were to “his moral and artistic vision.” Whereas Steve quotes directly from the interview regarding the question of human affection, integrity and the pre-requisites for becoming a better writer, Baldwin states further that, “sexuality is only a part of it. I don’t even know if it’s the most important part. But it’s indispensable.”⁴⁸

Baldwin’s writings concerned not the question of sexuality alone but a “commitment to love that shatters all boundaries,” between groups of people, especially blacks and whites.⁴⁹ Steve writes Beam to gain purchase on the function of writing, especially for a black gay man’ but his epistolary practice allows him to understand that friendship between gay/ queer/ or men who are uncertain about their sexuality does not always hinge on sexual desire. In both letters, Steve indicates a thoroughgoing interest in sexual politics, where on the one hand homophobia functions as a site of terror and on the other hand, love can cement friendship between men. While in the act of writing a letter to Beam sharing where he began reflecting on re-reading of Baldwin, Steve began ruminating on the self-destructive nature of his homophobia. Sadly, his mother entered

⁴⁷ Steve, “Joe” (July 12, 1984) and “To Be Continued” (January 16, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁴⁸ Clarence E. Hardy III, *James Baldwin’s God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 75.

⁴⁹ Clarence E. Hardy III, *James Baldwin’s God*; Richard Goldstein, “Go The Way Your Blood Beats”: An Interview with James Baldwin (1984) in Quincy Trope (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

his room and interrupted his thoughts. Fearing that she might read the letter, he “rips the page out of the machine” and tells his mother that he “didn’t want her to read it.” The content of Steve’s letter indicates that he began grappling with the question of own homophobia in his response to Baldwin’s writings. For example he cites Baldwin: “The capacity for experience is what burns out fear. Because the homophobia we’re talking about really is a kind of fear. It’s a terror in the flesh. It’s really a terror of being touched.” Steve strongly identifies with this quote, sharing with Beam that he too feared being touched by another man. Yet, Steve’s interest in Beam goes unresolved. Consider for example the letter Steve writes where he reflects on his lunch break at the Bar near his job, Marshalls. Although Steve happily discloses his intervention in that bar conversation, he closes the letter reflecting on the possibility of a relationship with Beam. He writes, “I keep wondering where this whole thing is going and if it is [going anywhere] how long will it take [to get there] but when I think about it seems that I’m the one who will determine that.” He then closes the letter with a quote from Hart Crane: “There is a world dimensional for those untwisted by love of things irreconcilable.” In September of that year, Steve would quote a Stephen Crane poem titled “The Heart,” which reads:

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial
Who, squatting upon the ground
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.

I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It’s bitter-better,” he answered;
“But I like it
Because it is bitter
And because it is my heart.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Steve, “Joe” (September 3, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

These letters allow Steve to vent his every day frustrations, sexual and otherwise, to Beam who in effect, facilitates Steven emotional development without judgment; without having, that is to say, his masculinity questioned or challenged. Eventually, Steve—by way of literature and poetry—arrives at a conception of love based his friendship with Beam. Although understanding the concept of love was a challenge for Steve, writing through love enabled him to share his most inner, deeply private thoughts and relate his fears and anxieties to Beam. What did Beam do with the content of these letters? How did he make sense of them and how would they influence his own writings? In spite of constantly reminding Beam that he and Steve would never have a romantic relationship, they pushed Beam to theorize a love that would allow him to love Steve beyond all the pain and hurt of rejection. Regrettably, Steve was only one of many black men with whom Joe had to find sustenance in the poetry of rejection, and indeed his “words from the heart.”

Making Ourselves from Scratch

Two black gay icons failed Joseph Beam: the writer James Baldwin and the political activist Bayard Rustin. Although he praised for their genius and bravery in addressing racial injustice, Beam would ultimately critique them for their failures to adequately address liberation in black communities at the intersection of race and sexuality. In other words Baldwin and Rustin did not represent the black gay “forefathers” that would help Beam fulfill his quest for black gay liberation. Waiting on the other end of this rejection was black lesbian feminist love with which Beam poured into “Brother to Brother” and *In The Life*. In two essays, “Making Ourselves From

Scratch,” and “James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy My Brother,” Beam “reads” Baldwin, calling out his inability to effectively depict love between black gay men within a black cultural context. In his correspondence with Rustin, Beam learned the hard way that historical context matters: Rustin was a race man devoted to anti-racist justice and did not deem sexuality a political issue because there was, from his view, no movement devoted to sexual and gay liberation.

From its outset, Beam’s essay “Making Ourselves From Scratch” intimates a brief coming of age story—Beam’s “passage from passivism to activism” as a black gay man.⁵¹ Beam’s masculine anxieties were palpable throughout his formative years; he was often hyper-conscious of his effeminacy during his college years in the “hinterlands of Iowa” where he pursued, but never completed, his graduate studies. Beam feared the repercussions if someone discovered or “outed” him as a gay man for reasons undisclosed. Largely, his fear stems from the paucity of black men or women who publicly identified as gay. “I needed heroes, men and women I could emulate,” he writes. It was not until later in life, well after his graduate studies and during his young-adult life, that Beam discovered powerful people, “mentors if you will.” Among them, he names: Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, John Edgar Wideman, Essex Hemphill, Lamont Steptoe, Judy Grahn, Tommi Avicelli, Charles Fuller, Toni Morrison, and Barbara Smith.” These writers, he continues, “are connected by their desires to create images by which they could survive as gays and lesbians, as blacks, and as poor people.”⁵² The reference to “images” resonates with profound salience throughout Beam’s literary oeuvre, and serves

⁵¹ Joseph Beam, “Making Ourselves From Scratch” in Essex Hemphill (ed.), *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men* (Washington, D.C.: Redbone Press, 1991), 36.

