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SILENCES, SYNTAX, AND SEX: BLACK WOMEN POETS MOVING PAST A
CULTURE OF DISSEMBLANCE IN THE POST-BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Silences, Syntax, and Sex: Black Women Poets Moving Past a Culture of Dissemblance in the Post-Black Arts Movement

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Audre Lorde's essays "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" are two canonical works of late 20th century U.S. feminist thought, which expound on the concepts of individual and collective silence, knowledge production and the body. "Silences, Syntax, and Sex: Black Women Poets Moving Past a Culture of Dissemblance in the Post-Black Arts Movement" uses these Lordean texts as a theoretical framework for the selected poetry of black women poets and activists Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez in order to understand how poetry has encouraged black women to cultivate sexual voice and agency in the midst of what Darlene Clark Hine calls a "culture of dissemblance." This work relies heavily on close readings of these women's Post-Black Arts Movement poetry (from 1975-1990), historically situating the silencing of black women's sexuality by dominant, hegemonic voices, as well as by black women themselves. I will argue that Lorde's modes for understanding the rhetoric of silence and the erotic are directly linked to the creative lineage of the three noted black women poets and their necessity to produce work that breaks collective silencing of sexual desire. Because of the overwhelming lack of critical analysis of black women poets and their work, with specific regard to positive self-sexual perception as a form of resistance, this

work intends to present these literary narratives as evidence of the place for sexual subjectivity within political activism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction **Poetry Was Never a Luxury**

Poet, activist, and essayist June Jordan begins her essay, “A Couple of Words on Behalf of Sex (Itself)” with a story of her visit to an academic conference. From the very first sentence, she positions herself in this writing, allowing us to experience what she observed as “media sex police: the inexhaustible reality of sex-be-damned” (59). She proceeds with her storytelling:

A rather good-looking (If I may say so) Black scholar of substantial academic standing held forth on the exploitation of Black men and Black women in American cinema. Equipped with a host of film clips, and super relentlessly postsyllabic commentary, this eminent Brother inveighed against the exploitative and, therefore, demeaning film presentation of physically attractive Black men or Black women, for almost an hour. From the back row of the auditorium, I had a really hard time detecting the exploitation thing. What I could see, easily, were fully clothed, gorgeous Black men or Black women, in various close-ups of irresistibly physical information. That’s what I saw. What I heard was ‘commodification’ and ‘racist appropriation’ and ‘trivialization,’ and so on, and I just wished I could turn off the sound. (59)

As a young scholar with a Journalism & Media Studies background, I am familiar with the complex histories of the commodification and exploitation of bodies, as well as the larger implications of simultaneous hypersexualization and desexualization in the popular consciousness. As a young scholar also with Africana and Women’s & Gender Studies backgrounds, I have been equipped with methodological and epistemological tools to cultivate an understanding of the histories of female bodies, brown bodies, and bodies—like mine—that happen to be, simultaneously, female and brown. As a black woman and student of the poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, and Audre Lorde, among others, I am constantly thinking about these women poets within the contexts of the latticed

black and women's movements, as well as how sexual narratives are constructed and contested.

In this Introduction, I will explain my particular interest in black women's sexual narratives and the poetic form, as well as the ways my identity informs my relationships to this research topic. This Introduction also discusses several of the major theoretical texts that have influenced my research. These texts include Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and "Uses of the Erotic", as well as Darlene Clark Hine's "Rape and the Inner-Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." In framing my discussion of the Post-Black Arts poetry of Ntozake Shange, June Jordan, and Sonia Sanchez, I will define the term, "Post-Black Arts" and address the societal factors that have characterized the shift from the Black Arts Movement to the Post-Black Arts Era. Illustrating this shift is important, given the amount of scholarship that exists in exploration of the Black Arts/Aesthetic moment. Lastly, I intend to discuss the importance of poetry for black people—even those who have existed outside of the Black Arts and Post-Black Arts Movement—in order to crystallize the connections between poetry, black women's sexual subjectivity, and the sociopolitical implications of those sexual subjectivities. This work assumes and explores the relationship between the three black women poets' desire for consciousness and the consciousness of their desire.

Claiming My Positionality

I begin this project with June Jordan's account because it illustrates the tensions that exist when black bodies are framed in dialogues regarding sexualities

and sexual desires. Black women in the United States have a long history of strategically constructing their presence in the public and popular consciousness, in an attempt to combat the equally-long histories of deleterious raced and gendered tropes. Jordan's account also alludes to much of what I have found myself fascinated by during the last three years of my study. I am interested in exploring ways that the body, the visceral and the physical experience are privileged, allowed to speak and accrue currency within rigid spaces where it is considered risky to claim one's own sexual agency.

Studying the poetry of black women poets Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez, while embracing the insights of Audre Lorde and Darlene Clark Hine has forced me to develop and seek answers to several questions concerning the histories of silence, language and sex, specifically in black women's narratives and poetry. I consider this research to be a deeply personal project and find my positionality—as a young, black, sexually-fluid woman and poet—to be of great assistance as I negotiate ways to engage theory, history, and other black women's lived experiences. I have often considered Cheryl Wall's words about the primacy of positionality in black women's writing, as well as for other marginalized and historically-silenced groups. "Making our positionality explicit is not to claim a 'privileged' status for our positions . . . Making our positionality explicit, is rather, a response to the false universalism that long defined critical practice and rendered black women and their writing mute" (Wall 2). In its earliest stages, this project represented my desire to engage poetry about sexual desire, all while negotiating voice and authenticity, as well as the overused, but incredibly useful 1960's feminist adage, "the personal is political." As I

struggled with my own voice as a young writer, I also grappled with the ways sex was completely silenced in the household in which I grew up. There was no talk about our physical bodies and/or their processes, and certainly not about the act of sex. Looking back, I now understand that there were several politics of silence at play, beginning with a Christian pathologizing of sexual desire (particularly in women) outside of marital and procreative structures, a culturally-specific schism that warded off “grown folks business” (which I would later learn, included sex) from “dinner table talk” and lastly, a benevolent silence aimed at protecting my siblings and me from the robust (and assumedly, tempting) dialogue about human sexuality and the ways it shows up. Hortense Spillers, in the beginning of “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” expresses a similar curiosity about “grown” narratives and encounters with sexual identity and practice. She writes:

I am interested here primarily in what we might call discursive and iconic fortunes and misfortunes, facilities, abuses, or plain absences that tend to travel from one generation of kinswomen to another, not unlike love and luck, or money and real estate. Just so, the elders pass on their voice, their tongue, their language, and it might even surprise us that they said the same words, or none at all, in the vaunted coital embrace, or the celebrated post-orgasmic fall out. Every child in us dreams, we might suppose, of knowing just what ‘they’ said and did in ‘there’ and do they still? (73)

I identify greatly with the silences Spillers speaks of and believe that they are rooted sociopolitically in the black, coming-of-age consciousness in the United States. It was not long before the silences of my household began to resound boisterously in my own consciousness, calling for the unfamiliar, direct, transparent and sometimes, brutally honest forms of communicative speech. The more I engaged feminist scholarly work and poetry during my undergraduate and graduate study, the more I became fascinated by systemic and strategic silencing, the ways silences serve as

indoctrination, and lastly, black women's relationship to sexual subjectivity in the midst of encouragements to dissemble.

Audre Lorde as a Theoretical Framework

This research relies heavily on two essays written by Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" as framing texts for the poetic discourse of Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez. Using Lorde's essays as a methodological framework for this research has allowed me a tangible way to filter the sex poetry of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez through the same sets of ideological constructs, arsenals of language and critical analysis. Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," expounds on the concepts of silence, language and lasting action, articulating that she has "come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (40). In this speech, Lorde interrogates structural factors that contribute to individual and collective silences among groups of women, positioning herself - a black, lesbian, feminist, poet, and warrior - as part of several marginalized communities who historically, have experienced stifled expression and silencing. "Uses of The Erotic" attempts to redefine and reposition our popular and academic conceptualizations of the "erotic" as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53). In this work, Lorde asserts that the erotic is connected to the freedom to desire, as well as the freedom to engage

those very desires. However, Lorde also warns readers about essentializing the connection between the erotic and the sexual. The two can absolutely resonate with one another, depending on the individual engaging that comparison; however, they are not inextricably linked.

Within the context of this research, the erotic will be explored in two very specific realms. First, the erotic will be explored as it relates directly to black women's sexuality, sexual freedom, and sexual desire. This research is interested in the collective silencing of black women's sexuality by black women themselves, as well as how the body of work of the three poets comes to articulate those silences as a means to dismantle structures of power over certain bodies and subjectivities. Second, the erotic will be used to illustrate Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez's knowledge production and cultural criticism practices using the vehicle of poetic expression. Lorde writes, "Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives" (57). Here, Lorde is claiming a much wider definition of the erotic than that which is sexual. Lorde is characterizing the erotic as a resource, available to women to use for the individual and collective assertions of subjectivity and resistance to ubiquitous matrices of domination. This distillation of the Lordean conceptualization of the erotic is essential to the ways this research intends to illustrate connections of this erotic knowledge production to the perpetuation of black women's historical silences, as well as the ways poetry has created a space for the expression of sexual subjectivity within the context of political resistance. To be clear, I am well aware

that Lorde was not the first scholar and writer to theorize “the erotic”; however in using Lorde’s work as the methodological frame for my analysis, I have limited my frame of reference to Lorde’s theoretical understanding.

There is great value in Lorde’s characterization of the erotic as a resource, and in my understanding, an individual and collective repository of knowledge and insight. There is, both, a mystic and a tangible quality about women’s erotic power; one of the more material and practical qualities is directly linked to the catalogue of cultural production crafted by black women in the United States. Black women’s cultural artifacts, including their prose and poetry are an offspring of our engagement with the erotic, as described by Lorde. In thinking about the importance of this research, I believe it holds value because it attempts to theorize and make sense of the historical breaking of silences by the three poets of choice, while serving as a breaking of academic silences—as the cultural production of black women poets and activists has also been silenced in several academic disciplines. I have often considered Jacqueline Bobo’s cultural studies work—specifically *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, which examines the role of black women’s cultural production within larger dialogues about resistance and subjectivity. Bobo has helped us to negotiate the role of the collective consciousness in black women’s creation and consumption of art. It is also because of Bobo’s analysis—mostly about Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, and the work’s societal reception—that I can view the three black women poets as cultural workers, whose production has lead to new forms of knowledge and possibilities for sexual subjectivity.

Writing About Black Women's Literary Tradition

In centering my research on black women's literary tradition, I am negotiating answers to many questions about the possible essentializing of thematic commonalities in their works. This research, like all critical analysis, intends to move beyond the singular narrative and identify where shared language and experience can produce new knowledge and claims. In the Preface of *Subversive Silences: Non-Verbal Expression and Implicit Narrative Strategies in the Works of Latin American Women Writers*, author Helene Carol Weldt-Basson advocates for the usage of textual structures that can assist critics whom, in their analysis, walk the fine line between articulating commonalities and "doing" essentialism. She cites Rita Felski, who states:

Critics . . . are often interested in the bigger picture; moving beyond the author's explanations and intentions, they look for patterns, conventions and clusters of themes that span multiple works and can tell us something revealing about a certain sensibility, worldview or historical moment. There is nothing wrong with reading in this way or with searching for signs of commonality in writing by women. Yet scholars must also be willing to admit the limits in their sample, the partiality of their explanations, the power of the counterexample, the texts that disprove the rule. (qtd. in Weldt-Basson 10)

Felski's acknowledgement of the complexities of literary criticism speaks to some of my own early trepidations about asserting the notions of a "black woman subjectivity" and a corresponding "black women's literary tradition." Cheryl Wall speaks to this trepidation in her encouragement of black women writers to write themselves into the national consciousness (1) and explore the ways that "the experience of Afro-American women is unmistakably polyvalent. The simultaneity of oppressions in their lives resists essentialist conclusions" (10). Her commentary about the ability to theorize the heterogeneity and multiplicity of black women's

narratives continues with the invocation of Theresa de Lauretis' lucid assessment of black women as diverse subjects in community. In "Feminist studies/Critical studies: Issues, terms and contexts", de Lauretis argues:

The concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy. (9)

This notion is integral to the methodological ethics and accuracy of a black feminist literary criticism—particularly one interested in exploring the sexual black woman as subject. Wall culminates this discussion about the utility of literary theory with a useful comparison of blues music and its aesthetics models. "It is not that we need literary theory to help us recognize that blues are, in Houston Baker's phrase, 'a generative source' of black women's writing; but perspectives informed by literary theory may help us move beyond identifying blues metaphors and celebrating blues singers as artistic models to understanding how blues aesthetics and ethics are inscribed" (8). Similarly, I am looking to the Post-Black Arts poetry of Shange, Sanchez, and Giovanni as part of an extended, diverse and colorful tradition to provide me with opportunities to make theoretical connections and compliment the already-existing canon of literature that places black women's experiences (academic and otherwise) at the center.

Undertaking this academic project has meant centering my analysis on the words and experiences of black women, staying as close as I can to the sources. As much as I will offer commentary and analysis about black women's sexual and

political lives in this work, I am also listening to the ways their writing speaks, names the nameless, and boisterously subverts.

Culture of Dissemblance As Historical Context

Darlene Clarke Hine's "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West" has been one of the most formative critical texts within my research, providing me with a theoretical basis for understanding how mechanisms of silence have been internalized, bolstered, and utilized creatively by black women in the United States. Hine's culture of dissemblance crystallizes a very specific collective experience that can be seen consistently throughout the histories of black women's post-Transatlantic Slave Trade experiences. One of the characteristics of the culture of dissemblance is that black women are silent about much of what they endure as a means to construct their identity as antithetical to deleterious stereotypes and historical tropes. Much of the literature about Hines' culture of dissemblance, uses both slave narratives, as well as primary source material culled from black women of the late 19th and 20th centuries; however, this research is concerned with the historical transference of this defense mechanism that catapults sexual voice to emerge in specific pockets of culture and society for and by black women – in this case, the poetry of Giovanni, Shange, and Sanchez. In other words, I am asserting that Hine's culture of dissemblance is still relevant and that black women during the Post-Black Arts period were just as involved in processes of simultaneous dissemblance and duplicity in order to survive a world, in which, they were not meant to.

Grappling with Chronology and Periodicity

There is much about the Black Arts and Post-Black Arts years, approximately 1960 to 1990, that leaves me, a young feminist of the hip-hop generation—both—curious and nostalgic. African-American history taught throughout the nation's school system essentializes the continuum of African-American lived experiences along the strata of class, sexuality, geography/space, cultural authenticity, and gender. The African-American narrative is one that can be characterized by its dynamism, by its cultural richness, and its complexity; however, the dominant narratives in our academic curriculum tend to reduce the African-American experience to a select few historical moments—without employing comprehensive context, understandings of continuity or a non-compartmentalized celebration of black achievement held during other historical juncture than Black History Month. Unfortunately, I did not learn about the Black Arts Movement until the sophomore year of my undergraduate study and instantly developed a strong fascination with what I perceived to be the inundation of politically-focused poetry. Black Arts Movement politics has made and strong, penetrating presence in African-American scholarship and I consider the period from 1960-1975 to be an incredibly rich cache for black cultural artifacts.

Among scholars who are experts in Black Arts Movement cultural production—specifically its literature—there is some contestation about, not only the time frame encapsulated by Black Arts Movement politics, but also the idea that a time frame dictates a very specific historical schism at both, its beginning and

ending. Out of this debate stems the language of “post-black”, “post-race”, “post-civil rights movement aesthetic”, “NewBlack”, and even “Post-Soul”—as well some important questions about the ideological qualifiers used to characterize Black Arts Movement art in the first place. Bertram Ashe’s “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction” illustrates much of this debate by discussing how the flexibilities of language and chronology have complicated the collective attempts by scholars of African-American history as they name, theorize and analyze time:

After all, at this point, there is little consensus on anything regarding the fledgling scholarship on the era: names, for instance, range from ‘The New Black Aesthetic’ to ‘post-liberated’ to ‘post-soul’ to ‘post-black’ to ‘NewBlack’ and beyond. There is disagreement over whether the era should be restricted, as I believe it should be, to artists and writers who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement, and there is disagreement on when the era begins and whether or not it has ended (regrettably, some scholars already see sub-generational breaks such as the post-post soul, for instance). (Ashe 609)

Ashe is raising some critical questions about the ways the period after the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements can be theorized and named consistently by scholars of African-American history. This debate is particularly important for me because as I have engaged the crossings between silences, sex, and syntax in my research, I have learned a great deal about the labor language does. It is important to consider, not only, how certain black aesthetic texts become “black aesthetic texts”, but also how they fit onto the continuum of black knowledge and cultural production.

