

©2021

Alexandria Naima Smith

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

AFREKETE'S ROOM: MAPPING THE SHAPE OF SPACE AND NARRATIVE IN  
BLACK QUEER WOMEN'S WRITING

By

ALEXANDRIA NAIMA SMITH

A dissertation submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Written under the direction of

Brittney Cooper

And Approved by

---

---

---

---

---

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2021

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*Afrekete's Room: Mapping the Shape of Space and Narrative in Black Queer Women's Writing*

by ALEXANDRIA NAIMA SMITH

Dissertation Director:  
Brittney Cooper

There is a rich body of scholarship on Black women's fiction and poetry that analyzes its engagements with aesthetic forms as well as the themes of memory and history.

Likewise, Black women's memoir and autobiography have been read for their illustrations of Black feminist politics, historical narratives, and intellectual histories.

However, less attention has been paid to the specific role of embodiment in the liminal genres of Black queer hybrid memoir texts, including semi-autobiographical fiction and poetry, book-length memoir essay texts, and forms like Audre Lorde's biomythography.

My dissertation *Afrekete's Room: Mapping the Shape of Space and Narrative in Black Queer Women's Writing* intervenes in this conversation to argue that within these texts, Black queer women and trans people mediate and narrate embodied experiences in order to position Black queer bodies as potential sites of knowledge production about gender, blackness, erotics, and subjectivity.

My project develops the analytic of sensual worldmaking, a term derived in part from Amber Musser's deployment of 'sensation' and M. NourbeSe Philip's concept of s/place. Musser uses sensation as a frame for drawing attention to the physical and affective impressions of embodied experience as well as the differential operations of

power on different subjects, while s/place names the mutual imbrication of external land-based geographies and fleshy, internal, corporeal landscapes in which Black women's bodies in the Americas are positioned. I draw these and other black feminist frameworks together to name sensual worldmaking as a set of strategies in which Black queer women and trans people's self-representative writing uses embodied intimacies, memories, and other sensuous experiences to generate critical knowledge.

Chapter one theorizes sensual worldmaking through tracing a Black feminist geography of Audre Lorde's embodied experiences in *Zami: a New Spelling of My Name* (1982). I illustrate how queer corporeal landscapes and Caribbean diasporic social spaces are entwined in Lorde's narration of moments of erotic intimacy and desire with herself, her mother, and Afrekete. Chapter two argues that Jamaican author Michelle Cliff's strategic manipulation of self-referential narratives in her memoir *Claiming an Identity They Taught me to Despise* (1980) facilitated her Black, lesbian, and feminist critiques of colonialism and imperialism. This chapter confronts Cliff's uneasiness with her work's characterization, by some of her contemporaries, as autobiographical and therefore depoliticized by re-centering the political significance of her narrative and discursive strategies.

In chapter three, I examine Dionne Brand's narrative reflections on Operation Urgent Fury, the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada during the Grenada Revolution, across literary forms, especially the memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) and the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996). I argue that Brand's use of multiple temporal orientations and grammatical persons to narrate embodied memories with varying degrees of coherence and fragmentation allows her to situate her Black lesbian body and its sensations of pain, disorientation, and shock as in a kind of continuous relationship with a larger Black diasporic community. Finally, in chapter four I discuss Nigerian-American author Akwaeke Emezi as a

contemporary literary figure who uses autobiographical fiction and digital media sites such as Instagram and Twitter as technologies of queer self-representation. This chapter argues that Emezi's 2018 autobiographical novel *Freshwater* proposes gendered embodiment as problematic for its protagonist Ada, and that human embodiment is itself not necessarily reconcilable for subjects within Igbo cosmology. As a work of Black queer diaspora studies, *Afrekete's Room* contributes a crucial focus on embodied knowledge production within Black queer feminist literary and cultural studies.