⁵² Joseph Beam, “Making Ourselves From Scratch,” 335.

as a literary device deployed for reflection and critique. Consider the opening paragraph of “Making Ourselves From Scratch,” where Beam writes:

Each morning as I wipe the sleep from my eyes, don the costume that alleges my safety and propel myself onto the stoop, I know with the surety of the laws of gravity that my footsteps fall in a world not created in my *image*. It is not in the newspapers, in store windows, nor is it on the television screen. Too often, it is not in the eyes of my sisters who fear my crack, nor is it present in the *countenance of my brothers who fear the face that mirrors our anger*. At day’s end, having done their bidding, I rush home to do my own: creating myself from scratch as a black gay man (emphasis added).⁵³

When Beam wakes in the morning and moves throughout the public, he does not capture reflections of himself. A closer analysis though might lend itself to a critique of the images of black gay men that circulate in literature at the time. His references to “images” and those reflected in “mirrors” signify on Baldwin. Indeed, Beam signifies on Baldwin’s construction of gay male images and love as well as his critical race(less) politics, which as critics note were more concerned with integration than asserting black gay men within black communities. Beam’s opening paragraph bares striking similarities to Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room* (1956). Baldwin begins the novel with Giovanni, its protagonist, peering out of a window:

I STAND AT THE window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across the death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past.⁵⁴

Like Giovanni, Beam wakes to a morning expecting to face a terrible day. However unlike Giovanni, Beam’s racial identity socially immobilizes him. As a black gay man,

⁵³ Beam, “Making Ourselves From Scratch,” 335.

⁵⁴ James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, 3.

Beam's image is not captured anywhere and thus is never projected back to him. Yet, given his racial capital, Giovanni, watches his reflection in the "darkening gleam of the window pane." Beam, unlike Giovanni, lacks a history and personal models from which he could emulate and understand the powers and meanings of conquest. And lastly while Giovanni escapes America on a vacation to France, Beam remains in America where he looks not to escape, but to understand how to live, and not just exist, within Black America. He "rush[es] home." Giovanni, as a "raceless" gay man, absconds, fleeing away from whatever problems beset his life in America. Clearly, Giovanni, though constructed by a black gay writer, does not reflect issues pertaining to Beam. Even as a raceless gay man, Giovanni represents what Baldwin calls a "most disagreeable mirror." "I concluded long ago," writes Baldwin elsewhere, "that they found the color of my skin inhibiting. This color seems to operate as a most disagreeable mirror, and a great deal of one's energy is expended in reassuring white Americans that they do not see what they see."⁵⁵ Quite differently from Baldwin, an appeal to whites was less a priority for Beam. Beam employs the mirror as a leitmotif not to lionize Baldwin but to signal the importance of creating legacies for black (gay) men; legacies where black men do not fear talking to each other nor looking into each other's eyes: "What is it that we see in each other that makes us avert our eyes so quickly...Do we turn away from each other in order to not see our collective anger and sadness," he queries in "Brother to Brother: Words from The Heart."⁵⁶ Beam concludes "Making Ourselves From Scratch" with the imperative of legacy building. He writes: "What is it that we are passing along to our cousin from North Carolina, the boy down the block, our nephew who is a year old, to our sons who

⁵⁵ Dwight A. McBride (ed.), *James Baldwin Now* (New York: New York University Press), 64.

⁵⁶ Beam, "Brother to Brother" in *In the Life*, 182.

may follow us in this life...What is it that we pass along to them or do they, too, need to start from scratch?”⁵⁷

Although Beam praises Baldwin for his legacy, going as far to call him a “true diva,” Beam seems very careful not to romanticize him. From the outset, we might question Beam’s word choice. Why “not a bad legacy,” as opposed to a “good legacy?” Why not opt for much more venerating rhetoric? The answer, I suggest, rests again in the motivating factors inciting Beam’s essay, “Brother to Brother,” which has pro-feminist politics. Beam begins this essay by signifying again on Baldwin’s novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, but this time he turns our attention to the erotics of interracial desire. “Many years ago, while I was rummaging through cartons in our basement, I found a tattered, coverless copy of James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, which had probably been left behind by one of the roomers with whom we shared our house. I read it, and realized that Joey and David’s experiences reflected what I felt.”⁵⁸ Exactly what feelings shared between Joey and David resonate with Beam? Beam goes on to suggest that “terror and anticipation” constitute those queer feelings connecting him to David and Joey. By revisiting the scene between David and Joey we ascertain these other feelings that Beam experience. To be sure, Baldwin writes that Giovanni’s relationship with Joey, “a very nice boy, too, very quick and dark,” was, from the beginning very futile. Joey’s blackness, as Giovanni ponders from the window over-looking France, disqualifies him from the kinds of relationships desired by and expected of Giovanni: “The idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me. So I

⁵⁷ Beam, “Making Ourselves From Scratch,” in *Brother to Brother*, 336.

⁵⁸ Beam, “James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother” in *Brother to Brother*, 229.

forgot him” (emphasis in the original).⁵⁹ Before dismissing Joey, Giovanni indulges his secret desires for blackness, indeed his sexual yearnings for Joey. Moments after having sex with Joey, Giovanni senses a certain fear precipitated by the fact of Joey’s blackness.

Baldwin writes:

We were both naked and the sheets we had used as a cover was tangled around our feet. Joey’s body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had ever seen till then. I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid...the desire which was raising in me seemed monstrous...Joey is a boy...I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood...I was ashamed...I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in me* (emphasis in the original).⁶⁰

Observing Joey’s post-coital flesh evokes shame in Giovanni. He drums up of any number of unsettling stereotypes regarding black male sexuality—his rapacious prowess and monstrous animalities. Above all, sleeping with Joey has desecrated his white manhood and diseased his otherwise pure white body: “how this could have happened *in me*,” Giovanni states despairingly. Joey’s blackness embodies hazardous danger; his body acts as an incubator of un-distilled liquid abjection threatening, once it goes viral, to white civilization—indeed we could interpret Joey’s comments as a “bareback” admission: that Joey “came inside” of Giovanni. Baldwin constructs Joey as a lecherous abomination whose seeds of destruction threatens David’s personhood and as a result merits physical disposal and psychic erasure. The novelty of defying interracial taboos wore-off quickly for black gay men when their one-night white lovers abandoned them at sunrise the next morning. The frequency with which one-night stands occurred within

⁵⁹ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, 6.