My research focuses on Giovanni, Sanchez and Shange’s poetry published from 1975 to 1990, a fifteen-year period following the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements. While negotiating the ways to name this period, I identified more closely with the terminology, “Post-Black Arts period” because it illustrates a shift—not a break—in the defining ideologies, while recognizing that there are underlying

similarities. This particular period holds much significance because it is the bridge and continuum between two highly-popularized moments in the black experience in the United States—the Civil Rights movement and what Thelma Golden has consistently referred to as the “Post-Black” moment. Golden’s characterization of “Post-Black Arts” is much more about reflections of blackness, narratives of a newly complicated double-consciousness, black modernity and the idea of a post-racial blackness. The Post-Black Arts period, as I have come to understand it is characterized by a set of cultural shifts that, like all cultural shifts, can be seen in the visual and aesthetic information created at the time. In the spirit of this research, which claims hypersensitivity to syntax and the labor of language, it is important to briefly consider what societal factors influenced the shift from a Black Arts Movement politics to Post-Black Arts Movement politics; there are three.

Theorizing the Shift from the Black Arts to the Post-Black Arts Era

The emergence and popularization of the feminist and gay and lesbian rights movements were, together, one of the most significant influences in the cultural production and social climate as we move from the Black Arts Movement to the Post-Black Arts Movement era. In many ways, the feminist and gay liberation agendas complicated and extended not only the black narrative, but the reach of liberation from and resistance to oppressive structures, like patriarchy and compulsive heterosexuality. The feminist and gay rights movements also engaged what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the ‘matrix of domination’ and what bell hooks has called the “politic of domination”—both of which successfully re-conceptualize

the ways various axes of oppression are intricately latticed and interlocked. This is not to assert that the Post-Black Arts movement era was the first time scholars and activists were seeing oppressions along the axes of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion as interconnected—but there was certainly a popularization and cementing of this paradigm during this period that remains prevalent in today’s academic discourse. The gay & lesbian rights movement illuminated the need for discussions and representations of non-heterosexual/queer narratives in the popular discourses of the time. Many popular voices of the Black Arts movement era were resistant to non-heterosexual voices and narratives, but the activist work by gay men and lesbians certainly sparked a desire for sexual freedom and inclusion in Post-Black Arts period. The feminist movement’s impact on the Post-Black Arts Movement’s ideological shift can be seen in its placing of women’s issues and concerns at the center of its discourse, privileging women’s voices and experiences and creating spaces for women’s advocacy and movement toward lasting social change.

Black women’s marginalization and silencing within mainstream U.S. feminist ideology made for a burgeoning resistance by black women who faced exclusion from “mainstream/white feminism,” as well from mainstream black nationalists, who often bolstered patriarchal/misogynistic ideology while fighting racial inequalities. The emergence of a black feminist identity and discourse can be considered another primary force in creating the ideological shifts, which undergird the Post-Black Arts Movement. Again, we must take into consideration the ways ideas and attitudes have had historical transference. I am not claiming a definitive

birth of black feminism(s) in the Post-Black Arts movement—that would simply be inaccurate; nor would I be comfortable placing a concrete birth date on black feminism(s). What I am calling attention to are the ways black feminist ideology becomes a haven for black women thinkers, writers, and creators in ways that only make sense given an understanding of the mainstream civil rights, feminist, lesbian, and ‘respectable womanhood’ traditions. Black Feminism(s) acquire a wider audience, a more diverse voice and distinct presence in the Post-Black Arts Moment. Because of the labor of black feminist organizations in the Post-Black Arts Movement period, there is a distinct community that emerges, consisting of black women activists, writers, mothers, lovers, and creators who are organizing in the name of intersectional identity and resistance. Kimberly Springer’s work in *Living For The Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980* is heralded as one of the first in-depth analyses of black women’s organizing under the more ubiquitously-documented Civil Rights and Feminist movements of the mid to late 20th century. This text serves as a detailed case study of five black feminist organizations—Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), 1968–1979; Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), 1973–1980; National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), 1973–1975; Combahee River Collective (CRC), 1975–1980; and the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), 1976–1980—who have contributed to the foundations of contemporary black feminism from ideological and structural perspectives. Springer takes on the task of dispelling the myth that black women, particularly at this historical moment, were unconcerned with issues of feminism and gender equality. While debunking this common misconception, Springer interjects an analysis

grounded in feminist, sociological and historical methodologies about “how black women developed a collective identity as feminists and how this identity influenced the structure of” the five black feminist organizations (4). These organizations had tremendous influence on the sustenance of the black feminist community and ideologies, which – in turn – shaped the voices and lived experiences of black women writers during the Post-Black Arts movement era.

The third factor which contributed to the shift from the Black Arts Movement period to the Post-Black Arts era is the presence of sexuality in American discourses, both in the academic sphere, as well as in more popular, non-academic spaces. The Post-Black Arts Movement era ushered in a greater number of scholars and cultural critics who were focusing their attention to the history of black sexuality. These Post-Black Arts Movement observations were not the first reflections about black individuals as sexual beings; however, with the ubiquitous rejection of Victorian respectability and womanhood in the 20th century, scholars writing about black sex and agency were describing, inciting and shaping a very real cultural shift that was developing as they wrote and published:

‘Respectability’, then, resonated with the concentration of scholars working on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conceptually, the politics of respectability was not only part of a historiographical turn towards class and intra-racial dynamics, it coincided with greater numbers of African Americanists doing work on the history of sexuality...but it was not until the early and mid 1990s that scholars started to write on black sexuality in earnest. Arguably, *Righteous Discontent* and essays such as Simmons’s ‘African Americans and Sexual Victorianism’ enabled this shift as did the 1988 publication of D’Emilio and Freedman’s *Intimate Matters* and the pointed response it evoked from literary scholar Ann du Cille. (Mitchell 438)

This passage, abstracted from Michele Mitchell’s “Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History,” lies within the purview of

analysis regarding scholarship about black sexuality as the conversation expanded to many non-academic outlets of knowledge. Another component of this is the sweeping commercialization of sex in our popular images and in the American consciousness. The 1960's and 1970's have been widely described as decades of liberalism; however, despite the emergence of an American political conservatism from the 1980's and through 1990's, sex remained virtually ubiquitous in ways that had not been popular before the sexual revolution of the 1960's. As the conservative political agenda manifests and unfolds in Washington D.C., American publications, sartorial trends, marketing imagery, television broadcast content and films were very much engaged with human sexuality in its various forms—as well as the hypersexualization of black bodies. Black sexuality's presence in dominant discourses of the Post-Black Arts era helps to distinguish it from its historical predecessor.

Why Black Arts and Post-Black Arts Poetry?

For contemporary black women poets, Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, poetry itself has become the very language of resistance, a space within the Black Arts/Aesthetic Movement that served as a source of transformative and lasting action for black people in the United States, from approximately 1960-1975. The Black Arts Movement is widely described as a branch of the Black Power movement and characterized by signifiers of cultural and Black Nationalism. Critics Larry Neal, Evie Shockley, and James Smethurst, among others have written extensively about the Black Arts Movement and the space-making practices of black

women who were interested in articulating their political allegiances within the movement, but who were not necessarily welcome by the patriarchal ideologies perpetuated by its leading men. The Black Arts Movement is arguably the single most controversial aesthetic moment in African-American history and its literature—particularly its poetry—played a tremendous role in what we consider the role of art in political consciousness to be. Black Arts Movement poetry was saturated with black aesthetics—which included language, dialect, experience, cultural references, Africanisms, and rejection of traditional “white” form. Many of the black men poets who wrote and published poetry that would become literary cornerstones of the Black Arts Movement historical moment, were also vocal in their criticisms of homosexuality and non-normative sexual practices, their Black Nationalist, Pan-African, and patriarchal ideologies, as well as their blaring misogyny and support of patriarchy. These tensions marginalized many black women poets who were producing literature and doing activist work during this politically-tumultuous time; however black women poets and writers found spaces to articulate the ways their voices and experiences were gendered and sexualized.

In essay “Saying The Least Said, Telling The Least Told”, Cheryl Clarke notes, “For black people, poetry has been the great teacher of consciousness, of history, of self-love as well as duplicitousness” (Clarke 140). This research is hinged on examining the ways that poetry becomes a tool of edification, a tool of revolution, and a tool of racial, gendered and sexual consciousness among black women. Black Arts Movement poets can be described as ambassadors of blackness, in their performance of Black Nationalism during this period of political entrenchment and

saturation. In our cultural consciousness, Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, among others, have been lauded as mothers and instrumental voices of the Black Arts and Post-Black Arts Movements—producing essays, poetry, and speeches that spoke creatively about black bodies, black consciousness, and black politics within the context of the larger white, racist, and sexually-conservative America. There are several themes, which ascend from their poetic works as a reflection of the times. These themes include, but are in no way limited to class stratification, love, womanhood, extolling of the black man, the black familial structure, and race relations. Another important common theme is the historical remembering of Africa within the context of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and systematic enslavement of African bodies. Both Jacqueline Bobo and E. Frances White write about historical memory as a mechanism employed by black creators to combat racist ideology, while building a coherent narrative of blackness (White 73).

Of these thematic consistencies in Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez' poetic works, it is the sexual consciousness as it relates to freedom, autonomy and agency that interests me most. The sexual consciousness as communicated by the poetry of these black women and framed by Lorde's encouragement of us to develop a language for that which we experience will lend itself to an understanding of how black women's bodies have been historically hypersexualized and de-sexualized without their consent or perspective. I intend to explore Clarke's notion of "duplicitousness," not by debunking and delegitimizing the existing narratives about black women's sexual silences, but by making space for my own critical analysis within this larger dialogue. I strongly believe that there is something to be said

about the extent, to which, this project is retrospective, while remaining relevant to present-day visions of black feminist literature and the place for black women's sexual desire in the popular consciousness.

There are two texts written by activist and poet Cheryl Clarke that assist greatly in prefacing the role poetry has played in shaping revolutionary praxis for black people—and specifically for black women after 1960. *After Mecca* excavates the poetry of black women from 1968-1978, as a means to connect the historical trajectories of feminism, blackness, and lesbianism. There is a very specific linkage of race analysis and gender analysis that Clarke offers in order to be able to understand the writing agency that emerges from this historical moment. *The Days of Good Looks: The Prose & Poetry of Cheryl Clarke* consists of poetry and prose that interrogates the places where sexuality, woman-ness, race, the erotic, difference, cultural production, and literary tutelage intersect for Clarke. "Saying The Least Said, Telling The Least Told", will be utilized again for its expounding on the ways that silence and invisibility have historically resonated with black people. Clarke writes:

Silence may be defined as the act of subordinating the expression of the other's needs to the will of the power group. Sometimes the silence is strategic, as in the case of Walter White . . . Silence and invisibility, according to writer Toni Cade Bambara, are two of the greatest metaphors Afro-Americans have contributed to art in the western world – realistically and figuratively. But perhaps gays and women have contributed those metaphors, also, perhaps all disenfranchised people have turned those metaphors into paradoxes and created ways for us and the world to understand our oppression. (136)

Here, Clarke's words are mirroring those of Audre Lorde's in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", in Lorde's discussion of the paradoxes of visibility as essential to individuals living full, authentic and empowered lives. Lorde

writes, “But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live . . . And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (42). The theme of visibility/invisibility within the context of black women and their sexual agency is intermittently woven into the poetry of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez—essential to the larger, historical conversation about how black women can mitigate their collective silences about their sexual experience as a means to articulate and resist matrices of oppression.

In speaking about this historical moment within the context of visibility, it is important to chronologically position these works in order to understand poetry’s societal function, as well as how black women were politically faring. The historical moment, of which, the selected poems of the three poets ascends is what scholar Ajuan Maria Mance calls the “Post-Black Arts Movement” (125). Mance’s text, *Inventing Black Women: African American Women Poets and Self-Representation, 1877-2000* is an invaluable contribution to the historical absences of scholarship about black women’s poetry and the lineage of cultural production from the 19th century onward. Mance characterizes Post-Black Arts Movement poetry as poetry that emerges out of the late 20th century, a time when the sociopolitical landscape for race relations was shifting and adapting the politics of acceptance. These poetic works were created and published for our literary consumption after the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960’s and early 1970’s had passed. No longer as volatile, the state of United States racial discourse provided black women poets with new platforms to transmit new messages concerning their collective sexual subjectivity. As the sociopolitical influence of Black Nationalism waned during the mid-1970’s,

much of the pathologies and principles remained in the consciousness of the black women poets – who, as mentioned, were not just poets. During the peaks of the civil rights, black nationalist movements, and feminist movements, Sanchez, Shange, and Giovanni stayed close to their pages, but could also be found on the streets alongside black men and other black women fighting for racial, class, gendered and sexual freedoms. Activist resistance was very much a part of their work as black women, black leaders, and members of nationally-recognized organizations. Mance elaborates on the dwindling influence of black nationalism and lists the following factors as central to its decline among black people: “the passage of federal civil rights legislation, the government infiltration of revolutionary nationalist organizations . . . and the challenge posed to that movement’s androcentrism by poets . . . whose Black Arts writing exposed the deleterious effects of its male-centered vision on the status and advancement of African American women (Mance 122). Post-Black Arts poetry becomes characterized by a shift away from the patriarchal reifications within the mainstream black nationalist movement and a move towards claiming their subjectivity as simultaneously black and woman.

Mance writes:

Amidst the late twentieth century’s extraordinary range of representations of African American womanhood, a smaller subtrend developed whose depictions of the Black female subject engage the specific question of her position at the intersection of two identities traditionally viewed as oppositional. Such poems address African American female subjectivity in ways that speak to the very roots of those conventional notions of the relationship between gender, race and, space that have consistently marginalized those figures who have sought visibility as both woman and Black. In doing so, these works establish a poetics of wicked excess that embraces and reinterprets the Black female subject’s contravention of those roles and restrictions that have defined mainstream conceptions of U.S. womanhood. (122)

Mance's analysis of the common themes within the poetic works of the Post-Black Arts moment provides readers with an understanding about of black women's subjectivity burgeons as a cite of poetic and literary inquiry. What Mance calls "African-American womanhood," includes sexuality and sexual agency; however, she is more concerned with the general, more overarching and inclusive concept of womanhood. Mance interrogates the concept of womanhood for much of her last chapter entitled, "Locating The Black Female Subject: Late-Twentieth-Century African American Women Poets and The Landscape of The Body" without dealing with the prevalence of sexual desire and autonomy in the poetry of Post-Black Arts poets. However, it is this absence within academic discourse concerning black women's constructing of agency and liberation that requires attention and analysis. This is where the following chapters of "Silences, Syntax, and Sex: Black Women Moving Past a Culture of Dissemblance in the Post-Black Arts Period" attempt to fill spaces and privilege women's sexual narratives.

The themes that undergird this work emanate from two critical questions: What have black women been historically silent about and how does poetry give voice to those silences in revolutionary ways? This query illustrates my interest in systematic silencing, black women's literary tradition, and expressions of sexual desire in the quest for individual and collective subjectivity. There are several research questions, which will aide me in my research project and serve as focal points for each of the chapters in this work. These critical research questions have also aided me as I developed an understanding the lineages of revolutionary, political poetry for black women and specifically the ways Shange, Giovanni, and

Sanchez move past the immobilizations of silence about sex and black bodies and into the realm of political and cultural transformation.

Chapter Overview

There are many components of this research, through which, Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez' poetry will be filtered and allowed to converse together. Using primary texts, the poetry, is essential to my project, as I am privileging the voices of these three poets within Lorde's and Hine's analytical frameworks. It is my intention to stay "close to the text", "stay at the page," and allow the selected poems to engage in conversation with one another. I find it equally important to examine the cultural conditions which may have forced these poems to light, mitigating collective silences around sex, which plagued communities of women situated in the African diaspora in the United States during the Post-Black Arts period. Fifteen years of historically-situated poetry, created from the hands, imaginations, and experiences of the selected poets will assist in the answering of the following larger, research questions about silence. Why and to what extent have black women historically been silenced or silent about their sexual identity, practices, pleasures, and desires within the context of larger liberation struggles? Also, how do Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez assist in the abolition and complication of those collective silences?