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation and the forms of personal and intellectual development which preceded it were shaped by a number of educational institutions: Spelman College, where I completed my undergraduate studies and was introduced to Black feminist praxis; Eugene Lang College at The New School, where I completed a semester of domestic exchange study and became acquainted with the New York metro area where this dissertation was ultimately completed; and the University of Ghana at Legon, where the Accra-based program of the School for International Training I participated in as a college junior is based. I am grateful to many institutions and spaces at Rutgers University which contributed to my time as a graduate student and positively impacted the journey towards this completed dissertation. These sites include the Departments of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, the Departments of English and Comparative Literature, the GradFund office in the School of Graduate Studies, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, the Rutgers Center for Critical Caribbean Studies, the Decoloniality Working Group, the Graduate Student Association, and the Rutgers Graduate Union.

This research was funded by a Rutgers Presidential Diversity Fellowship, grants from the Rutgers Center for African Studies and the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, a Teaching Assistantship with the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, a Graduate Assistantship with the GradFund office, a fellowship with the Center for Black, Brown, and Queer Studies (BBQ+). A version of chapter two was awarded the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars Graduate Student Essay Contest prize.

A version of chapter two has been accepted for inclusion in *New Criticism and Pedagogical Directions for Contemporary Black Women Writers*, a collection edited by LaToya Jefferson-James and forthcoming with Lexington Books. A version of chapter three is currently (as of March 31, 2021) under review for inclusion in a special issue of *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, edited by Bek Orr.

Special thanks are due to the many professors, administrators, and colleagues who I have met and interacted with in my time at Rutgers. These folks include Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, Ethel Brooks, Sylvia Chan-Malik, Ed Cohen, Marisa Fuentes, Mary Gossy, Maya Mikdashi, Jasbir Puar, Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, Kyla Schuller, Mary Trigg, Deb Vargas, Allan Punzalan Isaac, Carter Mathes, Kevon Rhiney, Stéphane Robolin, Evie Shockley, Ousseina Alidou, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Yolanda M. Martínez-San Miguel. Rutgers runs because of wonderful administrators, including Monique Gregory-McKinney, Feronda Orders, Collen Lord, Quiyana Butler, and Suzy Keifer, among others. I was given wonderful funding advice and professional guidance by Teresa M. Delcorso-Ellman, who I am sincerely grateful to have worked with. Bert Ashe, a family friend and Professor of English, offered encouragement and practical advice throughout this process.

I am particularly indebted to the members of my dissertation committee. Brittney Cooper, my chair, has consistently given thoughtful and insightful advice and has always advocated for me. Carlos Decena, my first chair, carefully guided me through the initial stages of this project. Michelle Stephens took me on as a student from outside of her home department and was consistently able to give rapid, extremely generative feedback throughout her tenure as Chair of the English department and Dean of the Humanities.

Abena Busia first inspired me to choose Rutgers and has generously shared her stories, her home, and her networks. Jafari Allen was present at the very beginning of this project, as the professor of the first queer studies course I took as an undergraduate student, as well as at its very end, as my external reader. My work could not have taken the shape it has without this group of Black, Caribbean, feminist, queer, and extremely generous readers.

My writing, thinking, and living has been supported by a group of wonderful peers and colleagues who have become dear friends. I am honored to have shared scholarly space with brilliant and caring Black women and femmes: Ashleigh, Mahaliah, Rosemary, Amadi, Jomaira, Ariel, María Elizabeth, and Camila. I was grateful to share the WGSS department with Al, Katy, Carolina, JB, Louise, Tyler, Jenny, Jill, and Sarah. Elsewhere in this big university I met other wonderful thinkers and beloved pals, including Alex and Man. With Isabel I have shared intellectual kinship, a neighborhood, many car rides, and life-sustaining intimacy. Beyond Rutgers, I built, maintained, and was buoyed in community by Naimah, Maya, Britt, Chris, and Ono. Jordan and Brian are the queer Geminis who have taught and shown me the most about friendship. Colin has been a gift to my life. And Kevin has been my closest and most loving companion for the past ten years.