⁶⁰ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, 8-9.

these erotic experiences devastated scores of black gay men.⁶¹ “Could there be happy endings for this kind of love,” Beam queries in his tribute to Baldwin. Blackness, among other aspects of the novel, “seems incidental,” he states in the essay.⁶² This critique notwithstanding, Beam admired Baldwin’s novel and specifically his “wisdom and courage in dealing sensitively with male relationships” and his ability to “cast some light on the...notion of whiteness...so many...willfully ignore.” At the expense of addressing whiteness with such thunderous eloquence, Baldwin, in Beam’s formulations, neglected to interrogate black male relationships within the black community. “The crisis in black male fiction, its lack of emotion and possibility, results,” Beam asserts, “from focusing on the racist foot on our necks.” In light of this, Beam further writes: “Baldwin wrote with the delicacy we’ve come to expect from women writers, yet at times his male characters could be as misogynist and despicable as those of any other male writer.” Beam’s literary emasculation of Baldwin notwithstanding, bolstering his critique is a pro-feminist politic. Citing the work of Black feminists, Beam asserts that Baldwin, in a sense, focuses his energies less on issues within black communities. On the one hand, Beam states: “The most glorious thing about Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the absence of white people.”⁶³ Beam implies that Hurston literary project labors to understand how black folks interact with each other, negatively or positively. He also references an interview between Lorde and Baldwin that appears in *Essence* magazine. In this interview, Lorde quite differently from Baldwin, “clearly saw other black women as her audience and issues of concern to black women as her primary

⁶¹ For more on these wild stories see Michael J. Smith (ed.), *Black Men/ White Men: A Gay Anthology* (Prentice Hall, 1999)

⁶² Bean, “James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother,” in Beam, ed./ conceived, *Brother to Brother*, 229.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 231

matters. She pressed Baldwin: ‘what do you have to say about the sexual violence of black men *in* the black community? Shouldn’t you be talking about that? What are you saying to my son Jonathan?’⁶⁴ In short, Beam “wished Baldwin to have been pro-feminist.”⁶⁵ Only in his last novel, *Just Above My Head*, does Baldwin—in Beam’s estimation—begin to explicitly address love within black communities. “In *Just Above My Head*, in plain view of the black family, it was possible for two black men to be lovers, and be political, and be cherished for who they were.” As a result, black gay men could be “warriors, artists, and astronauts; we could be severe, sensitive, and philosophical.” No, Baldwin did not leave such a bad legacy. But, queries Beam: “How many times could I read Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head*?”⁶⁶ Baldwin carved a path for black gay men to write indeed. However, he did not always deal with love in black communities. As Beam yearns for more depictions of black gay men in fiction, confronting the discursive limits of Baldwin’s fiction, he, by the end of his essay, respectfully, tips his hat to Baldwin.

Beam’s critique of Baldwin is not original and he might be liable for—as a number of new generation artists were at the time—trying to “define himself by everything Baldwin was not.”⁶⁷ Perhaps. Nevertheless, Beam’s critique is less invested in Baldwin as a homosexual race traitor—a term that summarizes the attacks Baldwin endured by Black Power literary activists Amiri Barks’s and Eldridge Cleaver. Both of whom referred to Baldwin “unsmilingly as Martin Luther Queen.”⁶⁸ Designed less as

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Beam, *In the Life*, xix.

⁶⁷ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking At A Black Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

destructive criticisms aimed at destroying Baldwin's reputation, Beam's insights are imagined to address the divides within black communities and offer practical solutions based on emotion; and on love. Beam's frustrations with Baldwin might best be understood by formulations posited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Writing on Baldwin, Gates contends that "Baldwin's conception of himself was formed by the familiar, and still well-entrenched, idea of the alienated artist or intellectual, whose advanced sensibility entailed his estrangement from the very people he would represent. Baldwin could dramatize the tensions between the two models—he would do so in fiction—but he was never to resolve it."⁶⁹ Baldwin's literal and physical alienation—which was sometimes self-imposed and represents what Magdalena Zaborowska theorizes as his "erotics of exile"⁷⁰—affected how he dealt with, or not, the black community generally speaking and black gay men specifically.

Beam admired Baldwin, soliciting him, along with civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, to participate in an anthology devoted to black gay elders titled, *Speaking for Our Selves*, a joint oral history project with Columbia University; Beam also invited Rustin to read the manuscript and to provide a "few words of advance praise," for the back jacket of *In The Life*.⁷¹ Baldwin remained elusive, neither declining nor accepting—he simply remained out of reach and non-responsive to Beam's invitation. Rustin, however,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁰ Magdalena Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decades: Erotics of Exile* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷¹ Joseph Beam, "Dear Mr. Rustin" (November 3, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

provided a thoroughly understandable reason for declining Beam's request.⁷² At great length Rustin writes:

My activism did not spring from being gay, or for that matter, from being black. Rather it is rooted, fundamentally, in my Quaker upbringing and values that were instilled in me by my grandparents who reared me. Those values are based on the concepts of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal. Adhering to those values has meant taking a standing against injustice, to the best of my ability, whenever and wherever it occurs.

I was not involved in the struggle for gay rights as a youth. To the best of my knowledge there was no organized gay liberation movement. I did not "come out of the closet," voluntarily—circumstances forced me out. While I have no problem with being publicly identified as a homosexual, it would be dishonest of me to present myself as one who was in the forefront of the struggles for gay rights. The credit for that belongs to others. They are the one who should be in your book. While I support full equality, under the law, for homosexual, I fundamentally consider sexual orientation to be a private matter. As such, it has not been a factor which has greatly influenced my role as an activist.⁷³

For whatever reasons, the anthology never materialized. At best, publishers, such as John Gill of The Crossing Press, were skeptical of the economic value—and thus profitability—of a volume devoted to black gay men that did not include "big names," such as Baldwin and Rustin.⁷⁴ Beam was well aware of the literary establishment's stance towards black gay men, intimating in an exchange with Audre Lorde's biographer Alexis De Veaux the "difficulties of identifying myself as Black gay man is that publishers

⁷² Initially, Rustin corresponded to Beam through a third party, Walter Naegle—a former lover. It would take several months before Rustin personally responded to Beam. However, after Beam noted how Rustin obliged the interviews of white journalists, Rustin "agreed" to participate in an interview with Rustin. Beam spared no punches with Rustin—he was quite blunt in what he perceived as Rustin's racialized favoritism. "Dear Mr. Rustin" (November 3, 1985). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York. For more on Rustin's relationship with Walter Naegle, See John D' Emilio, *The Lost Profit: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