Chapter 1, "Airing Dirty Laundry: Black Women and the Pacts of Silence" aims to discuss the historical silencing strategies that have been adopted by hegemonic white and male voices in an attempt to stifle black women's narratives. This chapter also uses much of Darlene Clark Hine's theory about black women's

personal and strategic dissemblance, while illustrating ways her seminal work, “Rape And The Inner Lives Of Black Women In The Middle West” impacts black women up until and through the late 20th century. The guiding question is “Why/to what extent have black women historically been silenced or silent about their sexual identity, practices, pleasures, and desires within the context of larger liberation struggles?” This chapter will engage the poetry of Giovanni, Shange and Sanchez, while making an argument about the ways speech and silences have been ubiquitous mechanisms in their literary resistance.

Chapter 2, “She Talk Like A Lady: Writing Poetry That Talks B(l)ack” aims to interrogate the following research question: “What is the language these black poets have developed in order to break collective silences and transform the sexual consciousness of black women living in the United States?” With its title influenced by one of bell hooks’ seminal works, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, explores poetry’s form, functions and the ways it allows for unique knowledge production, as well as movement from object to subject. Literary theory and close reading techniques will be used in this chapter in order to cultivate an understanding of the ways poetry makes space for subversive sexual narratives. Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez’ syntax will continue to be analyzed, but within the context of a larger discussion about the reciprocal relationship between language and black woman poet’s physical experience.

Lastly, Chapter 3, “Freakdom: Black Women’s Sexuality on the Line” places the sex acts of black women at the center of analysis, by remaining cognizant of black respectability and the lineage of narratives about sexual desire and practice by black

women writers. The guiding question of this chapter is, "What are the thematic commonalities within the poetry of Giovanni, Shange, and Sanchez that speak to the Lordean concepts of the erotic?" I will employ psychosexual theory in order to explore the inextricable link between desire and consciousness. I plan to interrogate Lorde's concept of the erotic as a sexual space, but also as a tool for knowledge production that allows black women poets a language to speak openly about their bodies within the context of their search for subjectivity.

Chapter 2

Airing Our Dirty Laundry: Black Women and the Pacts of Silence

This work intentionally begins with Audre Lorde as a preface to the ongoing conversation within peoples of color and feminist communities regarding the reciprocal relationship between sexual desire and collective consciousness. In this chapter, I am concerned mostly with Lorde's characterization of silence as a bridge to help cultivate an understanding of the ways black women have been silenced and have chosen silence, strategically—as a means to survive. Audre Lorde frames the concept of silence in ways that are complex, nuanced and indicative of its deeply-rooted implications within the individual and collective consciousness. Lorde's engagement with notions of black womanhood, survival under hegemonic authority, and women's telling of their own dynamic narratives have left me, a young black woman scholar, changed. My research relies heavily on Lorde's scholarly contributions, as I consider her to be an essential voice in the diapason of literature that documents and analyzes black women's lived and creative experiences. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" are essays written by Audre Lorde that lay the theoretical groundwork for this research project. I consider these two essays to be framing texts for my critical analysis of the Post-Black Arts Movement poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, and Sonia Sanchez. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" elucidates the relationship between silence, speech, agency, and subjectivity. This is, of course, an over-simplification of Lorde's analysis, but she

so brilliantly extrapolates the ways that silence functions for individuals working diligently toward social change and struggling with personal and more internal conflicts. There are many kinds of silence Lorde alludes to in this dynamic work, but she begins by referencing the ways she was forced to confront her mortality—her eternal struggle not to be silenced, during her battle with cancer. Mortality aside, Lorde also discusses the stigmatization of physical illness and retrospectively considers the seemingly insignificant silences throughout her lifetime, as well as the ways they left her vulnerable and inauthentic:

Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned to someday speak, or waited for someone else's words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength. (Lorde 41)

Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" provides women with such an extensive and detailed roadmap for attempts to move past imposed silences that are rooted in fear. "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" is also a suitable analytical framework for the conceptualization of black women's silence because it takes black women's history into account. Lorde characterizes black womanhood as being challenged by conflicting hypervisibility and invisibility—themes historically-attributed to marginalized, non-dominant social groups, while positing her "most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive" (Lorde 42). Lorde's "we" is consistently a powerful conjuring of community that reinforces her positionality as a black lesbian poet. Lorde's inclusion of herself in her writing engages questions about identity politics and standpoint theory—as

well as illustrates the personal stakes Lorde has in her own writing. And Lorde is always writing with her own, as well as the survival of other black women writers/poets in mind. In thinking about the guiding questions of this research, this cardinal text also does a great deal to force readers to consider where language and speech fall within the framework of silence. What does silence mean for black women writers, for whom it is their daily practice to engage language while engaging resistance? One of the most powerful moments is the following excerpt where Lorde frames women writers as agents of change with a particular responsibility to remain committed to language and its ability to impact collective consciousness and experience. "Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role within that transformation" (Lorde 43).

Silence as a Strategy

Before employing the close readings of the poetic narratives of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez, it is essential to examine the history of black women actively employing silence as a strategic mechanism. Examining the roots of this collective defense and coping mechanism allows us to understand the state of black women's subjectivity in the moments these poems transcended our cultural consciousness, giving name to what was once nameless and voice to who was once voiceless.

Identifying the trajectory of black women's silencing of the erotic from the 21st century back to the enslavement of Africans in the United States also helps us elucidate the importance of these poetic works in black women's struggle for liberation, sexual freedom, and rejection of sex-negative pathology.

There is an identifiable connection between the poetry of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez, and the deep-rooted history of black women constructing their subjectivity according to what Darlene Clarke Hine calls, a culture of dissemblance. This relationship is what has piqued my interest in black women poets' resistance to inimical, singular sexual narratives, despite the social risks of being misunderstood, stereotyped, and stigmatized.

Hine's Culture of Dissemblance

Hines' 1989 article, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West" is an incredibly important distillation of black women's experiences at a very specific moment in history and in very specific geographical spaces and places. In this text, Hine refers to the "culture of dissemblance" as "behavior and attitudes that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (912). One of the characteristics of the culture of dissemblance is that black women are silent about much of what they endure as a means to construct their identity as antithetical to deleterious stereotypes and historical tropes. "To dissemble is to conceal one's true self" (Harris-Perry 58). Michele Mitchell writes about this rejection of presumed-normative behavior that black women intentionally constructed their identity in

stark contrast to. "If popular notions about lewd, lascivious 'negroes' justified ritualised rape then black women assumed some control over a noxious situation by protecting their 'inner lives and selves through a selective revelation of the personal that created the appearance of disclosure" (Mitchell 436). There seem to be two different manifestations of the dissemblance process; there is the preventative dissemblance and the reactive dissemblance – and depending on what experiences black women have had with rape and other acts of violence and dehumanization, their dissemblance can be understood, as a reactionary, precautionary and anticipatory mechanism. Much of the literature about Hines' culture of dissemblance, uses both slave narratives and other primary source material culled from black women of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; however, this research is concerned with the historical transference of this defense mechanism that catapults sexual voice in specific pockets of culture and society for and by black women – in this case, the poetry of Giovanni, Shange, and Sanchez. Hine writes:

Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle. The inclination of the larger society to ignore those considered 'marginal' actually enabled subordinate Black women to craft the veil of secrecy and to perfect the art of dissemblance. Yet it could also be argued that their secrecy or 'invisibility' contributed to the development of an atmosphere inimical to realizing equal opportunity or a place of respect in the larger society... In other words, stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities, and identities of Black women. (915)

This excerpt is a tremendous contribution to the on-going discussion predicated on black women's silences about that which they experience institutionally and in their micro-level, daily interactions (although one may argue that those are inextricably linked experiences). Out of the dissemblance process, comes black women's strategic refuge in perceived asexuality (Harris-Perry 59).

Hine's text is also critical in terms of its attempt to theorize the fear that cultivates the culture of secrecy black women have historically ascribed to. Hine describes the anxieties of black women, alluding to fear, as a means to illustrate the nuanced layers of this psychological, collective process. "Indeed, the concepts of 'secrets' and 'dissemblance,' as I employ them, hint at those issues that Black women believed better left unknown, unwritten, unspoken except in whispered tones. Their alarm, their fear, or their Victorian sense of modesty implies that those who broke the silence provided grist for detractors' mills and, even more ominously, tore the protective cloaks from their inner selves" (Hine 916). What Hine draws in the aforementioned passage is an interesting connection between the concept and act of dissemblance and a Victorian sense of modesty. This relationship becomes especially potent when we begin the shift back to the premise of this research, the breaking of silences around sexual freedom, desire, and autonomy. In a sense, the specific works of poetry discussed below, stand in direct opposition to this Victorian modesty or what historian Victoria Wolcott refers to as "bourgeois respectability"—the indoctrination of black women with the virtues of sexual morality, cleanliness and chastity. Bourgeois respectability will later be used to situate the syntax, sex, and opposition to silence in the poetry of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez. These

three poets have proven themselves unconcerned with upholding white Eurocentric conceptualizations of sex performance, sexual narratives and normative gender performance. Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez are all part of a lineage of civil rights activists, black nationalists, and feminists who believed in poetry as complementary to physical, tangible work being done on the streets of poor, black communities at a historical moment where it was dangerous to be black. If we are constantly referring to Audre Lorde's ideas about the transformation of silence into language and lasting action, we are forced to see, even, their poetry about sex between black bodies or sexual agency as protest poems, as sites of resistance to the long history of sexual silence and sexual suppression.

Respectability and Victorian Womanhood

Anthropologist and folklore theorist Rogers Abrahams discusses the concept of respectability as an essential negotiation of gender identity, relationships, and familial structure. In his 1988 article, "Negotiating Respect", Abrahams expounds on the many ways that respectability is a critical tool for black women, who—since slavery in the Americas—have had to develop mechanisms to control their social relationships and their resulting perceptions according to tenets of woman-ness and blackness in relation to normative masculinity and whiteness. Abrahams examines one of the most prevalent spatial dichotomies, which has contributed to the schism in black women's performance of respectability and prudence. He writes:

This set of distinctions demonstrates one of the problems encountered by black women whenever they must go into a public situation, for some attempt will commonly be made by them to balance the need to present themselves as successful public interactants with the need to maintain the sense of female

respectability that is the ideal of feminine ‘face’ in the community. As Beverly Stoeltje’s informant ‘Evelyn’ analyzes it (in another recent study), there is an important behavioral distinction between acting *at home* and *on the street*, a distinction that goes beyond the places where interactions take place to the style by which exchanges are carried out. (67)

Here, Abrahams is calling attention to the widely-theorized split between the public and private spheres as a space of contestation for black women who are constructing their identity and ultimately, sexuality based on their environmental allowances. Although Abrahams does not speak directly about sexuality and performance of the erotic, he does speak about black women’s upholding of “the feminine”, which is culturally and intrinsically related to sexuality. What we can gather from the excerpt above is black women’s necessity – while straddling the public and private spheres—to strategically perform certain behaviors, which work to construct respectability and shroud their sexuality. Black women have collectively ascribed to this pathology in an attempt to take ownership over their presentation and perception, debunk ubiquitous stereotypes, and perform what they have internalized as femininity, professionalism, and respectability.

There is another dimension to the concept of respectability that may be used to explain and historically situate black women’s public conservatism around their sexuality. Ways that black women have historically been enticed to uphold Victorian philosophies concerning gender performativity is discussed in Gwen Patton’s “Black People and the Victorian Ethos.” Patton illustrates the many ways that imposed and internalized Victorian pathologies divided black men and black women around issues of sex, femininity, masculinity, “the revolution,” and its racial entrenchment, as well as the black family. Patton alludes to systematic instillation of fear among

black women as a rationalization of their taking on Victorian pathologies as a way to disassemble and perform their best rendition of “the black woman.” However, where Patton’s essay meets this research is the depiction of the ways that sexuality is compromised, silenced, and constructed by these black women in fear of perpetuating hypersexual stereotypes. Patton’s text leaves this research with several questions to consider regarding Victorian conservatism, black women’s sexual performativity, and the three poets of interest. These are the questions to be considered and answered. Firstly, Patton is speaking directly about Victorian notions of womanhood impacting black and white relations, as well as black gender identity development in the mid to late 1960’s. In what ways has this Victorian pathology changed with time? And secondly, much of the selected poetry of this research was written and published post-1960. Is it possible or accurate to view the sexual voice in the poetry of Shange, Sanchez and Giovanni as a response to the Victorian notions of femininity and respectability, as described by Patton? These questions are critical in terms of contextualizing Patton’s work within the seemingly abstract discussion about syntax, sex, silences, and poetry. These three questions are also an important interjection of the concept of time, and the ways that this research is hinged on very specific historical moments that require an isolated critical lens in order to understand the extent of their meaning. Patton’s essay, alongside the other critical texts forces us to examine the moments that these poems, their themes, and their sociopolitical mirroring originates from. However, what is missing is an understanding of how poetry allows the three selected poets to move past these debilitating and protective notions of womanhood and into an

aesthetic space where liberation of the body and the erotic becomes, perhaps, a microcosm for their larger, social freedoms.

Black Women's Dissemblance Today

Melissa Harris-Perry's *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* and Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden's *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women* are popular texts that focus specifically on black women's representation in the mainstream consciousness and set out to answer similar questions. These texts provide a discussion about the ways tropes that bolster deterministic ideologies concerning black women's sexuality and sexual practices are injurious to all involved. Harris-Perry employs qualitative and quantitative data, political science theoretical approaches and literary and media analysis theory to explore the coping mechanisms black women have adopted as a response to raced and gendered stereotypes. Her first chapter unpacks her paramount theory and metaphor of the "crooked room", which is characterized as the current, yet historical-metaphysical space that black women in the United States occupy. "When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion . . . It can be hard to stand up in a tilted room" (Harris-Perry 29). Black women's crooked rooms are ubiquitous, according to Harris-Perry and their inherent disorientation makes it challenging for most to "stand up straight" (29). Harris-Perry continues to analyze the many mechanisms adopted by black women who

intend to adjust and vertically align themselves within the distorted space, characterizing the culture of dissemblance as black women's "rigidly controlled public performance of themselves" (62):

Although this form of dissemblance created some emotional space for black women, the politics of respectability failed in important ways. Black women tried to live with dignity and modesty, control their fertility and work to form lasting, loving relationships with men and with other women, but these efforts occurred in a context of profound degradation of the black women's characters and real threats to their physical safety. The culture of dissemblance may have also left black women's politics without the flexibility to respond to complicated contemporary political realities that evoke the ideas of hypersexuality. (Harris-Perry 162)

It is important to recognize that while Harris-Perry acknowledges the legitimacy of quests for agency and subjectivity in black women who have made conscious decisions to dissemble, she is also countering that narrative with the pitfalls of dissemblance—and there are many. In her remarks about the dynamic process of dissemblance, she has managed to critique the inflexibility of controlling tropes, while also singularizing black women's experiences to the extent that they are only capable of acting *in response* to the crooked room (Alexander-Floyd 1077). In a review of Harris-Perry's most popular work, political scientist and theorist Dr. Nikol Alexander-Floyd critiques the effectiveness of the crooked room as a metaphor and theoretical frame, in which, black women's politics should be examined. Of the contradictions inherent in Harris-Perry's analysis, Alexander-Floyd writes:

Harris-Perry's metaphor of 'standing up straight' as a symbol for successfully responding to the contorted reality of a crooked room is an implicitly conservative, phallogocentric one, suggesting that the price of political recognition before the paternal, racial state is alignment with a discernable set of appropriate norms . . . Respectability politics may also explain the fissures in Harris-Perry's otherwise generally forceful critique of black female stereotypes. (1077-1078)

Alexander-Floyd's incisive critique of Harris-Perry's crooked room metaphor complicates the dialectic of dissemblance by provoking questions about why specific women are able to move from object to subject, as well as heteronomy to autonomy and not others. Despite Harris-Perry analytical shortcomings, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* is a recognized voice in the contemporary, popular conversation regarding black women's sexual politics in the midst of cultural silences. Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden's, who are cited in Harris-Perry's work, also spend a significant amount of time extrapolating the most prevalent myths about black womanhood and deconstructing the myths as they see fit. Although Jones and Shorter-Gooden do not reference the culture of dissemble explicitly, they discuss a similar process called "shifting", in which:

She speaks one way in the office and another way to her girlfriends, and still another way to her elderly relatives. It is what may be going on when she enters the beauty parlor with dreadlocks and leaves with straightened hair, or when she tried on five outfits every morning looking for the best camouflage for her ample derriere. And shifting is often internal, invisible. It's the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness – often a consequence of living amidst racial and gender bias. (7)

Jones and Shorter-Gooden report the findings of their American Women's Voices Project, in which, they conducted surveys and data from hundreds of black women in the United States. Throughout their work, they use the work of sexual behaviorists to discuss acceptance of pre-marital sex among black women, as well as cite ethnographic fieldwork to reveal the conservatism of black women's sexual practices compared to those of white women. Both of these texts provide a contemporary, less academic, and more accessible analysis of the ways black

women's sexuality is and has been constructed against the historical backdrop of silencing processes.