This work grows from the foundation given to me by my family. My parents gave me the world by teaching me to read and write, and have always given their support, even from afar. My siblings—Tomika, Jon, Yanni, and TJ—anchor me with love and keep me floating with laughter. My niece Tamia, and the Z Twin nibbling/cousins, Zack and Zaylee, embody love in their being. Grandma, Grandpa, and Granddaddy James are my



ancestral lights. Grandma Cleo and Aunty Lisa embody my home in the South. Auntee Juanita's love is the thing at the center of the world I want to create.

The bulk of this dissertation was researched and written within a few physical locations: Alexander Library, Hidden Grounds, Crema, and my Duncan Avenue apartment.

The thanks that I have written here do not come close to capturing my gratitude for these people who have shaped my life and this process. Beyond the names listed here, I have benefitted from an extended chorus of support: family friends, members of my parents' church, friends of friends, partners of friends, and community in the broadest sense.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	v
The Foyer: Introducing <i>Afrekete's Room</i>	1
Pounding Spice: <i>Zami's</i> Black Feminist Geography	32
Authoring Claims: Critique, Autobiography, and Imagination in Michelle Cliff's <i>Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise</i>	67
Being in the Black Queer Diaspora: Archiving Orientation and Embodiment in <i>A Map to the Door of No Return</i>	102
Vessel of the Spirit: Transcorporeality in Akwaeke Emezi's <i>Freshwater</i>	137
Conclusion	173

### The Foyer: Introducing *Afrekete's Room*

“So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home; of fresh-baked bread; of newly grated coconut stewed with spice (we never called it cinnamon), nutmeg, and bay leaf from the tree (not from the bottle). Violence can also become embodied, that violation of sex and spirit. Assimilation is another kind of violation that can be embodied, one’s own as well as others.”

- *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander, 277

M. Jacqui Alexander, like other Black feminists throughout the African diaspora, names the body as both a site and a vehicle of memory, violence, and attempted social integration. The scents and memories of home narrated in the epigraph give the reader cues of geographic and social positioning: home is a place where coconut, cinnamon, nutmeg, and bay leaves are locally grown and available. Home is in a culinary landscape where these fragrant flavors are combined over fire, such that their simmering remains an olfactory signal of home. Home, for Alexander, is Trinidad, despite the decades of exile which she details in the theoretical, autobiographical, and ethnographic registers of the essays collected in *Pedagogies of Crossing*. Exile is one of the forms of embodied violence Alexander names, as is the twin violence of enforced or coerced adaptation of dominant norms and practices. This passage’s positioning of the body, the embodied sensations of smell and taste, and the theorizations of power dynamics in relation to the body set the stage for the kinds of analysis which make up *Afrekete's Room*.

In many ways, the journey to this dissertation began with reading Audre Lorde as a Comparative Women’s Studies major at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, is Lorde’s canonical poetic and mythological memoir which spans the historical period from her parent’s immigration from Barbados and Grenada to the United States in the years before her birth in 1934, until Lorde’s very early twenties. With this text Lorde inaugurates biomythography as a new genre, one which incorporates

elements of biography, mythology, and historical analysis. The form brings together personal narrative, figurative and imaginative language, and geopolitical assessment in a way that makes it especially suited for writing about how the world is internally experienced and externally organized. The title of this dissertation emerges from my fascination, as I repeatedly returned to *Zami*, with the setting of Audre Lorde's relationship with Afrekete towards the conclusion of the book. "It was a 1 ½ room kitchenette apartment with tall narrow windows in the narrow, high-ceilinged front room. Across each window, there were built-in shelves at different levels. From these shelves tossed and frothed, hung and leaned and stood, pot after clay pot of green and tousled large and small-leaved plants of all shapes and conditions" (Lorde 248). This description resonates with my hazy memories of my late Aunt Juanita's apartment in Oakland, California. Each time I encountered this scene and setting in the book, I was struck by Lorde's attention to illustrating the physical space in which her life-changing relationship with Afrekete unfolds. The apartment is simultaneously situated within the larger context of 1950s Harlem and New York City, yet just as easily imagined as its very own world in which Audre and Afrekete are its only human inhabitants. In my reading of *Zami*, Afrekete's apartment is one of the most narratively and thematically significant sites in the text because of the many-textured intimacies—erotic, racial, gendered, classed, and spiritual—its physical location enables.