⁷³ Bayard Rustin, "Dear Mr. Beam" (April 21, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁷⁴ Joseph Beam, "Dear John Gill" (December 16, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

won't touch me with a 10-foot pole."⁷⁵ With this understanding, we can understand Beam's persistence and his affectionate appeal to Rustin, insisting that Rustin's "experiences as an openly gay Black activist are important to those of us who are beginning to wage similar struggles within the Black community...No doubt you realize you are a role model for us."⁷⁶ Anticipating Gill's marked skepticism and reluctance, Beam confesses in a different letter to Rustin that, "to make the idea fly and the book salable, it's imperative that you and James Baldwin are a part of it. It is my hope, now that we have met and talked face-to-face, that you would be will to be a part of this new project." Yet and still Rustin declined. In a poignant letter written to Essex Hemphill on one late evening on April 1986, Beam admits to the devastation inspired by both Baldwin's and Rustin's decisions. He writes: These days my nerves are worked...I'm not sleeping well and [I] wonder what will happen in the next phase [of my career]. I hurt from the responses of Baldwin and Rustin."⁷⁷

The lack of laudable representations of black men in Baldwin's fiction, complied with his and Rustin's refusal to act as gay elders and mentors to the younger generation, led Beam to lament a fragmented black gay community. Baldwin and Rustin are just two cases among many others. In Philadelphia, Beam's hometown, the black gay community struggled to coalesce, which he notes in an interview with a local activist.⁷⁸ This lack of caring, this emptiness and fragmentation, and this sense of alienation and love between

⁷⁵ Joseph Beam, "Dear Alexis" (November 6, 1984). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁷⁶ Joseph Beam, "Dear Mr. Rustin" (February 15, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁷⁷ Joseph Beam, "Essex," (April 29, 1986). Joseph Beam Papers. Schomburg Center for Black Culture. New York, New York.

⁷⁸ Joseph Beam, "Brother, Can You Spare Sometime?" in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*.

black men compelled Beam's literary activism—both in *In The Life* and his essay “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart”—as well as his feminist practice of love. When Beam could not turn to his black gay elders, he turned to black women for inspiration, the courage of conviction, community, and love.

Queer Relatives

In *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam's Call*, co-editor Steven Fullwood interviews the black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith. At some point in the interview, Fullwood shifts his focus to “the black lesbian impact on Jo Beam's writings and work...He really looked to women [and] specifically you [Barbara] and Audre for his writings, [particularly] when he was compiling *In The Life*.”⁷⁹ “Right,” Smith states. Smith shares that she and Beam discussed the book constantly during its development stages. The relationship between Smith and Beam began when the two served on the Executive Board of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays in Washington D.C. Beam was the Editor in Chief for *Black/ Out*, the organization's literary journal. About Beam's commitment to *Black/ Out*, Smith states:

His being editor of *Black/ Out* was so challenging, and so time consuming because there wasn't always sufficient resources for it to be you know, an easier job than it actually turned out to be. But he was so committed, and he produced many issues. But the thing is that I think his skills as an editor are most ascertainable from the products that he produced...he had extremely high standards. He knew how to use the English language with, you know with, well, not with ease, because it's never easy. But the thing is [that] he certainly had enough skills that he could deploy written language with great effectiveness.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Steven Fullwood and Charles Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius*.

⁸⁰ Fullwood, *Black Gay Genius*, 27-28 .

A familial kinship developed between Smith and Beam. As Fullwood states to Smith, “you two were siblings in the struggle, working together, sharing battle stories on literature, love, and life.” They were both, Smith asserts elsewhere, “working for liberation and having a damn good time”—a mood evidenced by Smith’s reply to Fullwood’s observation: “It’s nice to laugh about that.”

Gil Herald, who served as the Executive Director of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) from 1983-1986, more clearly articulates Beam’s black male feminism that resulted from his relationship to Smith and other women of color. “To the extent that it is possible for men to presumptively dub themselves as feminist, I would say [that] Jo and I thought of ourselves in that way. To follow the example of Barbara Smith, Cherie Moraga, Audre Lorde, and other [women of color], we would have to better express,” he continues, “our feelings and struggles with loving ourselves, learn the art of intimacy between men, acknowledge our vulnerabilities, and express the strength derived from that process through writing—learning from,” he concludes, “sisterhood.”⁸¹ Beam’s feminist praxis extended to his work on the Executive Board of the NCBLG and in his literary pursuits. On the board, women were consulted regularly, “especially when there was an important decision to be made”—and equally important was that women held “the majority of the vote on the board.”⁸² Arleen Olshan remembers that when Beam worked at Philadelphia Giovanni’s Room—the nation’s oldest LGBT bookstore—he “read voraciously and studied gay life and feminism in books, music, the literature for young people and through the people who shared their

⁸¹ Gil Herald, “You Have Got To Tell The Story: Recalling My Brother/ Sister Joseph Beam” in Steven Fullwood and Charles Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius*, 40.

⁸² Herald, “You Have Got To Tell The Story,” 41.

lives in the store.”⁸³ Beam wrote many reviews of black lesbian literature and as he reflected on this work he began to ponder ideas “that would become his life’s work.”⁸⁴ Indeed, reading *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Top Ranking*, *ZAMI*, *Home Girls*, and *Claiming An Identity They Taught Me To Despise* was a “turning point in Joe’s life.” These works by women of color,” Olshan continues, “would start him on his journey home” and indeed inspire the publication of *In The Life*.⁸⁵

Pro-feminist Imaginaries

In *New Black Man*, cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal asks: “what the hell is a black male feminist?”⁸⁶ Spotting a coterie of black male scholars and activists—who range from Frederick Douglas and W.E.B Dubois to Gary L. Lemons, David Ikard, and Michael Awkward—a black male feminist, according to Neal, is “serious about embracing politics that are anti-sexist/ misogynist and anti-homophobic” and “serious about uprooting impulses within the black community that work to deny community and diversity.”⁸⁷ Black men who dare to “claim the moniker are,” Neal observes, “usually the product of a serious intervention by the women in our lives.”⁸⁸ In short, black male feminists, and men who are pro-feminist, confront patriarchy and sexism in America by attending to their own collusion with anti-womanist and homophobic systems that uncritically privilege heterosexual masculine dominance. bell hooks’s *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* introduced Neal to the concept of “black male privilege,”

⁸³ Arleen Olshan, “Remembering Joe” in *Black Gay Genius*, 101.