Paradoxical Silences and Diglossia

Theorizing silence as a construct, experience, and metaphysical space (such as the metaphorical crooked room), complicates the notion that silence exists only as a derivative of absence, void, and passive complicity. There are many scholars who have contributed to the body of knowledge that theorizes silence as a dynamic tool used as a communicative strategy. For marginalized groups of individuals who have been forced into silence—for example, black women—it can be spiritually, politically, and economically beneficial to manipulate the rhetoric of silence and speak selectively. While acknowledging the towering history of systemic silencing by way of white, patriarchal, hegemonic institutions, and their beneficiaries, I intend to expand the politics of silence as a paradoxical, subversive space, in which, silenced groups are aroused to cultivate a diglossic language of secrecy. These paradoxical silences are linked directly to their survival.

Katherine McKittrick's begins *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle* with a brief, yet powerful quote by poet, documentarian and essayist Dionne Brand – which reads, “I don’t want no fucking country, here/ or there and all the way back, I don’t like it, none of it,/easy as that” (qtd. in McKittrick ix). This excerpt was taken from Brand’s poetic prose and deploys anger and rage at all of the sociopolitical constructs that land has acquired and imposed upon black women in the African diaspora. Geography acquires and reifies constructs; however

McKittrick is particularly interested in the spaces of intersection between geography and black subjects. McKittrick employs several narratives to crystallize these spatial intersections, including Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to illustrate how physical/metaphysical spaces can be useful for subversive resistance at the hands of black female subjects. Gillian Rose's notion of a "paradoxical space" becomes a useful theoretical framework for the space-making practices of black women who choose to dissemble and claim silence as their communicative mechanism. Invisibility and surveillance are two ideas, which are paramount in the academic discourse regarding paradoxical spaces and their potential to provide opportunities for the articulation of subjectivity. Visualization of one's self in a confined space—nestled inside a larger, meta-oppressive space helps individuals erase themselves "from the immediate landscape", empowering themselves with an imagined sense of control amidst chaos (McKittrick 43). For black women who have chosen to dissemble, creating a safe, "invisible" (although, not sophisticatedly-hidden) and rhetorical space can aid in the collective production of intellectual property and resistant representations of self. I am suggesting that not only is black women's adopting of dissemblance into silence a potentially communicative discourse, but that the "specific space: the space occupied by a women in the field of knowledge under particular historical and discursive circumstances" (Ludmer 83) illustrates the ways silence is, in fact, a space where sexual subjectivities can be articulated.

This dynamic characterization of silence is much more conducive to the study of black women's coming to voice in the midst of ubiquitous encouragements

to ‘dissemble’ and ‘shift’. In *Subversive Silences*, Helene Carol Weldt-Basson’s study examines the work of seven contemporary Latin American and Latina authors, illuminating their usage of stylistic and thematic silence as a counternarrative to normative and traditionalist notions of silencing mechanisms. Weldt-Basson cultivates a “feminist poetics of silence” throughout this text, interrogating six separate and distinct forms of silence—coded, paradoxical, hyperbolic, parodic, cultural, and symbolic—with a critical feminist methodology that employs French feminist theory, sociolinguistic theory and muted-group theory. In the first chapter of her investigation, Weldt-Basson considers the wide body of scholarship that has focused on appropriating the concept of repressive silence in order to bolster new and incendiary ways of viewing silence:

Kaminsky’s discussion of silence is somewhat traditional, because it associates silence with repression. This is also true of the way in which Castro-Klarén interprets silence, for she alludes to the silencing of women writers as a form of perpetuation of their subservient role. In contrast, another group of critics views silence as a potentially subversive tool. Both Marjorie Agosín and Josefina Ludmer discuss silence in this manner . . . Agosín does not offer any comprehensive theory of silence as a communicative strategy . . . Josefina Ludmer analyzes silence as a space of resistance in the writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Ludmer shows how Sor Juana separates knowledge from saying and recognizes it as not saying, or silence, in order to empower herself and respond to religious authorities from her position of subordination and marginality. Ludmer, like Agosín, suggests that silence is not necessarily a passive strategy. (22-23)

Weldt-Basson’s invoking of this community of scholars and their work assists greatly in this particular literary and research project, in which, black women’s sexual silences and poetic speech are being scrutinized for their value in black women’s pursuit of sexual and social subjectivities. In considering the complexities of dissemblance, Ludmer’s most well-known article, “Tretas del débil” [Tricks of the Weak] is an analysis of spaces that exist between processes of knowing and

processes of saying—a useful framework in debunking the ways that strategic, communicative silence can be convoluted by the notion that ignorance is inherent. For those who analyze the culture of dissemblance only through the traditional, masculinist paradigm, there is seemingly no space for women to articulate their ways of covert knowing, but only victimized, reactive, passive, asexual or rigidly conservative muteness:

Juana states right off that *she doesn't know how to say*. Not knowing leads to silence, is directly related to silence. Here, however, it is a matter of a relative and positional not knowing: not knowing how to speak to one in a superior position, a not knowing that clearly implies recognition of the other's superiority. This ignorance is thus a specific social relationship transferred to discourse. (Ludmer 88)

Ludmer's analysis of this "trick of the weak" illustrates silence is a strategy that allows women's writing and speech to claim a space, in which, it becomes acceptable to say and do what may be forbidden in other spaces. Privileging this "trick of the weak" and its analysis changes the forms of silence that we have come to know and authorize in our narratives.

Another interesting component of this discussion is the notion that implicit in the encoded silences of women, is the "potentially subversive element that should be understood in terms of women's fundamental diglossia or need to express themselves through a male-dominated discourse, which perforce become dialogic or double-voiced in the Bakhtinian sense" (Weldt-Basson 23). Diglossia, according to sociolinguistic theory refers to the speaking of two similar languages and dialects within the same community. Diglossia can be imagined using the medical and congenital defect called, bifid tongue—in which, the anterior part of one's tongue is physically split longitudinally down the middle. Critics of black women's literature

have taken into account the ways diglossia connotes a linguistic dualism bolstered by class and its traditional linguistics constructs. "The concept of a woman's text in the wild zone is a playful abstraction: in the reality to which we must address ourselves as critics, women's writing is a 'double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant" (Showalter 265). Showalter is examining the cultural context of language and alluding to a muted language that is a necessary component of their writings. Audre Lorde might say that this dialogic, this linguistic dualism is integral to black women's daily and physical survival. Showalter is not the first scholar to consider the role of dual voices in women's literature; in fact, black feminist writers have been exploring this idea as long as they have been reflecting on their complicated relationship to formal and written language (which has its own body of scholarship that posits language, itself, as an inherent repository). Mae Henderson employs Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of dialogism and consciousness in order to theorize the matrix of black female subjectivity by way of the black feminist literary tradition. Henderson identifies the connections between Bakhtin's characterization of the many languages of heteroglossia as "intersect[ing] with each other in many different ways . . . As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (292) with the shared space of consciousness and inner speech. Henderson's deployment of Bakhtin's philosophy of language is useful to this research project because it provides us with a model for understanding how black women's narrative writing is historically and theoretically complicated by the singular and collective, colloquial

and codified, and ultimately paradoxical kinship between language and silence. Hine's culture of dissemblance has been heavily theorized since its debut in academe; however, these texts work to complicate its assumptions about the ways silence can be a counterhegemonic response and a space for coded speech to create new opportunities for black female subjectivity.

Sonia Sanchez and Speech

Sonia Sanchez is widely recognized as one of the most prolific writers of the Black Arts/Aesthetic Movement, with an arsenal of poetry that speaks greatly to life-affirming narratives of complicated black womanhood. Sanchez was one of the Black Arts Movement poets who expressed her "frustration with the androcentric focus of 'the movement' and the patriarchal bias of some of its most prominent texts" (Mance 95). Two books of Sonia Sanchez' poetry are helpful in terms of contextualizing her sexual voice as it relates to notions of black women as agentic beings. *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems* and *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums: Love Poems* are two insightful collections of poems (haikus, tankas, sonkas, and sensual blues) that are intermittently woven by expressions of blackness, woman-ness, sexual desire, political resistance, and liberation. The four poems mostly thematically saturated with the concepts listed above are an untitled haiku, an untitled sonku, [*question from a young sister*], and an untitled poem. The first line of the untitled poem "Good morning, sex. How do you do?" (Sanchez 56), leaves readers with questions about how we interact with sex, talk to it, perform it, and engage it in conversation. This line also reminds readers of sex' co-optation of

cultural normalcy as an act-to-be-expected—an act so much a part of how we identify and build relationships, that we can speak to it. Sex is material. Culturally, it has culminated in its own persona, its own public figure. This poem speaks directly about cultural and social expectations about sex, how it is supposed to look and how it must be performed:

You say what? Sex is and sex ain't
sex wuz and sex wuzn't
sex should be and sex has been
on Times Square billboards
on television, in the movies,
in the lyrics dripping off pouting lips. (56)

In this work, Sanchez is being very clear with readers about the subjective redefining of sex and its performance qualities. She is alluding to media's saturation of sex-related imagery, while making a statement about the ways we are culturally indoctrinated by these images, as well as their construction of hegemonic ideologies around sex and bodies. This poem continues to address homosexuality and the orgasm as two components of sex that are relative and as experiences, are essential to acknowledge:

Sex is kinky & clean shaven
sex is straight & gay
sex is do it anyway.
[...]
Sex is love. Unlove.
Comes with danger & beauty
Comes in clean and shadowy places.
Sex is life. Death. A gig. (57)

Sanchez's deconstruction of our heteronormative conceptualizations of sex performance reaffirms the importance of what some have called "sex talk," in assisting individuals as they assert themselves as beings with desire, with erotic

capability and lastly, the agency to negotiate the conditions of their own sexual subjectivity. What is important about this particular poem is the way that it is aligned in the tradition of the Black Arts “protest poem”. Protest poetry and protest art is heavily discussed in Black Nationalist discourses and essentially, intends to undermine, debunk, and question normative cultural structures. The element of protest—in this case—transcends the Black Arts Movement, under the guise of less confrontational and radical language. However, the intent remains the same—Sanchez funnels her frustration toward sexual constructs, rather than those that are racist and classist. Similar to this untitled poem, Nikki Giovanni’s “A Poem/Because It Came As A Surprise To Me”, which I will discuss in upcoming pages, projects homosexuality against the social landscape of heteronormative sexuality, in protest. This thematic morphing of the protest poem is just as present in the work of Shange and Giovanni—once again, illuminating the roots of poetry about sex and black women’s bodies to a politics of resistance and struggle for liberation from oppressive structures.

Sanchez’s “Haiku [*question from a young sister*]” raises interesting questions about ownership over one’s sexuality and embracing what the speaker calls, “freakdom” (Sanchez 55). “1./what’s wrong with being/ freaky on stage you a stone/ freak in yo own skin./ 2./ at least we up front about this freakdom. at least/ we let it all hang out.” (Sanchez 55). Reading this poem within the context of this research and its assumptions, the question then remains, *have black women always let it [their freakdom] hang out? Why not?* “Freakdom” refers to individuals’ erotic experiences, their desires, as well as their adherence or lack thereof to sexual norms

and practices. These two structural haikus are making a statement, which permeates this research about black women, their silences about sexuality and the possibilities that emerge when they begin to break collective silences about their erotic agency. The title of this work posits these haikus as questions and as a conversation—while simultaneously threatening assumptions about the culture of dissemblance and how dialogue has managed to “slip through the cracks”, opening the door for boisterous expressions of sexual subjectivity.

Ntozake Shange and the Body

Ntozake Shange has quite possibly received the most recognition in recent popular media consciousness with the Tyler Perry film adaptation of her most lauded work, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. There are two poems, by Shange, which offer critical insights to the black woman’s experience owning her sexual desire and refraining from the processes of cultural and societal dissemblance. *Nappy Edges* is a collection of poetry by Shange, published in 1978. There are two poems that have become essential to the positionality of Shange’s sexual voice in poetic, political discourse. These are “get it & feel good” and “no gusts of wind tickle me”. Viewed as statements and declarations, these poems address the necessity to know one’s own body, to own erotic authority over one’s own bodily existence and lastly, the relationship between pride and “healthy” black body image. “no gusts of wind tickle me” reads:

cuz i don’t look like no woman just like a child
playin grown/ & I know my bride price wuld be higher in
some parts of the continent/ cuz thighs growin on top
each other are like rattlesnake meat/ a delicacy

& quite something/ & when I think bout the difference
 of bein wet all the time / & bein dry & then bein wet/
 I get all hot tween my legs again (107)

Shange's poem includes descriptive language about the space between her legs, her vagina, and its reactions to various exterior, environmental factors. Readers are bombarded with sensory cues that employ sound, smell, and texture as a means to illustrate how her vagina responds to that which occurs around her. Silence about women's reproductive organs can be found in the latticed histories of several groups, not only those who have been marginalized—but black women's silences about their vaginas are of particular interest. This descriptive ownership over the speaker's space "tween her legs" signifies a black female awareness of bodily agency, as well as distinct pride in the sexual connotations written into this account. "get it & feel good" also implies a pride in one's erotic prowess and the rejection of shame for doing so:

whatever good there is to get
 get it & feel good
 this one's got kisses
 that one can lay
 [...] whatever good there is to get
 get it and feel good
 get it & feel good
 snatch it & feel good
 grab it & feel good
 steal it & feel good
 borrow it & feel good
 reach it & feel good
 you cd
 oh yeah
 & feel good (52)

Shange's repetitive locution, "get it & feel good" resembles the melodic methods of oral hypnoses, encouraging black women to, once again, take collective ownership

over their sexual desires without internalizing guilt and traditions of silence. These poems work together to illustrate the airing of what some would consider to be the dirty laundry of black women's sexual lives. Shange's poem stands in the face of cultural taboos about sexual practices, like masturbation—presenting readers with an intimate reflection of the speaker's sexual experience.