I initially conceived of this dissertation, which was first called *Blackness from Elsewhere*, as a literary study somewhat influenced by anthropological methods. I was interested in thinking about how the cultural specificities of different geographic locations in the African diaspora were borne out in literature. For instance, I thought

about what it might look like to map the city of Accra from the way it is portrayed in Kofi Awonoor's novel *This Earth, My Brother*. I intended to analyze other literary movements through different locations in the African diaspora as well—Audre Lorde's Harlem, Teju Cole's Manhattan, and Yaa Gyasi's transatlantic narratives, among others. As I continued writing and thinking, the emphasis shifted: while I remain interested in cities, regions, and specific locales, my geographic focus has turned inward to the interiorities of literary characters and authors. It became clear that I was more invested in the conceptual and narrative production of space than in identifying how these narrative constructions mapped to external geographies. For instance, it mattered to me that Afrekete's apartment was positioned in Harlem, a neighborhood with crucial geographic significance within the scope of US and diasporic Black migrations, though I was ultimately most interested in exploring the various spatial registers of the erotic intimacies between Audre and Afrekete which took place and were narrated from within the space of the apartment. This continued examination of the inwards registered as internal geographies—erotic geographies, embodied geographies, erotic and embodied landscapes. While I am not formally trained in the discipline of geography, Katherine McKittrick's book *Demonic Grounds* provided me with the initial language and a set of conceptual tools to begin to understand geography as an ongoing process, as a heuristic through which multiple levels—scales—of life can be apprehended and interpreted. In conversation with McKittrick's geographic work I began trying to understand Black feminism through Black women's bodily geographies—both the geographies their bodies traverse in various movements through the spaces of the African diaspora, as well as the

geographies and terrains of their physical bodies. The central concept of this dissertation, sensual worldmaking, emerged from the insights McKittrick offers.

Sensual worldmaking is a set of narrative strategies in which Black queer women and trans people's self-representative writing uses embodied intimacies, memories, and other sensuous experiences to generate critical knowledge. Sensual worldmaking narrates racialized and gendered bodily experiences within the African diaspora and theorizes Black queer bodies as sites of knowledge production about identity, subjectivity and power. It is therefore a subjective, bodily centered method of spatial theorizing. This analytic is particularly indebted to Amber Musser's deployment of 'sensation' and M. Nourbese Philip's concept of s/place. Musser uses sensation as a frame for drawing attention to the physical and affective impressions of embodied experience as well as the differential operations of power on different subjects. She writes, "If we conceive of experience as the narrative that consciousness imposes on a collection of sensations, sensation provides a way for us to explore corporeality without reifying identity . . . Sensation is then both individual and impersonal; it occupies a sphere of multiplicity without being tethered to identity" (Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 1-2). This passage proposes that sensation, while attentive to individual embodiment, is not incorporated into the fold of narrative in the way that the notion of experience is understood to be. M. Nourbese Philip's concept of s/place names the mutual imbrication of external land-based geographies and fleshy, internal, corporeal landscapes in which Black women's bodies in the Americas are positioned. In the essay, "Dis Place—The Space Between," Philip argues for conceptually linking space and place in order to create the figure of S/Place: "the immutable and irrevocable linking of the inner place or space" (Philip 77). S/Place is

conditioned by the encounters with racialized and gendered violence which herald black women in the New World. Because these conditions accompany the development of S/Place, “the space between the Black woman’s legs becomes. The place. Site of oppression--vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer space” (Philip 76). Here, Philip proposes that Black women’s experiences of their bodies are necessarily reflective of external structures of social power and positions this relationship within historical and spatial context.