⁸⁴ Olshan, “Remembering Joe,” 101.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

⁸⁷ Ibid, 42.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 42.

which in turn gave him “some inkling of the way that I benefited from my position as a black man often at the expense of black women.”⁸⁹ Neal goes on to suggest, but not fully develop, that Ikard’s and Awkward’s interventions are based on an emotional attachment to love. Citing Ikard’s essay “Love Jones: A Black Male Feminist Critique of Chester Himes’s *If He Holler’s Let Him Go*” and Awkward’s memoir *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*—where Awkward states “I could no more have rejected feminism than I could have chosen not to love my mother”⁹⁰—Neal concludes that “the real value of feminism to black men comes from its ability to literally transform our world view, particularly in response to our acceptance of the very rigid versions of black masculinity.”⁹¹ Even more, he notes the inherent relationship between “homophobia” and “the hatred for women,” and unequivocally states the importance of black gay men to reconstructing black masculinity. He writes: “Like feminism, black gay men offer possibilities for all black men to rethink their own masculinities and sexualities in order to create more productive relationships with the black community.”⁹²

Beam’s writings do the kind of work that Neal articulates—by focusing on love, Beam encourages us to rethink “our black masculinities and sexualities” in an effort establish livable and lovable relationships to the black community. Beam’s, essay embrace politics that are “anti-sexist, misogynist, and homophobic”; and as the Smith interview and his essays reveals, Beam political consciousness resulted from “serious interventions by women of color.” We see these interventions most clearly in “Making Ourselves From Scratch” and in “Brother to Brother: Words From the Heart.”

⁸⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 61.

⁹¹ Ibid, 63.

⁹² Ibid, 65.

Let us briefly return to Beam's essay, "Making Ourselves From Scratch" and specifically Beam's rhetorical choices, Why "scratch"? What significance of this word choice? To walk away with only its literal translation—"from the beginning or starting point; from nothing, without resources"⁹³—would be to miss Beam's larger purpose: establishing an intellectual link to black feminist intellectualism; and thus, giving credit where its due. Although the implication of Beam's writings suggests that he began his literary activism as a black gay man "from scratch," "without resources," black feminism, as his correspondence reveals, serves as his vital resource to his intellectual and political consciousness. The essay itself echoes Audre Lorde's, "Scratching at the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving." As the essay anticipates Barbara Smith's "Doing it From Scratch: The Challenge of Lesbian Organizing," it is reiteration of "Black Lesbian/ Feminist Organizing"—an interview with other black feminists first published in *Homes Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.⁹⁴ Thematically, Beam's writings address, like Lorde's and Smith's, the politics of organizing a community of black gay men in the name of love and community.

Beam's most well-known essay to date, "Brother to Brother Words From the Heart" exemplify his pro-feminist imaginary—and demonstrates the work of feminist intervention that help black men to rethink, Neal reminds us, their own masculinities and sexualities. It bears repeating here that the manifesto argues that "black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties." On the surface, the essay calls for friendship between all black men by encouraging them to revise their notions of love. Achieving

⁹³ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/scratch?s=t>

⁹⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 2007), 45-52; Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 167-177; Barbara Smith (ed.), *Home Girls a Black Feminist Anthology* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 285-311.

love in black communities requires confronting the pain, hurt, and shame hardly ever discussed in black communities, a practice often known in a gendered context as a “culture of dissemblance.”⁹⁵ However, beyond revisionary love the essay speaks to the importance of communal links, building intellectual relationship with black women. Beam begins the essay not with his own words, but words spoken by Audre Lorde in a critical moment of her life: “...what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”⁹⁶ To be clear, this sentence does not serve as an epigraph. Beam employs an ellipsis at the start of the essay as a rhetorical gesture that then enables Lorde to speak directly to and through him about the intersection between pain and love that often condition black life in the 1980s, a time period where black bodies were under siege, if not completely destroyed by the conservative backlash of the Regan/ Bush administration. As the self-proclaimed “love-evangelist” Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes: “The 1980s was a period where what we now understand as neoliberalism, or a profoundly anti-social individualist form of global capitalism, ran its test case on our bodies, [and on] our communities, through an intense backlash against social institutions, war on poverty programming and economic human rights gains.”⁹⁷ In other words, black survival hinged on black men and women turning and speaking to their selves despite a U.S. government hell-bent on silencing their voices.

Yet and still Beam culls the sentence from Lorde’s, *Cancer Journals* and specifically her essay, “The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action.” Lorde’s diagnosis with breast cancer instilled in her a profound degree of bravery

⁹⁵ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs*, 4 (Summer 1989): 912-920.

⁹⁶ Beam, *In The Life*, 180.

⁹⁷ Gumbs, “Queer Relative,” in *Black Gay Genius*, 224.

compelling her to break her own silences. “I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I have ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence,” she writes as if to Beam, “will not protect you.”⁹⁸ Over the years, Beam internalized Lorde’s words as he became aware of the necessity to break his own silence; the silence of being both black and gay in America; the silence that induce and accompany internalized hatred as well as destructive anguish regarding his HIV and AIDS status. To express this anger, following his first sentence he culls another quote from Lorde, and this time from *Sister Outsider*:

I know the anger that lies inside of me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other.⁹⁹

Beam quotes from Lorde’s eight-part essay, “Eye-to-Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” which Lorde—in an interview with Charles Rowell—deemed one of her *most important* essays.¹⁰⁰ Lorde addresses women by using anger as a necessary framework to analyze its destructive force in black women’s lives. This and other essays, such as “Uses of Anger,” encourage black women to address anger so that they may find love awaiting them at the end of this collective release.¹⁰¹ In spite of Lorde’s focus on anger, “Eye to Eye” functions, much like “Uses of the Erotic” as a manifesto for love among and between black women:

We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what is native has been stole from us, *the love of black women for*

⁹⁸ Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinster/ Aunt Lute, 1980), 20.

⁹⁹ Joseph Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from The Heart,” 180.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Rowell, “Above the Wind: An Interview with Audre Lorde” in Joan Wylie Hall, ed., *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

¹⁰¹ Lorde, “Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” in *Sister Outsider*, 127.

each other. But we can practice being gentle with ourselves by being gentle with each other. We can practice being gentle with each other by being gentle with that piece of ourselves that is hardest to hold, by giving more to the brave bruised girlchild within each of us, by expecting a little less from her gargantuan efforts to excel. We can love her in the light as well as in the darkness, quiet her frenzy towards perfection and encourage her attentions toward fulfillment.¹⁰²

Addressing anger and hatred represents a method to ensure black women's individual and collective survival; surviving past the pain and into future lives that finds nourishment in emotional expression and love's embrace. Every aspect of Beam's "Brother to Brother" parallels Lorde's essay in its call for love. Whereas Lorde says early in the essay, "My Black woman's anger is a molten pond at the core of me," Beam writes, "I, too, know anger. My Blood contains as much anger as water." They both embody anger and purge their anguish through speaking. Where Lorde writes in eight vignettes, Beam uses four, signifying further the essay's "junior" relationship to Lorde's: "Eye to Eye" births and mothers "Brother to Brother." Beam continues to echo Lorde throughout the essay, asserting her politics of difference and her thesis on rage as talking points to inspire change in the individual lives of black men.