Nikki Giovanni and Black Bodies

Nikki Giovanni is acclaimed as one of the most prolific black women poets of the Black Arts and Post-Black Arts Movement. At the height of the Black Arts Movement, Giovanni was a literary (black) household name—referred to as the “Princess of Black Poetry” by The New York Times for the potency of her words and thematic density of her poetry. Her work has contributed greatly to my exploration of the relationship between silences, syntax, and sex, while complicating the ways Hine's culture of dissemblance manifests theoretically in sexual narratives. Two of Giovanni's poems will be employed in this particular chapter, both of which were published in *The Collected Poetry Of Nikki Giovanni*. They are titled, “Seduction” and “A Poem/Because It Came As A Surprise To Me” and initially published in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Despite these poems being published before the rigid 1975 onset of the Post-Black Arts era, I use them to illustrate how Giovanni was making powerful statements that are salient among the themes of Post-Black Arts poetry. The two poems are nestled between 400 pages of poetic prose, providing readers with critiques of systemic domination and the marginalization of people of color and women. Her work is laden with allusions to homosexuality, biblical

archetypes/tropes, Pan-Africanism, Afrocentricism, black heterosexuality, and like most poets who wrote alongside Giovanni at the apex of the Black Arts Movement, the Black Nationalist desire to incite a revolution. “A Poem/Because It Came As A Surprise To Me” reads, “homosexuality/ (an invention of saul/ as played to perfection by the pope)/ is two people of similar sex/ DOING IT/ that’s all” (Giovanni 127). What is important about this particular poem is the way that it is also aligned in the tradition of the Black Arts “protest poem”. Part of the power of this poem is its centering of homosexuality in Giovanni’s discourse; she rejects the social debates that surround homosexuality, particularly in black communities and presents readers with a simplistic image of gay and lesbian sex, “two people of similar sex/ DOING IT/ that’s all.” Giovanni also confronts the biblical narrative of Saul, alluding to his son Jonathan who, is known to have had a platonic and possibly homosexual relationship with David. Giovanni pegs the Pope as part of a religious tradition that has historically escaped criticism for its homoeroticism and in some cases, bold homosexuality. The silences Giovanni is breaking in this poem, as well as the ways she is doing so are important to the analysis of Post-Black Arts sex talk. Similarly, Giovanni’s “Seduction” allows readers to position themselves as voyeurs to an intimate, sexual encounter between a black woman and black man—both of whom (but particularly, the man) seem personally and politically invested in the anti-racist revolution:

one day
 you gonna walk in this house
 and i’m gonna have on a long African
 gown
 you’ll sit down and say ‘The Black...’
 and I’m gonna take one arm out

then you – not noticing me at all – will say ‘What about
this brother...’
and I’m going to be slipping it over my head
and you’ll rap on about ‘The revolution...’
while I rest your hand against my stomach
you’ll go on – as you always do – saying
‘I just can’t dig...’
while I’m moving your hand up and down
and I’ll be taking your dashiki off
then you’ll say ‘What we really need...’
and I’ll be licking your arm
and ‘The way I see it we ought to...’
and unbuckling your pants
‘And what about the situation...’
and taking your shorts off
then you’ll notice
your state of undress and knowing you you’ll just say
‘Nikki,
isn’t this counterrevolutionary...?’ (35)

One way of reading “Seduction” is to characterize it as narrated by an assertive female voice, one who is not deterred by the distracting talk about “the revolution” or the politics of their time. This tenacious sexual voice is woven into this short poem by Giovanni and represents an interesting challenge to Hine’s culture of dissemblance. In many ways, this work serves as a repudiation of silent, contrived, and respectable sexuality; however, what becomes most dynamic is the breaking of sexual silence within the context of political resistance—so much so, that sex itself is assumed to be “counterrevolutionary”. Hine’s culture of dissemblance—in this case—can be applicable not only to the ways that black women concealed their erotic subjectivity to white individuals in the public sphere, but also from the patriarchy and double standards perpetuated by black men of the black nationalist movement. In many ways, the movement was hinged on thwarted expectations of masculine militancy for women, as well as suppression of expressive

femininity – but “Seduction” refuses to laud dissemblance and speaks openly about sexual desire in the midst of political discourse in the private sphere. However, another analysis of this poem and works that similarly describe a male presence and heterosexual desire, is to label it a “lover-object poem” —a term used by Mance in *Inventing Black Women: African-American Women Poets and Self-Representation, 1977-2000*. Mance devoted much analysis to the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Arts Movement, while centering her analysis, specifically, on the black woman poet’s voice. She writes, “To depict the black woman acting autonomously, in accordance with her newly aroused consciousness would pose an unwelcome challenge to the widespread support for maintaining a gendered separation between African American women’s limited role as lover-object and the role of the Black male as redeemer-liberator” (102). This alternate reading of “Seduction” forces us to reconsider the framing of the male gaze and the ways the male presence delineates a shift in black women’s sexual subjectivity.

Audre Lorde’s “Revolution Is One Form of Social Change” is a useful introduction to the complexity of the intersection between lasting political action, and the axes of domination that impose themselves on bodies that look differently. Lorde suggests an intersectional approach to the construction of readers’ revolutionary plan of action—one that identifies size, color, and sex as areas of division between bodies. “When the man is busy/ making niggers/ it doesn’t matter/ much/ what shade/ you are” (139). Here, Lorde is using a racial discourse to situate “the man” —signifying white hegemony and its institutions—as in the business of producing/making “niggers”. This process alludes to the social

construction of archetypal tropes that live in racial binary structures. Lorde also states that “shade” [skin color] does not matter very much in the larger racial binary, as a reference to the one-drop rule politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This kind of racial essentialism exists in today’s popular racial discourse and Lorde develops her narrative about this being only one kind of division. She proceeds:

If he runs out of one
particular color
he can always switch
to size
and when
he’s finished
off the big ones
he’ll just change
to sex
which is
after all
where it all began. (139)

This stanza ends “Revolution Is One Form of Social Change” and encourages readers to, once again, consider the kind of intersectional revolution that would allow for the dismantling of several axes of power simultaneously—or at least, one that takes these dynamic intersections into account. Lorde successfully complicates domination by using color, size (connoting power), and sex to illustrate the ways that difference is institutionally and industrially hierarchical. Where this work connects with the work of Nikki Giovanni is the way that the body—black, big, male, and female becomes the site, on which, black women poets project the tensions between revolution and individual agency. What we continue to see is that the political revolution is never too far from the physical body.

Chapter 3 **She Talk Like A Lady: Writing Poetry That Talks B(I)ack**

In exploring the complex and intricate relationship black women poets have historically had with language, what has remained integral is the diversity in the ways language is constructed and employed. In the Post-Black Arts era, activists, and wordsmiths, Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez were professing their belonging to a tradition that was responsible for engaging the politics of the moment, as well as active consciousness-raising and social organizing.

The Functions of Poetry

Having identified and examined the many ways that the politics of silence were woven into the literary work and lived experiences of the three black women poets, it is important to return to Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" to examine the processes, by which, the poets' language was skillfully cultivated. Lorde was no stranger to the process of poetry-writing during the Post-Black Arts moment; in fact, some of her most widely-renowned works were both written and published at this juncture. Lorde's characterization of poetry and its knowledge production process have given feminist scholars and fellow poets alike tremendous insight regarding individual and collective shifts from heteronomy to autonomy.

This shift is analyzed heavily in both of the framing texts, as well as "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," an essay best recognized for its astute observations about the relationship between the process of poetic knowledge production, women's physical

existence, and survival. In this work, Lorde writes about the ways, in which, poetry is linked to class privilege, assertions of one's desires (sexual and otherwise) and women's self-actualization. Throughout her work, Lorde maintains that poetry is a transformative source of power for women and other marginalized groups. For Lorde, the process of poetry-making requires arming oneself with the tools of language and reliance on one's erotic knowledge to cultivate a vocabulary for the seemingly intangible and nameless. Lorde, firstly, encourages readers and poets to embrace the process of "distillation" as it relates to the erotic space within each of us (Lorde 36). She affirms women's emotional knowledge and privileges the act of speaking as essential in women's daily resistance to colonizing, patriarchal fallacies. "For it is poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt" (Lorde 36). This theory, nestled in the introductory paragraph of "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," illustrates the cornerstone of my research project, and also lucidly and tangentially expressed by feminist poet, Adrienne Rich in *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*:

The study of silence has long engrossed me. The matrix of a poet's work consists not only of what is there to be absorbed and worked on, but also of what is missing, desaparecido, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable. It is through these invisible holes in reality that poetry makes its way—certainly for women and other marginalized subjects . . . The impulse to create begins—often terribly and fearfully—in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we might ask any poem is, *'What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?'* And yet I need to say here that silence is not always or necessarily oppressive, it is not always or necessarily a denial or extinguishing of some reality. It can be fertilizing, it can bathe the imagination. (150)

There are tremendous parallels between the words of Rich and Lorde. Both lesbian poets are placing great effort into their characterizations of silence within the

context of poetry's propensity for brave and calculated speech—particularly for women and other non-hegemonic groups. In both quotes above, readers are encouraged to consider not only the act of silence-breaking in and of itself, but the identity of the voices engaged in speech, and the context, in which, the silences come to exist. Essentially, Rich and Lorde are both speaking explicitly about the feminist politics of silence. Lorde's and Rich's analyses elucidate an important relationship – that is, the inextricable kinship that exists between the poetry-making process, the anatomies of silence, and the act of talking b(l)ack.

In my early days of claiming feminism, one of the texts that contributed greatly to my personal and now-evolving relationship with the black feminist literary tradition is bell hooks' *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. As a young, black, self-identified feminist at a diverse institution, I was looking for spaces—both physical and metaphysical—where blackness and womanhood were not only celebrated simultaneously, but also critically engaged. In the early stages of this research, as I was mulling through collections of Black Arts and Post-Black Arts Movement poetry, I revisited *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* for its delineation of the many intersecting and overlapping discussions about black feminist knowledge production, activism, and physical experience. hooks begins this seminal work exploring acts of speaking in black households and communities—beginning with her very own. Anecdotally, she maps out cultures of silence that are learned and ultimately, perpetuated by black girls from the time they are very young. “In the world of the southern black community that I grew up in, ‘back talk’ and ‘talking back’ meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring

to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion . . . To speak when one was not spoken to was a courageous act – an act of risk and daring” (hooks 5). Her analysis about the act of speaking in black spaces denotes a particular positionality and a threatening assertion of power. In this space, speech is not a right, nor is it inherent or irrevocable. Instead, it is a privilege reserved for a select few and must be earned. hooks moves into an discussion about black women’s silences and intricate relationship with language, claiming—“certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech, but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (hooks 6). These words are Lordean in their nature and assertive tone, explicating the ways silence and speech have evolved in spaces where women and black individuals navigate compulsory silences—sexual and otherwise. hooks continues to disclose more of her personal relationship to literary expression by discussing how poetry—as a single form, genre and historical continuum allowed her access to a unique awareness of her own developing voice:

For me, poetry was the place for the secret voice, for all that could not be directly stated or named, for all that would not be denied expression. Poetry was privileged speech – simple at times, but never ordinary. The magic of poetry was transformation; it was words changing shape, meaning, and form. Poetry was not mere recording of the way we southern black folks talked to one another, even though our language was poetic. It was transcendent speech. It was meant to transform consciousness, to carry the mind and heart to a new dimension. These were my primitive thoughts on poetry as I experienced and knew it growing up. (hooks 11)

In identifying ways that hooks’ analysis spoke to this particular research, I encountered feelings of resistance towards descriptions of poetry that “sounded” romanticized and mystified, in fear that the language would convolute my academic

voice. After all, poetry has historically had a contentious relationship with the academy and its ways of legitimizing and authorizing specific means of knowing. The notions that “poetry is not academic enough”, “there is no theoretical basis for poetry”, “poetry is not worthy of academic inquiry,” and that “only poets read poetry” present epistemological challenges for those who choose to theoretically engage poetry and cultivate a body of knowledge using “the master’s [academic, methodological] tools” (Lorde 110). Despite these beliefs, it is important work to confront the paradoxical relationship between poetry and the ivory tower, as well as elitist critiques that only perpetuate the notion that poetry is, in fact, a purple-prosed luxury. In the Introduction to *Sister Outsider*, Nancy Bereano of Firebrand Books denounces the history of the antagonistic relationship between feeling and knowing:

But what about the conflict between poetry and theory, between their separate and seemingly incompatible spheres? We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and that theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist’s mode is of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced ‘subjectively,’ and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the ‘objective’ world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them. The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think – between poetry and theory. (Bereano [Introduction] 8)

I include this tangential analysis to contextualize my early and problematic trepidations about descriptions of poetry that read like hooks’, seemingly-intangible, frothy, ornate, esoteric, elusive, and arcane—but also, to illustrate that there is work to be done in order to deconstruct the polarization of poetry and theory in our consciousness and scholarship. I greatly value hooks’ vivid and lucid analysis of the ways poetry has given her the language to create visions for

subjectivity and resistance. This chapter's title, "She Talk Like A Lady: Writing Poetry That Talks B(l)ack" is inspired by hooks' text and intends to explore several aspects of Shange, Sanchez, and Giovanni's Post-Black Arts poetics within a Lordean framework and mindful of the possibilities of communicative silences. Not only did I intend to channel hooks' and other black women writers' invocation of an intersectional analysis and voice, but also a critique of a respectable femininity. My use of black vernacular/slang is intentional and I intended to make implicit, questions about who "ladies" have historically been and whether or not they have resembled women like Shange, Sanchez, and Giovanni.

This chapter pursues the exploration of poetry's function, form, textuality, and lastly, the ways it allows for distinct and subversive sexual narratives in Sanchez, Giovanni, and Shange's work. The functions of poetry—the real, material, and physical functions—are heavily theorized in the writings of many Black Arts movement historians and theorists. Their analysis helps to answer questions about how poetry serves the individual and the collective, the consciousness and the possibilities of meaningful transformation. This body of research rests heavily on the theoretical basis that poetry—as a genre, process, meaning-making tool and repository—has palpable consequences for the spaces, in which, it emerges and seeks to bear witness. In analyzing the relationship between poetry, sexual subjectivity, and political resistance for black women poets, questions emerge about the ways poetry can truly alter individual's physical experience. This research makes claims about Post-Black Arts poetry acting as an intersectional space where gendered, racial, transnational, and socioeconomic transformation meet black

women's individual and collective subjectivity; therefore, I am making a clear statement about poetry's potential to reach the social experience. Like many poets, I believe strongly that all poetry—not just poems that were birthed during the Post-Black Arts movement has a social function. I consider Audre Lorde's writings about poetry (take for example, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury") to be cardinal texts, which have informed the ways I have perceived, both, poetic and cultural production in/for communities of women. Audre Lorde would say that poetry absolutely does have a social function, because it has a profound utility for the individual consciousness, first and foremost. What these questions regarding "function" have encouraged me to contend is that poetry has historically had an intricate and fluid history with the political, but also, that an examination of the ways "utility" is framed by poets and literary critics—alike—is necessary.

Poets on Fear and Silence

In 2002, Callaloo published "Lucille Clifton & Sonia Sanchez: A Conversation," in which, there were many assertions made about the functions of poetry for the two black women poets. Sonia Sanchez vacillated between what read as a stern and assertive reading voice and a more light-hearted voice imbued with casualness and comfortable laughter. Despite an audience, the poets share intimate moments of shared references to Black Arts and Post-Black Arts cultural production and complicated politics. As this chapter considers the utility of poetry for Shange, Giovanni, and lastly, Sanchez—I considered that it might be important to invoke their own characterizations of their relationship to the art form:

SANCHEZ: . . . The point, my poetry and the poets that I know who wrote well, is to keep us all human. And that is what we finally have got to understand. That we've got to make you turn around when you're fearful and say, 'Don't be afraid. What are you afraid of? What are you afraid of? And why do people want you to be afraid?' You know. Why do people want you to be afraid? And if you can say, 'I'm not afraid.' We are a nation of people who will not succumb to this fear at all, then that's what we do as poets—make you understand what it is finally to be human and to walk upright.

CLIFTON: The poem, I think, the thing that poetry can do, is speak for those who have not yet found their ability to speak.

SANCHEZ: That's right.

CLIFTON: And to say you are not alone. (1071)

Sanchez and Clifton's words are an important account that speaks to the myriad of possibilities that poetry can have for the consciousness of the poet and the social space, in which, the poet exists. Sanchez makes a connection between the writing and practice of poetry and fear, denouncing its control over individuals by pulling them into silence. With Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" as an overarching theoretical filter, we begin to identify commonalities in black women's narratives that subvert their communal reluctance to speak bravely. "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" was first delivered in 1977, at the onset of the Post-Black Arts Movement. Lorde's characterization of silence offers an interesting bridge to Sanchez and Clifton's discussion and also elucidates the reciprocal relationship between fear and silence. "My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit in a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences" (41). Sanchez and Lorde are both making a statement about the place of community in individuals moving from

silence into speech, illustrating that there is power in shared experiences and narratives. Both poets are also offering us language for identifying the ways silence is incapable of protecting those who choose to employ it. This presents an interesting challenge to those who have theorized and come to understand silence as a circumstantially subversive mechanism, but Lorde is relentless in her analysis of silence. Clifton states explicitly that poetry, for her, is about the act of turning to speech, “transcendent speech” —as bell hooks would refer to it (11). Sonia Sanchez turns to the notion of secret and selectively-communicative speech while discussing spaces, in which, black speech becomes socially acceptable:

SANCHEZ: When black folks wouldn't say it out loud, they said it in the hallways of their homes, in the doorway in the beauty parlors, in the barbershops, but never out loud, you know. Because I'm not a revisionist; when he [Malcolm] said it out loud, I ducked. (1055)

By “it”, Sanchez is alluding to the politics of language, space, and culture, articulating the ways speech is affected by the spaces, in which, it is forced into existence. She is also referring to the black individual's relationship to private spaces, which presumably are safer to speak and reveal what theorists refer to as black people's “inner selves”. The barbershop and the beauty salon are both physical, institutional and public spaces; however, they also serve as cultural apparatus' – extending the reach of the black private sphere and becoming havens, of sorts, for cultural indoctrination, the celebration of black aesthetics and black life and, as well as escapes from the surveillance of the exterior, white, capitalist hegemonic dailiness. Sanchez' insights in this conversation with Black Arts Movement poet Lucille Clifton personalize this research, going straight to the source in order to identify how poetry has served her as a Black Arts and Post-Black Arts black woman poet.