As much as the essay focuses on relationships between and among black men, Beam's feminist politics also addresses the importance of improving social relations between black men and women, what he sites as the shift from "getting by to a positive getting over." He writes: "I dream of Black men loving and supporting other Black men, and relieving Black women from the role of primary nurturers in our community. I dream, too, that as we receive more of what we want from each other that our special anger reserved or Black women will disappear."¹⁰³ As Gumbs reminds us, "this right

¹⁰² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 175.

¹⁰³ Joseph Beam, "Brother to Brother," 188.

here, the thread of unlikely love that links these two essays, is the queer thing.”

Unpacking this queer thing, Gumbs continues:

There is something very lesbian about Audre Lorde, a Black lesbian, talking about how Black women can value Black women, and there is something very gay about Joseph Beam as a Black gay man talking about the revolutionary potential of Black men loving Black men...Lorde makes it very clear in her essay that she is not talking only, or ever primarily, about romantic relationships. She is talking about her relationship with her mother, with her sister, with her therapist, with the woman behind the Medicaid counter, with the librarian. And, as Beam says, his agenda is not about a “particular, sexual political or class affiliation.” This is about love itself. And here is the queer thing.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, the queer thing is a “dangerous secret:” that Audre Lorde and Joseph Beam are but two people in during those times who “love[d] themselves and love[d] each other.”¹⁰⁵

Although Lorde and Beam centered their work around the “imperative of love” for black women and black men respectively, their relationship as “cultural producers and mentors, supporters, fans, and colleagues of each other is a model for something that we learn far too little about: healthy (meaning non-hetero-patriarchal, non-objectifying) holistic love between Black women and Black men.”¹⁰⁶ Beam learned from Lorde to place love at the center of his consciousness, which allowed him as a black gay men to love his heterosexual brothers just as much as he loved himself and anyone else.

Through love, as we have seen, Beam addresses, indirectly, the physical violence perpetuated by black men towards black women. Beam’s essay is anti-patriarchal, against the performance of masculinity—and “this disease called strength”¹⁰⁷—and antithetical to

¹⁰⁴ Gumbs, “Queer Relative,” 221-222.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁰⁷ Trudier Harris, “This Disease Called Strength: The Masculine Manifestation in Raymond Andrews’s *Appalachee Red*” in Keith Clarke (ed.) *Contemporary Black Men’s Fiction and Drama* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001)

the “cool-pose”¹⁰⁸ that grips black men by their collars. Instead, Beam calls for emotion, insisting that black men embrace their feelings because at stake are black livable and lovable futures. He states: “Black men loving black men is an autonomous agenda for the eighties, which is not rooted in any particular sexual, political, or class affiliation, but in our mutual survival. The ways in which we manifest that love are as myriad as the issues we must address. Unemployment, substance abuse, self-hatred, and the lack of positive images are but some of the barriers to our loving.”¹⁰⁹ Beam’s list of barriers to loving combine the material embodiments of “racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia”—or what Lorde calls the “forms of human blindness,” that in turn stems from society’s “inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force.”¹¹⁰ Black men loving black men is,” he concludes the essay, “a call to action, an acknowledgement of responsibility.”¹¹¹

Joseph Beam died of AIDS complications in 1989. As I close this chapter, I use the very words he did to describe James Baldwin: “Not a bad legacy brother.” Although sadness and rejection wounded him, women of color feminist love politics nourished him. His legacy lives in his words and in the words of others. As Essex Hemphill’s poem reminds us, many internalized their love for Joe—which in turn kept the march toward love and liberation alive and well for decades to come. Out of all this confusion that defined the times, Joseph Beam gave and brought his heart.

¹⁰⁸ Gwendolyn Brooks, “We Real Cool” in *Selected Poems*; bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

¹⁰⁹ Beam, “Brother to Brother” in *In the Life*, 191.

¹¹⁰ Lorde, “Scratching at the Surface,” in *Sister Outsider*, 45.

¹¹¹ Beam, “Brother to Brother” in *In the Life*, 191.

Epilogue
On Finding Assotto Saint's *Risin' to The Love We Need*

as i swallow
the last morsel of green apple
blessed with myrrhed prayers & libations on an african altar

in a gothic cathedral
where with banners from all corners of our country
freed from the prejudice of a dozen years' politics of greed

thousands gather on king's day
to ground sorrow at a sister's recent passing
(lorde we testify)
drum up her spirit along a cascading rainbow
to orisha's paradise

the juices snake sweetly down my throat & circles my veins
it loosens my tingling toes stiffened
by neuropathy

armed only with a candle that flares its last flames
i march out into the dark hell of
our big apple

--Assotto Saint, "Audre's Apples"

Initially, I planned to write my dissertation on the life and times of Assotto Saint, a gay Afro-Haitian poet, playwright, and activist whose *Spells of A Voodoo Doll* spoke to me one day while I was visiting A Room of One's Own, a feminist book store in downtown Madison, Wisconsin. I made a trip to this bookstore once weekly in the Summer of 2007—the year I moved from Florida to Wisconsin to begin my graduate

studies in African American Studies. During these visits I searched for any and every title related to the culture and history of black gay men—a theme that attracted me to graduate school in the first place and which I explored in my Master’s Thesis. There it was, sitting on the shelf that occupied the center of the store. Its spine slightly butted forward. Its colors—vibrant yellows and seductive greens and reds—lured me. “Assotto Saint...who is he,” I wonder quietly to myself—hyper aware of my black presence in this otherwise predominately white space in a city equally just as white. I glance at the book’s front and back jackets and notice a few pictures of Assotto Saint. “Oh, he’s cute.” I open the text and as I skim its first few pages I notice the language I studied during my undergraduate years at the University of Florida: Haitian Kreyòl.

Sanba sa fe mal o
Ma rele sanba ma rele
Sanba fa mal o
Gade sa ne g-yo fe mwen
Sanba san-m ap koule
You ban m cyay-la pote
M pa sa pote!
Chay-la lou wo ma roule
Chay-la lou wo m pa sa pote!
Ma roule!

“Ke-M Pa Sote”
Boukman Eksperyans¹

This is a blues lyric performed by Boukman Eksperyans, or Boukman Experience—a Haitian band that blends musical styles of vodu ritual ceremonies and folklore music with rock and roll. The lyric’s persona is hurt by the actions of black musicians (Sanba sa). “Gade se ne g-yo fe men” or “look at what these negroes did to me,” the speaker croons. The musician’s gave the speaker a “burden” to carry, which is too heavy a load for the

¹ Assotto Saint, *Spells of A Voodoo Doll* (New York: Richard Kasak, 1994), 14.

lone speaker. The speaker refuses to carry this burden: “You ban m cyay-la pote/ M pa sa pote!”; and, refuses to carry it lone. Acting alone undermines the speaker’s attempt at expressing love through community; a love evidenced in the lyric’s title, “Ke-M pa Sote,” which translates as: “My heart won’t come out.” The loneliness devastates then angers the speaker—“Sanba san-m ap koule,” which translates as “my musician blood is running.” As the lyrics imply, the persona prefers performing with the community of black musicians who’ve, sadly, burdened and alienated the speaker for reasons unknown—I can only suggest that within the context of Saint’s writings that this alienation has something to do with sexuality, and specifically being gay. “Do we,” Saint queries in his essay “Sacred Life: Art and AIDS,” “deserve to be loved?” Love, he declares in this very essay, “makes being alive worthwhile.”² Saint wants us to understand the relationship between love and community and to see that where there is no community, there is no love. It is no wonder then that his play “Risin’ to The Love We Need” concludes both *Spells of A Voodoo Doll* and Joseph Beam’s *In The Life*, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, “Rising to The Love We Need,” envisions a beloved community that has room for all black people; a beloved community that loves all of its people. “Francine,” Billy—a “35 year old, muscle bound, very sexy prototype of black hustler” whose an “excellent acrobatic disco dancer” that “goes for whites”—says to the play’s infamous drag queen, “you are one queen with a whole lotta loving/ your life’s all in your dream & your dreams are all your life.”³

In this dissertation, I have suggested that at the center of black lesbian and gay cultural politics—are freedom dreams based on love. This love stretches far and wide in

² Saint, *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*, 379.

³ Ibid.

an attempt to include every person in the black community in its fold—much wider than even King’s beloved community, which envisioned a “pure” form of love (agape) as a transit point of understanding between whites and blacks. From the position of black queer folks—lesbians, gays, and as Saint’s play suggest drag queens—love is a practice of life—that attempts to reimagine the beloved community. The love articulated in this dissertation is not singular and nor is it easily achieved. Barbara’s Smiths home love, Pat Parker’s “just love,” Cheryl Clarke’s “wild love,” and Beam’s “revolutionary queer love” all require a thoroughgoing understanding of sexuality that complicates blackness, or the many ways of being and representing one as authentically black. Smith’s “home love” relegates erotic practice to the genre of fiction—a strategic move that relies on a public/ private split which parallels the division of labor between her political (public) and the fictional (private). Parker’s “just love” moves with and against the dreams of Martin Luther King as she confronts the discursive limits of the law—which sanctions violence against women and queers. Quite differently from many of her black feminist and women of color contemporaries, Clarke searches for a language to articulate both her lesbian identity and to explicitly speak of sex between women—the sheer ability to speak brazenly and publicly about a black lesbian woman’s erogenous zones within the cultural and historical context of blackness is, for Clarke a liberating act of wild love. Beam’s “revolutionary queer love” argues that sexual identities should not limit the ways in which black folks express love between one another. So what does Saint’s work offer? My brief reading will show that Saint’s plays, “New Love Song”—like his play “Risin’ to The Love We Need”—in that the key for black folks’ liberation hinges on us recognizing that we each, naturally—as earth, water, wind, and fire—

possess pieces of love. We must come together in order to collectively survive in this brutal world.

New Love Song

Saint's theatre production *New Love Song* "sings out the souls of black gays in America." The production's central characters are Sky, Nile, Blaise, and Rock. Their names signify on the natural elements of earth—sky, water, fire, and earth. Collectively, they represent black gay men whose experiences in life naturally bring them together in a concerted effort to reimagine the beloved community and meanings of freedom in the United States. As the play marks the centennial celebration of the Statute of Liberty—taking place, that is, on July 4, 1986 in New York City—it signifies on narratives of freedom to suggest that for black gay men similar freedoms are at best tenuous, if not deliberately denied to them. Tenuous because in spite of the valiant efforts of activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and Harvey Milk, black gay men—especially those who live with and die from AIDS—continue—to suffer in anti-gay black communities and anti-black white gay male communities. Can there be an America the celebrate difference, where in a beloved community ethos, "all colors blend?" Indeed, could there exist an inclusive beloved community that welcomes black gay men living and dying from AIDS?

In a moving scene Saint brings these questions to bear on his audience/ reader. In this scene Sky, his lover Sir Duke, and Duke's mother dramatize death, homophobia in black families, and the love that surpasses both. Although Sir Duke eventually dies from AIDS, Sky fights a mighty hard battle to ensure that Duke's last days are lived with comfort, joy, and pleasant memories of times past. Duke's mother Doris, and specifically

her homophobia, foil Sky's plans for Duke. Sky confronts Doris's—"Doris Duke"—homophobia even as they exchange unsavory comments about one another's erotic sexual practices. When mother Doris blames Duke's illness on Sky's "low morality" and "perversion," Sky matches her sting by calling out her hypocrisy: "don't you ever, ever talk to me about morality/ not ever/ you have been blessed with four sons but as i understand, each one by a different father & you ain't ever been married." After the two eventually settle their differences and witness the death of Duke, the one who binds them together, Blaise states:

once in a dream
america was 200,000,000 hearts
each shining like a satellite
each shining bright in each other's light
each shining in its own right
i was sun
now I have a nightmare
& it's a nightmare deeply rooted in the american dream
my normal heart just ain't ticking as is
it's a time bomb

(projections of martin luther king & harvey milk's
pictures along with a slide of the perfect row of
graves at arlington cemetery are shown/ one by
one, nile & rock drop dead on stage, emitting loud
cries/
sky observes all this & observes himself caught
in this madness/ blaise grabs the american flag
from the pine tree & waves it over the dead
bodies, turning & taunting them as he keeps
shouting)

The hopes and dreams of men like King and Harvey have yet to materialize and indeed benefit black gay men. The allusion to Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*—"my normal heart"—emphasizes ways in which black gay men were not a concern for the larger predominately white gay agenda; and, the reference to nightmare further demystifies the

relentless realities of black gay men—even in death they are taunted by meanings of citizenship and freedom.