Poetry Magazine published a conversational exchange titled, “Does Poetry Have A Social Function?,” in which, poets, Stephen Burt, Major Jackson, Emily Warn, and Daisy Fried raise questions about the ways poetry impacts the material, social world. Their analysis was seemingly balanced, as they considered poetry’s value both, at the production and the consumption ends. After all, it is impossible to scrutinize the utility of poetry without considering whom and what it is useful for, if anyone or anything at all. Major Jackson and Daisy Fried’s comments were most enlightening, aiding readers in the development of particular context. Daisy Fried’s assessment of poetry complicates and in some moments, conflicts directly with the ways my research has affirmed poetry’s power. However, her sentiments are part of this conversation and validate the need to explore questions about poetry’s function. Fried writes:

People who talk about poetry's social utility often concentrate on content. They think, perhaps, that poetry Tells the Truth, or Provides Solace. These notions make me queasy, and are treason to poetry. If you're crawling to poems on your hands and knees, as I once heard a famous poet remark—in my view, you're not crawling to poetry. Prozac would probably work better.

Poetry's social function comes not from what it means but from what it is. Its utility is to shake us out of our standard American buy-stuff-and-watch-TV half life. A poem's content matters very little to that utility . . .

Though its subject matter and politics are both clear and attractive, content has very little to do with why the poem is extraordinary. (297)

Fried raises provocative questions about whether or not it is the content of poems that ultimately determines its social value. In the process of engaging the concept of “utility”, she undermines the ways poetry can speak truths—especially ones that otherwise cannot be articulated—and claims that poetry’s power is rooted in its very existence. I find it difficult to discuss poetry’s social function—particularly

within the Post-Black Arts historical moment and not attribute the utility of Shange, Jordan, Lorde, Giovanni, and Sanchez' works, in part, to their content. As mentioned, there are other factors, which contribute to a poem's social function/utility in our world—for example, the sometimes dubious page-to-publishing process, the rigidity of the academy, financial support or lack thereof, geographical space, etc; however, a tremendous part what makes these poems worthy of academic inquiry is the way their respective “coming-to-be” processes carve out space for powerful invocations of individual and social experiences. Audre Lorde's “Poetry Is Not A Luxury” focuses on this process for women poets and debunks the notion that poetry is a frivolous and mindless endeavor. “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence” (37). For Lorde, poetry is inextricably linked to her subjectivity and survival in the material world as a black, lesbian, feminist, warrior, poet, and mother. She places tremendous value on poetry and illustrates the ways the creative process aides the individual in their daily life:

It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (37)

This offers great insight to the discussion initiated by the poets in “Does Poetry Have A Social Function?” and emphasizes poetry's utility as a repository, an accessible and tangible tool. Major Jackson speaks to the notion of “carving out space” in ways that are much more complementary to this research, with emphasis on the relationship between the poet, her process of making and the page. “Whether as a form of witness, as a medium which dignifies individual speech and thought, as a

repository of our cumulative experiences, or as a space where we ‘purify’ language, poetry, like all imaginative creations, divines the human enterprise. This is poetry’s social value” (299). Jackson continues to illustrate how “one of poetry’s chief aims is to illumine the walls of mystery, the inscrutable, the unsayable. I think poetry ought to be taught not as an engine of meaning but as an opportunity to learn to live in doubt and uncertainty, as a means of *claiming* indeterminacy” (299). Jackson’s analysis is overrun with language that endorses the spaces where personal narrative shatters silences and engages silences, syntax, and sex, as axial motifs. It is in analysis like Jackson and Fried’s that readers can develop a nuanced understanding of how poetry transcends the physical page and becomes part of individuals’ political necessity. To ignore the social and political possibilities of these works would mean ignoring a significant aspect of a cultural revolution, to which Black Arts and Post-Black Arts poetry are partially responsible. Post-Black Arts poetry is, as its most fundamental level, “political poetry” and operates on the basis that political transformation is possible if Black people look to each other for support.

Political Poetry and Subjectivity

In a similar vein, there lies another critical component to the questions regarding the relationship between the political sphere and the poetic process—that is, whether or not poetry is inherently political. Many writers refrain from using the term “political poetry”, as it brings with it a set of notions about what constitutes a “political nature”, as well as the implicit intentions, methods, voice, genealogy, and

expected outcomes. In some ways, the labeling of poetry as “political” also reaffirms ideological constructions of what poetry must or should look like. For Post-Black Arts poets, Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez, what has propelled their poetry into our literary consciousness has been the very ways that they have rejected restrictive rationales that use class, race, and academic elitism to bolster a hegemonic model of “political poetry”. After all, this is what Lorde’s “Poetry Is Not A Luxury” is a critique of. The term “political poetry” is personally problematic, but this research calls for an exploration of its implications, nevertheless. The explicitly political nature of Shange, Sanchez, and Giovanni’s Post-Black Arts sex poetry is connected to Melissa Harris Perry’s assertion that “the internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of black women are inherently political” (5). This notion certainly essentializes the lived, physical experiences of black women but encapsulates a history of scrutiny and simultaneous marginalization. Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez deploy literary mechanisms that tell sexual narratives, all the while maintaining an awareness of the innate potential for political impact.

Part of the immense power of Black Arts and Post-Black Arts poetry is the density of allusions and references to that, which, comprises our social experience. The voices of Post-Black Arts poetry are also rarely singular; they are part of an ensemble and continuum, a community of writers envisioning new forms of speech. Evie Shockley interrogates this notion of polyvocality—albeit in a divergent context—expounding on the ways the multiplicity of voice allows for the expanding of subjectivity and the conjuring of a wide range of black aesthetic narratives that read in solidarity. Shockley discusses Sanchez’ *Does Your House Have Lions* and

suggests that an “inscription of polyvocality into the structure of the poem foregrounds her commitment to an ethical and evolving black aesthetics—an aesthetic that employs (and re-forms) the conventional rhyme royal stanza, even as it expands the subject of the traditional Western epic” (56). In Shockley’s reading of Sanchez’ multiplicity of narrative voice, she employs Mae Henderson’s brilliant analysis of polyvocality in the literary tradition of black women writers. In “Speaking In Tongues: Dialogues, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” Henderson illuminates the complex of mechanisms and positionalities that influence black women’s dialogic relationship to subjectivity:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women’s writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the ‘other(s),’ but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of black women’s writing is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or ‘generalized Other,’ but a dialogue with the aspects of ‘otherness’ within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the ‘Other’ of the Same, but also as the ‘other’ of the other(s) implies, as we shall see, a relationship of difference and identification with the “other(s). (Henderson 18)

Henderson’s remarks about the multiple positionalities, from which, black women speak, write, and process historiographical knowledge illustrates what she refers to as the “simultaneity of discourse” (17). Inspired by Barbara Smith’s work, this concept reminds readers about the axes of identity and standpoint, as well as their potential to convolute the possibilities of a monolithic black woman narrative voice. In Cheryl Wall’s Introduction to *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, she explores polyvocality in a similar vein to Shockley—by considering the ways that each work of a black woman writer and/or poet is positioned as part of a community of writing that has historically sought to

negotiate a black female subjectivity in the midst of operative silencing mechanisms. Wall “points out the untenability of the concept of a monolithic black female language” (5) and maps the body of literary criticism, which has been dedicated to engaging the “thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities in black women’s writing” (6).

Similarly, in “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words”, Hortense Spillers truncates a related notion: that black women’s sexuality requires a kind of translation and that the words that best characterize their physical experiences are inherently conscious of their own nuance, in relation to the larger, communal black woman’s narrative:

We would argue that the black female’s sexuality in feminist and patriarchist discourse is paradigmatic of her status in the universe of symbol-making so that our grasp of one compliments clarity in the other . . . To state the problem metaphorically, the black woman must translate the female vocalist’s gestures in an apposite structure of terms that will articulate both her kinship to other women and the particular nuances of her own experience. (88)

I have found great utility in black feminist literary criticism’s language and analysis of black women’s narratives. In rethinking the idea of a tradition, Wall, Shockley, Spillers, and Henderson have assisted me as I have cultivated a theoretical framework that cushions, projects on, reflects, and illuminates the sexual narratives of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez, as well as their implicit resistance to the politics of dissemblance. When reading an Ntozake Shange poem, we are not simply reading Ntozake Shange’s words; the same can be applied be applied to Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, as well as their respective bodies of work. Their words are bridges, connecting historical moments and the bodies who have occupied certain spaces to a creative vein where metaphor, hyperbole, repetition, and black talk do the literary

labor. Their Black Arts and Post-Black Arts poems can be envisaged as constellations of historical references. The poems require imaginative and dynamic processing from readers, but are tremendously valuable in their ability to illuminate less obvious connections between the landscapes of our cultural memory and the possibilities of our foresight.

In the next and final chapter, I intend to stay significantly closer to the Post-Black Arts poetry of Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni while discussing black women's sexual politics. I will explore the highly debated and contested relationship between the sexual and the social—cultivating a well-rounded image of black women's sexual subjectivity, on the line. The historical will serve this discussion greatly, as I will examine how the very nature of black women's relationship to the sexual has evolved and been mediated by black women themselves.

Chapter 4

Freakdom: Black Women's Sexuality on the Line

Black women in the United States have endured a long, laborious, and complex relationship with sex, sexual desire, and sexual subjectivities. The history of the transatlantic chattel slave trade contributes greatly to this historical narrative, in which, black women identify ways to withstand interacting axes of the colonial gaze and systemic surveillance apparatuses. Of the systemic surveillance of black women's bodily movement, regulating their sexual possibilities is one of the primal objectives. In my earlier discussion about Hine's culture of dissemblance, this research attempted to complicate ways, in which, sexual silences result in paradoxical spaces where black women can facilitate sexual subjectivities; however, the question remains—what are those sexual and agentic possibilities?

As black women's sexuality continues to be pathologized, stereotypes such as the mammy, jezebel, welfare queen, strongblackwoman (Morgan 87) and the "Hottentot Venus" have amassed an identifiable sociopolitical currency in the United States. With black women on the defensive, and dealing with the complexities of claiming simultaneous blackness and woman-ness, they have been tasked with negotiating ways to project a politics of chastity and conservatism—all the while, addressing their identity as sexual beings. With deleterious stereotypes and tropes that are cemented in, not only, a white, masculinist psyche, but also physical, hegemonic institutions, how can black women assert sexual narratives in ways that resist dominant narratives—even when it is dangerous to do so? This question

undergirds the entirety of this research and I am not sure that in the final chapter, I have provided tangible answers; however, I feel confident knowing that the questions that have ascended from my interrogations can address and ultimately, complicate a scholarly conversation that has historically subsumed identical questions.

Theorizing “Freakdom”

This chapter title is inspired by a small network of references, which have influenced me greatly as I have considered black women’s relationships to the sexual, as well as the relationship of black woman poets who are interested in writing and sharing sexual narratives. I called this chapter, “Freakdom: Black Women’s Sexuality on the Line” in an attempt to pay homage to Sonia Sanchez’ “Haiku [*question from a young sister*]”, in which, the speaker prides herself in her public display of sexual subjectivity. “at least we up front/ about this freakdom. at least/ we let it all hang out” (55) completes the haiku and is powerful in its connection to the history of societal pressures for women – and women of color, in particular – to dissemble and hide their “freakdom.” As much as my feminism claims a lineage in Black Arts and Post-Black Arts consciousness, my feminism has also been nurtured by the hip-hop generation, in which, I have aged and remained inspired. Hip-Hop lyrics are laden with messages about black women’s proclivity for “freakdom”—many times, contradictory and demanding for women. As a member of the hip-hop generation, I have been encouraged to be a *woman* in the streets and a *freak* in the sheets, coaxed by messages like that of singer Adina Howard to “be a

freak until the day, until the dawn” and guided by hip-hop artists like Whodini, who advises listeners about ways to physically identify freaks who only, “come out at night.” These messages have empowered me to negotiate the ways I am a sexual black being in the world, but also, the risks that emerge from this very public dialogue. When I wrote “Black Women’s Sexuality on the Line”, I was making a three-tiered statement. Firstly, my intention was to allude to the risks and stakes that emerge for the state of black women’s sexuality when contextualized through the histories of sexual policing, shaming, and the perpetuation of reductive polarizations. Secondly, I was employing “on the line” as an idiom which refers to being on the phone. When individuals are “on the line” they are in communication with others, perhaps waiting for opportunities to contribute to the conversation. Lastly, I employed the phrase, “on the line” as an allusion to the literary tradition this work is inherently and fundamentally dependent on. The lines of poems, scholarly journals, and anthologies make this work possible and it has been my intention to stay as close “to the line”—the language and its form—as possible.

Rather than looking to the entire canon of scholarship regarding the history of sexuality, I have selected one text to illustrate the state of black women’s sexual subjectivity in the Post-Black Arts era. *Feminist Review’s Sexuality: A Reader* is a vast collection of writings about women’s sexual identities in the midst of public debate and dissension. Similarly, Carole S. Vance’s *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* served as a rich repository of insights by scholars and critics who are concerned about the genealogies of women’s sexuality. These texts, along with Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist*

Thought, elucidate much about the ways the academy has centered its focus on the relationship between women and the sexual. I intend to allow a selection of essays from these three collections to enter a conversation with one another and illustrate some of the theoretical frameworks that can be employed in the understanding of a politics of sexuality for black women. Lastly, Alan Richter's *The Language of Sexuality* is another notable text, which will impact the analysis this chapter hopes to map. *The Language of Sexuality* is a useful study of sexual language and emerges out of Richter's own work as an editor of an English dictionary. Richter's book has been a reminder that not only should the analytical energy of this chapter be directed at the theoretical mapping of black women's sexual subjectivities, but also toward the ways Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez' poetics center an interrogation of language—syntactical, structural, communicatively-silent and objective.

The Possibilities of the Erotic

In this chapter's focus on the landscapes of sexual identity and practice for black women poets, Audre Lorde's "Uses of The Erotic" and "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" will not be too far away. Lorde's conceptualization of "the erotic" is not explicitly sexual. Her positing of an inherent "erotic power" in women has been analyzed from a sexual perspective; however, it has tremendous value outside of that particular purview. Even as I am privileging the sexual narrative, a non-sexual reading of Audre Lorde's notion of the "erotic" proves to be necessary. Lorde understands the erotic, as she states, in several ways; the first being the providing of "power which comes from sharing deeply any

pursuit with another person" (56), which says something about the power of the collective, shared experience. Examining black women's writing as a tradition and identifiable community of creators can be helpful with Lorde's insistence on the shared experience. From a Lordean perspective, there is great power in black women poets writing their poetry with other resounding voices in mind, but also in the act of sharing with those who are not necessarily part of the published authority of voices. Lorde continues:

The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference . . . Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens in response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also open to the erotically satisfying experience . . . (56)

Lorde employs the language of bridges, crossings, and sharing, all of which reoccur linguistically and thematically throughout feminist discourse in order to, once again, make a statement about the ways the communal experience can allow for new visions of subjectivity. Her concluding thought about her capacity for joy being directly implicated in "erotically-satisfying experiences" is also connected to the notion that cultural production and even individual creation are intrinsically tied to the communal and the desirable. A sexualized reading of these ideas do illuminate new possibilities, not only for the reach of her language, but also for the ways we can consider the articulation of an erotic sexuality as a repository of power. I would argue that Lorde's "open and fearless underlining of [her] capacity for joy" (56) and the bravery required "to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge, without having to look away and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of

that exchange” as an allusion to the French notion of *jouissance*. It was in a Women’s & Gender studies undergraduate seminar about Audre Lorde that I was initially introduced to this concept. There is no literal French to English translation of *jouissance* but in the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, *jouissance* is understood as pleasure, joy and enjoyment, excessively overwhelming, yet retaining its feelings of satisfaction. *Jouissance* also refers to the apex of the sexual orgasm. French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous has adopted *jouissance* in her analysis of women’s relationship to the coital, the carnal and the sexually-erotic, characterizing *jouissance* as an ineffable constellation of pleasure, but also as complex source of interior, creative power for women. Cixous’ analysis of *jouissance* sounds very Lordean in nature. My connections here reveal the psychoanalytic extension of Audre Lorde’s analysis about pleasure and the metaphysical, but more importantly the constraints and disruptions of language. I do not intend to assert that Audre Lorde’s “Uses of The Erotic” is a text entirely about women’s sexual subjectivity, as she has explicitly claimed that it is more than that. However, I would simply like to acknowledge that her analysis of erotic power can be useful for projects like mine, that focus on the spaces of intersection between desire and the ability to engage those desires – sexual and otherwise.