If the dreams of equality, the beloved community, and progress expressed by otherwise heroic icons, like King and Milk, fail black gay men, then what or who can save them? Saint echoes these sentiments through words spoken by Rock: “ever since this health crisis started, i have engaged myself more & more in the reality of our lives yet dwelt in so many questions/ where do we fit in the reactionary new age of america? in a homophobic black one? what do we believe in? what makes us live?” The play makes it very clear that black gay men believe in the possibilities of love, expressing this sentiment in a chorale where they want to “sing a new love song.” Saint also makes it clear that black men are charged with creating communities in which they can survive and thrive despite regimes of anti-black and anti-gay oppression.

i want to break new ground & mold myself a brand new community of black gays standing up once & for all in realization, validation & celebration of ourselves/ a brand-new community of black gays aspiring to the visions we have four ourselves/ a brand new community of black gays singing a new love song not just for america but four ourselves.

The question of “what makes us live” renders a less obvious answer, though I like to think that Saint embeds an answer in plain sight of his reader/ viewer. If we are to literally interpret this question and apply it to the play itself—what or who gives the play its structure, its characters, its aesthetic possibilities—then we find that it’s answer is black womanist playwright Ntozake Shange herself. Indeed, Saint’s *New Love Song* performs an inter-textual engagement with Shange’s critically acclaimed choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuff*.

Very early in *New Love Song*, Saint articulates the rebirth of black gay men, indeed a celebration of black gay life renewed, by first excavating the poetry of black women writers a la Shange's infamous choreopoem. The segue between celebrating the fourth of July and creating black gay communities hinges on Rock finding nourishment from the buried words of black women writers like Shange. Having Blaise relate his experience locating *For Colored Girls* in Barnes & Noble, Saint writes:

ntozake shange
i looked you up
among poets at barnes & noble
but i didn't find you
walt was there amidst leaves of grass
anne gazed down
glazed eyes dreamt of rowing & mercy
erica posed in her latest erotica
even rod took much space
I searched among ghosts
& those alive
still
i didn't find you
i asked the clerk
if he had kept you tied down
or does he use your books
as dartboards
he smirked then shouted
she's in the black section
to the back

Like other black poets—"langston nikki & countee" and "maya who looked mad"—Shange's work is relegated to the book store's literary "ghetto." However, in order for black gay men to "discover cosmic truths," then they must attend to not only larger histories but the role of women in these histories and their development. Each character in *New Love Song* signifies on those colorful women in Shange's *For Colored Girls*. Blaise, wears a red robe, Nile a blue robe, Rock a green robe and although Sky wears a

white robe it is embroidered with—among other elements—“rainbows.” Like the ladies in the choreopoem *Blaise, Nile, Rock, and Sky* search for the ends of their own rainbows. A new love song is a lyrical way in which these black gay men can “strike up the music” and dance and sing until they come to love themselves fiercely.

In the final analysis, Saint’s *New Love Song* asserts the critical importance of black women to black gay men’s protest movements. When Sky accompanies his lover Duke in the hospital, Sky unleashes his anger over his lover’s illness on a black nurse. The nurse does not respond with a like tone. Instead, she encourages Sky to direct his angers in more productive ways. The nurse states:

you can do all the screaming you want, loud as you need but from now on, you do it outside. That’s where you should be carrying on in the first place/ it’s obvious to a duck that if enough of you homosexuals were acting up in the streets, those politicians & all the others would be taking you quite seriously & allocate much more money for research/ i don’t have to teach you history/ you told me you was born in the south, & brother, if most of us in the 50s and 60s didn’t get into civil disobedience, march-ins, sit-ins & what have you, we would still be riding in the back of the bus.⁴

The nurse does not chastise or castigate Sky for his misdirected anger. Instead, she encourages him to take to the streets in protest of the U.S. government’s lack of response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic—and specifically the Bush administration’s negligible resources to fund AIDS research. In an act of love the nurse “held” Sky, taking him in embrace, understanding the need to support him in such devastating times—and loving him fiercely in the age of AIDS.

Assotto Saint’s *New Love Song* articulates a fundamental aspect of black gay men’s rebirth and their liberation: love. This love, while threatened by many foils—homophobia and AIDS—brings black gay men together; and it’s this coming together

⁴ Saint, *Spells of A Voodoo Doll*, 305.

that promises their survival and indeed their liberation from the shackles of psychic, legal, and political oppression. Love facilitates their survival and their political consciousness; love undergirds their literary and cultural aesthetics; love compels their movement in the face of so much despair and death. Without black women though, black gay men's visions of love and liberation would not have materialized as effectively. As Saint notes in his memorial poem to Audre Lorde cited at the start of this epilogue, black women—and particularly black lesbian feminists—were vital to black gay men's survival. Black women's visions inspired in black gay men the need to survive, the need to be visible, the need to rise to the love they all needed. The times were difficult: black gay men were dying from AIDS and black women were dying from breast cancer. Love kept alive their hopes and dreams. Love surpassed all forms of death.

In this dissertation I have worked against the politics and poetics of death: physical death, psychic death, the death knell that scholarly declension narratives sound for black writing in the post-civil rights era. Yet buried beneath the weight of these narratives of death are the lives and visions of many, many black lesbian and black gay men, all of whom took a vested interest in liberation well into the last decades of the twentieth century. Recovering these lives is not easy but in this dissertation I have attempted to do just that; to “raise the dead” so that we may celebrate a rich history of liberation heretofore under-explored in African American literary and cultural histories. I chose love as my ultimate object of recuperation because love endures the times. Love complicates blackness and while it's never easy to define it lays at the very heart of liberation struggles from the Civil Rights movement onward: throughout the black women's liberation, gay liberation, and the age of AIDS. Examining love allows us to

appreciate how black lesbian and gay life radically revised, reimagined, and sustained the beloved community long after the 1960s.

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