Black Women Poets on Sex Policing

In the very beginning of this research project, I employed the voice of June Jordan, a poet, essayist, and activist whose literary work runs through the same bloodline as that of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez. June Jordan is one of the most

widely recognized poets of the 20th century and her essay, “A Couple of Words on Behalf of Sex (Itself)” was an illuminating burgeoning point for the development of this thesis. Jordan’s observations of “media sex police: the inexhaustible reality of sex-be-damned” (59) is implicit with questions about the place of sexuality, sexual desire, sexual voice in the mainstream public consciousness. When Jordan speaks about sex policing, she is referencing a particular rhetoric of concern with the ways individuals exist as sexual beings in the world.

Jordan pegs the media as a responsible participant in this social suppression—and in some spaces, an outright rejection—but ideology does not begin at the stage of media proliferation. Media outlets are simply a set of arms of the reciprocal communicative operation, responsible for the sharing of valuable and qualified information. Jordan is also calling out individuals within her community who police sex and sexuality. Sex policing manifests as homophobia, sex and body shaming, and the upholding of rigid and archaic sexual constructs. Editors of Black Male/Female Relationships Nathan and Julia Hare’s harmful comments perpetuating the notion of homosexuality as deviant and a “product largely of European society” (64) are an embodiment of the policing and bigoted absurdities that have historically resounded within black discourse:

Just as those black persons who choose to dissidentify with their race and long to alter their skin color and facial features to approximate that of the white race may be found to suffer a racial identity crisis, the homosexual individual who disidentifies with his/her body to the point of subjecting to the surgery of sex-change operations similarly suffers a gender identity confusion to say the least. (10)

This passage illustrates the policing of sexuality by black intellectuals, as well as the juxtaposition of racial identity politics and sexual identity politics. In addition to

establishing a connection between the racial and sexual, the Hare's have also confused homosexuality and transexuality, and their comments are incredibly transphobic in nature. Cheryl Clarke writes about black people's homophobia in "The Failure To Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" (published in Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*) and her challenging of black intellectuals and their privileging of heterosexuality are important critiques—particularly in Black Arts and Post-Black Arts moments. "It is ironic 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" (199). Clarke's observations of homophobia as a form of sex policing provide context for the possibilities of Jordan's assessments.

The notion of a sex police is quite ironic in nature and alludes to the institutional police state, which is responsible for the protection of its inhabiting citizens. This institution is powerful; it punishes, regulates, maintains order, and uses the dialogics of benevolent service, community, and patriotism. What would a formal and institutional sex police force look like? Jordan is asserting the presence of a more covert, yet hegemonic and ideological policing of sexuality that exists under the guise of benevolent conservatism, infiltration of the United States school system by way of censorship, hyperbolic propaganda, and misinformation, as well as the insistence on cultures of shame which are used to control behavior and perpetuate norms. These are some of the ways, in which, sex was 'damned' in the

Post-Black Arts moment; yet, they remain boisterous in the rhetoric of today's sociopolitical discourse.

In the Introduction of Ntozake Shange's 1991 text, *The Love Space Demands: A Continuing Saga* she articulates a similar observation of what she names, "sex-death":

Now sex is not a Victorian metaphor for chastity. Sex-death has given birth to a whole new slew of epithets and lines meant to get somebody something they wanted, regardless to the threat to the integrity of language or love . . . Women who seek to fulfill their own sexual and sensual requisites are, again, sluts and loose . . . Our behaviors were just beginning to change when the epidemic began, moving closer to shame now than any time since I've been alive. Words and attitudes that undermine trust and liberty to feel are creeping back into the bedrooms and couches of our lives, so that we are always second-guessing each other . . . Sometimes, I couldn't fathom why any of us were doing and calling ourselves somebody's beloved. (Shange)

I include this passage to illustrate the sameness that exists in the comments of both black women writers and also the worlds they speak of. Shange's Introduction is a scathing critique of politics of sexuality that are functionally-dependent on the ways, in which, the brave are shamed. Shange's language is also much more abrasive than Jordan's. Where Jordan posits a rhetoric of "sex-be-damned," Shange is denouncing the rhetoric of "sex-death". Death is an eternal, perpetual silence, one that is not quite as fixed as that of damnation. Within the context of damnation, which connotes the presence of an orthodoxy—there can be room for repentance, as damnation is avoidable and can possibly be negotiated. Shange's proposition of "sex-death" rears a more rigid, inevitable silencing of sexual politics—one that can be stalled, but not escaped. Shange's reflections are important to this particular project because she identifies the social ramifications for women who choose to have sex freely and without consideration of the inconsiderately binary hegemonic

norms. Part of the ways black women have been pathologized in the United States, is, in fact, the sex policing that demonizes perceived-promiscuity as well as the projection of one's sexual desire outside of the marital construct. This is linked directly to Hine's process of dissemblance, in which, black women self-construct and self-represent themselves in ways that stereotypes leave very few possibilities for. Many black women in the Post-Black Arts moment donned a mask of asexuality, learning "to adopt a false identity that provided them some semblance of protection—of the self if not necessarily of their bodies—in their hostile and sexually predatory environment (Harris-Perry, 59). In Shange's reflections of "sex-death", she points to the ways language becomes a complicit tool in the project of sexual demonization; however as a bard and griot of sorts, Shange also recognizes the power inherent in the coming-to-language process for those who are able to see past covert encroachments on sociopolitical and sexual liberties.

Language and Sexuality

It is this relationship between the linguistic and the sexual that Alan Richter analyzes in *The Language of Sexuality*. Before expediting a record of the entities, Richter isolates both and identifies the role they have played in the social experience. He illustrates the fundamental nature of both entities by encouraging readers to imagine a social word without their existence. Richter acknowledges a primitive fascination with the English language because of what linguists have come to refer to as *natural gender*. "Natural gender means that sex and gender correspond and that inanimate objects have no gender or are neutral" (4). Despite this definition

and its anomalies, Richter asserts the need to “look behind language in order to grasp the ideology underlying it” (4). This is useful for those dissecting language in its many forms, in order to make substantial claims about the labor it does for the subject employing it, as well as the metaphysical space, in which, it is being employed. Within the context of this research, I have attempted to look at the fiery words of Post-Black Arts poets—inspecting verbiage and deliberate word choices—but also, past the words and onto the politics that forced the words onto the page in the first place. Richter writes:

Perhaps in the 1980’s in the West, since religion has lost much of its constrictive and repressive grip, sexuality and its expression is going through further liberalizing changes. In addition to historical examination of societies one could just as easily examine present-day primitive societies, for the wealth of anthropological data available simply adds to the argument for the existence of extreme variations on the theme of sexuality. (7)

Here, Richter is alluding to a cultural shift –the same cultural shift that contributed to the schism in Black Arts and Post-Black Arts politics. This is just another example of the ways critics should read beyond narrative words in order to identify where the social and political momentum begins. This research has already identified the social landscape, in which, Post-Black Arts poems emerge and adopt a politics of language. Richter’s brief but lucid analysis about the prevalence of thematic taboos answer questions about how silences are selective in their encroachment and—again—reflective of a social and cultural politics:

We need to look beyond the psychology of ego defense mechanisms, however, to understand the full scope of sexual repression. This involves taking up a sociological and anthropological viewpoint on the notion of taboo. The notion of taboo should be of some use in elucidating some of the more common themes that keep cropping up in the terminology of sexuality. One of the most general features of taboo is the existence of a boundary across which certain actions are not sanctioned by social custom. (16)

Richter's deployment of thematic taboos only reinforces the notion that in listening to the ways a work speaks to the social, its silences and erasures are equally worthy of interrogation. Is this not the fundamental goal of "Silences, Syntax, and Sex: Black Women Poets Moving Past a Culture of Dissemblance in the Post-Black Arts Movement"?—To interrogate the communicative sexual silences, as well as the flat-out repudiations of sexual silences by black women poets from 1975 to 1990?

A Reading of *For Colored Girls*

I consider Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf* to be one of the richest repositories of black women's lived experiences in the Post-Black Arts moment. I always find myself admonished by the words of different women, different segments and moments. Mostly, I've been consumed by the texts' reverberation—its ability to resonate with myself, a colored girl born in 1989, roughly fifteen years following its on-stage debut. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf* has girth and deep roots. It is a patchwork of narratives, simultaneously and intricately woven into one narrative that, Shange notes, is specifically for colored girls. In 2014, this choreopoem is a testament to black women writer's work, our labor, and the diverse personal genealogies of inspiration/influence we bring with us to the page. Shange brought with her hue symbolism, dance, music, more than subtle vestiges of Black Arts and Post-Black Arts Movement politics, street-slang, affect, sex-talk, and rage. Shange also introduced American audiences to the "choreopoem", a new form of expression that combines poetry, dance, and music. What makes the choreopoem

important are the ways it rejects traditional poetic form and storytelling by presenting an alternative that synthesizes multiple forms of art. Even before an analysis of Shange's content takes place, it is imperative to see her breaking of form as subversive. *For Colored Girls* has become the feminist juncture of these various ideas.

In order to fully understand my analysis of *For Colored Girls*, I think it is important to first, reposition Audre Lorde's theoretical frames at the center of this discussion about her notions of "the erotic" in relation to black women's poetic discourse around their bodies, their desire for sexual pleasure and autonomy, as well as their subjectivity. The choreopoem consists of several moments where readers are confronted with black female sexuality as it is related to a liberatory raced and gendered praxis. There are several questions that have shaped my reading of *For Colored Girls*, centering my focus on the conceptual intersection noted above. These are questions, which have helped me to examine this text along a complex and infinite continuum of literature that has been created by and for women of color. How does Ntozake Shange deploy and frame sexual themes throughout the choreopoem? Jacqueline Bobo understands black women to be cultural readers; What are the various readings of narrative in *For Colored Girls* and how do they resonate with what has been culturally and historically posited as the black female experience in America? Can *For Colored Girls* be considered a canonical text, also for colored boys or for colored people collectively?

Shange in *For Colored Girls* has managed the difficult task of fostering specificity, by naming a very particular raced, classed, and gendered experience—

while simultaneously, fostering a complex universality of experience. Shange's 'ladies' tell us their stories about being raped by men whom they have considered friends, losing their virginity in the back of a Buick, dealing with their man's infidelity, and negotiating sexual agency—on their own terms. These experiences are not confined to colored girls or even colored women, but Shange (a woman of color) employs other women of color to stand in and share what uniquely belongs to them. This complex question of specific/targeted vs. universal experience is one of the most important aspects of the text because it brings us back to a critical question. Who is Shange speaking on behalf of and to whom? Even I am compelled to answer: She is speaking for colored girls and to colored girls, but I am also well aware that the span of her influence and messages of consciousness are meant to disrupt the borders of color, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and geographic locale. Shange is speaking to colored girls, but with the hope that her discussion and literary offering would be overheard by the larger social world, which has tremendous bearing on the "historical and discursive circumstances" (Ludmer 83), that shape their experience.

Reading this text alongside Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women As Cultural Readers* enabled me to consider the cultural production of black women and how we—as an interpretive community—act as simultaneous producers and receivers of cultural messages. Texts like *For Colored Girls* are critical because they offer alternative histories and recover both, lost and stifled narratives. Bobo's scholarship is deeply informed by cultural and media studies, and she seems to have a predilection for personal narrative, a privileging of individual lived experiences.

This shared memory of “Lady in yellow” is potentially subversive because it is a departure from highly codified rhetoric of academe used to describe individual’s first sexual experiences. “Lady in yellow” gives audiences the details of this encounter where she “got drunk & cdnt figure out/ who’s hand was on [her] thigh/ but it didn’t matter”—minus the shame, embarrassment, and guilt which normally permeates these exchanges, as well as their resulting narratives (8). “Lady in yellow” is having an experience where she is the only young woman amidst five male cousins, being touched—even groped—without much of a care as to how “respectable” she is. Shange frames this historical and cultural trope as a moment for subversive, positive reinforcement—placing several colored girls in a conversation that lauds sexual experience (*even drunken sexual experience*) as what Cheryl Clarke in *After Mecca: Women Poets and The Black Arts Movement* calls “a necessary rite of passage – and not unpleasant” (102). “Lady in yellow” continues:

Bobby started lookin at me
 yeah
 he started looking at me real strange
 like I was a woman or something
 started talking real soft
 in the backseat of that ol buick
 WOW
 by daybreak
 I just cdnt stop grinnin (10)

By the end of this segment, readers have heard the entire sexual account of “Lady in yellow” and are made to feel like they have been part of the narrative, shared experience. “Lady in yellow” makes an explicit connection between the moment she gave up her virginity and the immediacy of an identifiable, burgeoning womanhood. In thinking about the ways that “womanhood” has been socially constructed and

passed on in oral traditions, the “loss” of a woman’s virginity has signaled ascension into “true” womanhood. Before a sexual experience, women are not referred to as “women”; they are “young women”, “girls,” and even, “young ladies”. Aside from the ways language is implicated in the connection between womanhood and the sexual coming-of-age, there is the sense that “lady in yellow” is endowed with new ways of seeing, experiencing, being in her body. The ways “lady in yellow” describes this difference, it is as if there is a physical difference in her appearance that warrants interrogation. This can be read as a form of sexual subjectivity, as well as a sexual self-actualization. Bobby’s looking at her “real strange” illustrates the power of the male gaze in forcing female sexual subjectivity into consciousness and reinforces the notion that it is only through men’s physical presence (and coital encounters) do women come to articulate themselves as sexual, agentic beings.

Another powerful representational risk is the choreopoem sequence delivered by the ladies in purple, red and blue, mapping out the complexities of “latent rapist bravado”, as well as their “being left with the scars” (19). This is one of the most salient segments of Shange’s choreopoem because of the added nuance of examining the sometimes-elusive borders between friend and rapist. Shange is speaking directly about a history of women who have been sexually-abused by men whom they have trusted, invited into their homes, and possibly had an intimate relationship with—none of these things, of course, being justifiable invitations to be raped. Shange’s striking deconstruction of the historical narrative, “rapist as stranger” is essential to her own task of dispelling myths that rationalize violence against women of color, as well as her reminding audiences that the narratives of

colored girls are not always rainbows, gardenias, and gospel. Shange posits the “rapist as friend” narrative as a counter to the pathologizing of black women that occurs when they are violated sexually by men, about whom, they should have known better:

but if you have been seen in public wit him
danced one dance
kissed him good-bye lightly
wit closed mouth
pressin charges will be as hard as keeping yr legs closed
while five fools run a train on you (18)

This sequence reveals the anxieties that victims of rape face when asserting the very language of their attacks and navigating victim-blaming rhetoric that makes women responsible for their being targeted in the first place. This rhetoric becomes complicated when applied to the narratives of black women—who are already pathologized for their “inherent” hypersexuality, vulgarity, and illicitness. Keeping Hine’s “Rape And The Inner Lives of Black Women In The Middle West” close by, we can see why dissemblance looks attractive to black women who are presumed sexually-deviant by default. This scene is also crucial to the narrative trajectory of *For Colored Girls* because it illustrates several of the many problems with societal victim-blaming and empowers women to hold their assailants accountable for their deplorable actions—all the while, courageously propelling the issue of sexual violence to the political forefront. In the Introduction to *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, editor Carole S. Vance discussed sexual violence as part of the rhetoric about black women’s sexuality in the public domain. She writes:

Beyond the actual physical or psychological harm done to victims of sexual violence, the threat of sexual attack served as a powerful reminder of male privilege, constraining women's movement and behavior. The cultural mythology

surrounding sexual voice provided a unique and powerful route for it to work its way into the heart of female desire. (3)

Vance concludes her comments with an allusion to the processes of dissemblance against the backdrop of a schism between the public sphere and private sphere. “If female sexual desire triggers male attack, it cannot be freely or spontaneously shown, either in public or in private” (3). Shange shatters that notion by making this sequence a shared, simultaneous recollection, rather than a monologue from one, singular woman. The notion of a shared ownership over this rape narrative asserts a question about voice and collaborative speech acts. What contributes to a universal rape narrative and how does Shange refute the silencing techniques of dialectics of shame?

Shange’s literary and narrative decisions in *For Colored Girls* serve as evidence of black women’s challenging and consciousness-raising cultural production. When placed in conversation with other poetry written by black women during the Post-Black Arts period (1975-1990), this text begins to reveal a great deal about the ways black women’s literature, scholarship, and social activism bears witness to a history of taking collective action in the face of continual victimization and black women’s articulation of voice.

Giovanni and Sexual Objectification

Nikki Giovanni was selected as part of this research project because of her poetic topicality and sharp use of language. Giovanni’s poetry is known to be controversial, as she was aligned in the rhetoric of Black Arts politics, decrying misogyny from within the movement and negotiating her blackness and woman-

ness at the page. There are several poems, which illustrate a sexual politics and consciousness. Giovanni's poetry skillfully conjures images, forces us to rethink the personal and the political—all the while remaining tactile and accessible. In "Woman Poem," Giovanni forces the woman speaker to work out the intricately-latticed frustrations that are imbedded in the very experience of being a woman in the world. The speaker moves us past the frustrations of not having enough food to wishing she "knew how it would feel to be free" (71)—a reference to singer Billy Taylor's 1963 hit, "I Wish I Knew," which became one of the major anthems of the Civil Rights Movement. By the third stanza, sex becomes a topic of dissension and Giovanni allows the speaker to engage the many contradictions inherent in asserting one's sexual subjectivity:

it's a sex object if you're pretty
 and no love
 or love and no sex if you're fat
 get back fat black woman be a mother
 grandmother strong thing but not woman
 man seeker dick eater sweat getter
 fuck needing love seeking woman (71)

Giovanni's speaker refers to "it" throughout the entire poem, inviting readers to subjectively analyze and ponder the possibilities of what "it" could be. "It" is elusive and conjures the same kind of discomfort and frustration that the speaker identifies as the root of her speech. Giovanni's employing of "it" is a direct reference to black womanhood. "It" is black womanhood. This would make sense, given the title of the poem as well as the linguistic difficulties of naming and articulating black women's experiences. It almost becomes easier to refer to black womanhood as "it"; so, Giovanni continues. The speaker brings several conversations to the forefront of her

statements, calling on the contradictions inherent in body image standards for women and black women in particular. When women meet the social, cultural, and historical expectations of “prettiness,” which tends to be thin, white, or having European-features, having been formally-educated they are objectified and treated as trophies by those whom they are in relationships with. Giovanni’s speaker conversely critiques the notion that women, when deemed “fat”, receive “no love and no sex” (71). There is a history connected to this analysis, one that de-sexualizes black, obese (and sometimes, just average weight) bodies that do not fit hegemonic notions of beauty. This complicates the notion of black women’s hypersexuality and falls within the purview of the archetypal “mammy”, who exists as a fragmented being, devoid of sexual identity. The speaker encourages black women to “be a mother/grandmother strong thing” instead of being “fat black” and woman. This reads as more of a cynical warning—one that could, perhaps, only be articulated by an individual who has lived the experience herself. The closing lines of this poem “man seeker dick eater sweat getter/ fuck needing love seeking woman” offer validation of black women’s sexual possibilities, while employing “dirty words” to make a statement about the sensory-sexual experience. These words imply an active longing and doing on part of the black woman, as well the simultaneity implicit in the articulation of a sexual politics.

Sonia Sanchez and Black Heterosexual Partnership

Sonia Sanchez’ “Wounded In The House of A Friend: Set No: 1” is a rich landscaping of a black woman speaker’s locating her voice in the midst of several

personal frustrations. Of the four parts this work contains, I have only used one to illustrate how black women's sexual subjectivity has been written into the consciousness of the Post-Black Arts moment. It is in this work that we can identify a sharp political consciousness and experimentation with poetic form that leaves readers mystified by the poem's richness. I would not label this a poem "about" sex; however, Sanchez captures and communicates some of the nuances implicit in black women's relation to the possibilities of partnership. "Set No: 1" is largely about wounded love, deceit, and betrayal. Sex narratives are woven intricately into the poetry and work to reveal the nuances of marital and non-marital sex, as well as the inner thoughts of an unfaithful black man and a black woman struggling to cope with infidelity by "*becom[ing] the other woman*" (88). In the very beginning, there is an epigraph from Frantz Fanon, which introduces the ensuing drama:

I have only one solution: to rise
above this absurd drama that others
have staged around me. (81)

This work illustrates the rising above the circumstantial drama that has made a bed in her bedroom, ultimately affecting the sexual relationship between her and her husband. There are two speakers/voices in "Wounded In The House of A Friend: Set No: 1." These two voices make space for the interrogation of two very specific archetypes that have run rampant throughout the literary narratives and oral narratives, which permeate the black community and its borders. These tropes are the betrayed black woman, otherwise known as a woman-scorned and even the "angryblackwoman/madblackwoman", (Morgan 119) and the deceitful black man (a more polite way of invoking the language of "aint-shit niggas" using contemporary

black vernacular). The deceitful man is a racialized extension of a culture of white machismo, “sowing his royal oats”, benevolent in his sexism and sexually-pathologizing his wife, for whom, “it’s not normal to fuck as much as” [she does] (88). Italics denote the wife’s voice and the husband’s voice is not italicized. For a significant portion of the poem, they do not speak to one another. There is, in fact, no dialogue between the married couple until the woman confronts her husband, confronting him about several of his extramarital affairs. The man is explicit about his affairs, answering all but a few of his wife’s questions. The dialogue ends, and the wife asks, “can I pull my bones together while skeletons come out of my head” (85), which illustrates the wife’s attempt to come to terms with the state of her marriage and the resulting disappointment. This disappointment develops into rage/fury as the poem nears its end and Sanchez charges her words in ways that signify this emotional shifting. Early in the poem, the wife’s speech is sensual and with undertones of sexual “readiness”, we see her prepare herself physically and emotionally for sex with her husband:

i am preparing for him to come home. i have exercised. soaked in the tub. scrubbed my body. oiled myself down. what a beautiful day it’s been . . . lounging inside my head. i am walking up this hill. the day is green. all green. even the sky. i start to run down the hill and i take wing and begin to fly and the currents turn me upside down and i become young again childlike again. ready to participate in all children’s games. (85)

Early in “Wounded In The House of A Friend: Set No: 1”, we feel the ease with, which, the woman is responding to her husband’s infidelities. Sanchez allows us to see into her private thoughts as she processes herself, doing herself up for his return home and the hope of “childlike”, uninhibited sex. The wife’s movement into

rage/fury comes after she is confronted by her husband, who believes they are having too much sex since his revelations:

She's fucking my brains out . . . What is wrong with her? For one whole month she's turned to me every nite. Climbed on top of me. Put my dick inside her and become beautiful. Almost birdlike . . . But my God. Every night. She's fucking my brains out. I can hardly see the morning and I'm beginning to hate the nite. (85)

Sanchez has allowed the husband to feel contempt and disgust towards his wife for coaxing him into sex, for being "hypersexual" and for "getting out of hand" (87). The confrontation ends with the pathologizing of the wife's implied emotional response. He asks if she is having a nervous breakdown, but Sanchez is slowly interrogating the wife's subjectivity, her coming to be an active participant in their sexual partnership:

honey. it's too much you know.
What?
 all this sex. it's getting so i can't concentrate.
Where? . . .
 in bed. i can't turn over and you're there
 lips open. smiling. all revved up.
Aren't you horny too?
 yes. but enough's enough. you're my wife. it's
 not normal to fuck as much as you do.
No?
 it's not, well, nice to hear you talk to way
 you talk when we're making love.
No?
 can't we go back a little, go back to our
 normal life when you just wanted to sleep at
 nite and make love every now and then? like me.
No.
 what's wrong with you. Are you having a nervous
 breakdown or something?
No. (88)

Sanchez characterizes this shift into agency and subjectivity, firstly, by changing the linguistic capitalization of their respective speeches. Before this confrontation, Sanchez used only a few capital letters in the speech of the wife, leaving her with lowercased, informal attempts to assert herself onto the page, and in her sexual life. During this confrontation, the husband's voice is only written in lowercase letters. The wife, whose voice remains italicized, is marked by the abrupt use of capital letters and short retorts. After asking, "*if I become the/other woman will I be/loved like you loved her*" (88) again, in reflection of her positionality amidst her experiences, Sanchez constructs an uninterrupted stream of consciousness, in which, the wife negotiates the constellation of emotions that her relationship has been imbued with:

I know what I'll do now. i'll go outside and give it away. Since he doesn't really want me. My love. My body. When we make love his lips swell up. His legs and arms hurt. He coughs. Drinks water. Develops a strain at his butt-hole. Yeah. What to do now. Go outside and give it away. Pussy. Sweet. Black pussy. For sale. Wholesale pussy. Right here. Sweet black pussy. Hello there Mr. Mailman . . . You want a doughnut a cookie some cereal some sweet black pussy? . . . Mr. Federal Express Man. Cmon over here. Let me Fed Ex you and anyone else some Sweet Funky Pure Smelling Black Pussy. hee hee heee. (89)

Sanchez continues to write her way to the conclusion of "Set No: 1," with this dramatic crystallization of the wife's agentic voice. She arrives at a specific vocal subjectivity, one that reflects the diapason of rage, fury, black women's disappointment and sexual frustration. The speaker's giving away of her "*sweet black pussy*" is a response to the betrayal by her spouse and illustrates her desire for sexual compatibility, as well as emotional respect. The speaker wanted to be viewed as a whole being, complex in her identity—yet desirable. Sanchez rhetoric in "Wounded In The House of A Friend: Set No: 1" forces us to think about the ways

black women's sexuality is shaped, acted upon, and molded by the social relationships, in which, they engage. This work breaks many silences beginning with the airing of dirty laundry within black romantic relationships, as well as catapults sexual desire, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction into the sphere of discourse. Giovanni's "Woman Poem" and Shange's *For Colored Girls* work to reveal similar realities about a complex black womanhood told from the perspective of black women themselves. The three selected works articulate a diverse black woman's narrative, while engaging in a discussion about the ways black women's sexuality was "on the line" and at risk for objectification, violence, and lastly, being misunderstood. There is an unabashed and lucid focus on the sexual experiences of black women in the world in these three poems and together, they demonstrate the power of black women's truth telling, "even at the risk of it being bruised or misunderstood" (Lorde 40).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Coming Into My Own Language

Audre Lorde's modes for understanding the politics of silence, language, and transformation are directly linked to the creative lineage of the three noted black women poets and their necessity to produce work that breaks collective silencing of sexual desire. The works of Shange, Giovanni, and Sanchez illustrate the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between one's desire for consciousness and the consciousness of one's desire. Exploring black women's poetics of sexuality, desire, and pleasure in the Post-Black Arts moment has proven to be a valuable and inherently complex research project. In considering the labor that all writing does—inside and outside, as well as on the “line” of the academy—my research has answered several critical questions about how the articulation of language and excavation of one's history can have significant bearing on one's physical experience and movement from object to subject. Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez are, in fact, part of an abundant tradition of black women poets whose literary production has given critics and readers the language to explore the relationship between silences, semantics, and sex. Darlene Clarke Hine's theorizing of black women's dissemblance has offered a valuable, historical analysis about the deleterious nature of archaic tropes and stereotypes. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in The Middle West” is a landmark text that resonates greatly for scholars seeking to make connections between black women's cultural behavior at a time when they were not expected to be able to cultivate the agency to survive. This text is also important because it begins a discussion, to which, Barbara Smith, Audre

Lorde, Akasha Gloria Hull and so many other black women writers ultimately, contribute. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in The Middle West” was published and made waves in the scholarly community in 1989. I was also born in 1989. I disclose this about myself, not just to write myself into this work, but to illustrate the ways “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” has amassed an intergenerational audience and retained its consciousness-raising possibilities more than twenty-five years after Hine’s inception.

Concluding this research project calls on the act on considering how Post-Black Arts poetics resonate with the feminist community and its scholarship in the 21st century. In the age of the proliferation of terms like “post-feminism”, “post-racial” and “post-black”—all of which began to controversially resound after 1990—scholars are consistently having to answer to claims that “feminism is dead” and that “racism is no longer”. Yet, at the time this research was being conducted, the great cultural theorist Stuart Hall passed away, George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of an unarmed Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin, feminists celebrated the 80th’s birthday of Audre Lorde by offering their tools of knowledge production to bear witness to her legacy, and rap pop-star Nikki Minaj received public backlash after releasing a promotional photo corresponding to her new single, entitled “Lookin’ Ass Nigga.” The photo included the iconic image of Black Nationalist Malcolm X with a rifle in his hand, looking out of a window and was inscribed with the words “Lookin’ Ass Nigga” to the left of his head. I do not intend to enter a debate about the dialectics of a “post”-movement, but rather claim that as a young, black, feminist, and poet, who owes her tutelage to both the academy and the down-

home, the politics of race, gender, and sexual respectability are very much a part of the ways, in which, my physical experience is negotiated.

Assertions of a diverse sexual subjectivity in the midst of Post-Black Arts poetics have filled the historiographical gaps in black women's narrative telling; however, a question I have been considering since the earliest stages of this research project how feminists and young scholars, like myself, are beneficiaries of Black Arts and Post-Black Arts politics. In other words, what of these words have I inherited and to what words and to whom do I have a particular responsibility? Throughout "Silences, Syntax, and Sex: Black Women Poets Moving Past a Culture of Dissemblance in the Post-Black Arts Movement," I have examined the contentious nature of a definitive, theoretical, "black women's writing tradition," but writers like Akasha Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, Claudia Tate, and Deborah McDowell leave me no choice but to claim black women's literary tradition as ancestral.

To deny a black feminist literary tradition would be to displace works like Samiya Bashir's "Clitigation", Lenelle Moise's "kissed there myself," and Joan Morgan's *When Chicken-Heads Come Home To Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*—all three being powerful, contemporary invocations of a feminist politics that has ideological and linguistic roots in this literary/narrative tradition. Black women writers and poets insist on the possibilities of a tangible tradition and lineage in order to participate ambidextrously in the representation of ourselves. Giovanni, Sanchez, and Shange's poetics have left indelible impressions on the black feminist literary project, mapping nuanced ways of understanding standpoint, and collective identity in the midst of growing rhetoric of the individual.

This research project has been tasked with offering a unique contribution to feminist scholarship, which is its own genre, community, and constellation of theoretical attempts to assert language. In my contribution, I have privileged the works and voices of black women writers of the late 20th century, while examining the politics of the relationship of the self to one's scholarship. In the Introduction of this work, I position myself and remain wedded to the notion that my doing this discursive work not only establishes my own "motherline" as Susan Willis would call it, but my own "coming to voice" and informed, reliant autonomy. In closing, Audre Lorde's "To the Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to be a Woman" in *Our Dead Behind Us* is fiercely appropriate. The movement of this four-part poem begins with an account of her birthing "in the gut of Blackness/from between my mother's particular thighs" (7) and ends with her scathing promise to self:

I cannot recall the words of my first poem
 but I remember a promise
 I made my pen
 never to leave it
 lying
 in somebody else's blood. (7)

Throughout this work, I have lamented the difficulties inherent in the process of writing about black women's identity and assertions of subjectivity; however, the conjuring of critical questions, as well as theoretical analysis, have revealed the possibilities of black feminist reflection and writing today.

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