In bringing these notions of sensation and s/place together to think about the autobiographical narrative production of Black queer subjects, I recognize the distance between sensation and sensual. The term ‘sensual’ is understood to be more connotative of sexual pleasure than the more seemingly neutral ‘sensation.’ I draw out the sensual within sensual worldmaking in order to emphasize the eroticism of my interlocutors’ bodies. In foregrounding sensuality, this framework is attentive to the characteristics of sensation highlighted by Musser, while prioritizing the erotic quality of these authors’ embodied encounters. My use of erotic is drawn, as is much of this term’s circulation in Black feminist discourse, from Audre Lorde’s signal essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Lorde’s juxtaposition of sensation and the sensual interprets sensation as more detached from the deeply emotional, nonrational, and corporeally engaged feelings of the erotic. Lorde is emphatic that in light of the richness of the sensuality of the erotic, one need not “succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (Lorde 1984, 54). In contrast to the erotic, sensation is described as plasticized, and Lorde identifies the detachment of “sensation without feeling” as characteristic of the exploitative dimensions

of pornography (Lorde 1984, 54).<sup>1</sup> This skepticism toward sensation's detachment mirrors the essay's broader critique of the ways western, Eurocentric, misogynistic discourse has demonized the erotic as a means of devaluing the feminine. Lorde's recuperative project reunites "the spiritual and the political" which have been falsely separated, arguing that "the bridge which connects them is the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us" (Lorde 1984, 56). Echoing Lorde's insights in this essay, I approach the erotic aspects of the texts I study in this dissertation as inclusive of yet not limited to sexual and romantic intimacy, prioritizing the quality of a depth of feeling across a range of emotional and intimate states. My analysis of sensual worldmaking in *Afrekete's Room* traces the erotics of embodied experiences which are then creatively narrated.

The logics of sensual worldmaking resonate with other Black feminist analyses of narrative and knowledge production. M. Jacqui Alexander identifies how colonial and imperial domination is normalized through the refusal to name one's positionality—where one is positioned "in place and space"—instead, securing a singular position and its perspective as definitive of the norm (Alexander 112). Emphasizing place and space, she names "self-conscious positionality" in contrast to the feigned placelessness and pretended objectivity of colonial knowledge production (Alexander 112). Self-conscious positionality seeks to situate rather than obscure knowledge production by accounting for one's geopolitical and social locations. Sensual worldmaking epitomizes self-conscious positionality through its use of lived and embodied experiences as the foundation for

---

<sup>1</sup> Black feminist sexuality scholars have developed a robust dialogue which both contextualizes and complicates Lorde's critiques of pornography in this essay. See, among others, *A Taste for Brown Sugar* by Mireille Miller-Young and *Funk the Erotic* by L.H. Stallings.



narrative and knowledge production. Relatedly, Dionne Brand's observation that "places and those that inhabit them are indeed fictions" foregrounds the relationship between narrative creation, self-creation, and the imagination of spaces.<sup>2</sup> In the context of sensual worldmaking, this statement reveals that the spaces in which autobiographically influenced texts take place—the locations in which the narratives are 'set,' the places that the memoirs trace movement to and from—are shaped and lent form to by the embodied experiences of the authors. Within this dissertation, understanding self- and space-creation as processes of fiction illustrates that by narratively constructing the places that have been meaningful in their lives, my interlocutors are able to theorize the relations of power that have shaped their geographic, interpersonal, and institutional lived realities.

Sensual worldmaking arises from the Black feminist literary tradition's focus on embodiment. The link between queer women's bodies, narratives, and intimacies framed by the concept of sensual worldmaking is explored in a question posed by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley:

"What would it mean for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean, and to plot her bodily and imaginative work of womanness, eroticism, and decolonization nowhere stable, nowhere fixed, nowhere conventional . . . but in the malleable explosive, volcanic force of the so-often buried words she puts together to speak her body, her desires, her work, her island" (Tinsley 2010, 28, cited in Stallings 139).

Tinsley offers these questions as part of the framing of her book *Thieving Sugar*. In specifying the Caribbean, she draws attention to ways that both literature and criticism can tend to imagine some geographies, particularly Europe and North America, as more legible sites of queer intimacy than the geographies of the Caribbean. Tinsley names the integrated becomings of 'womanhood, eroticism, and decolonization' as forms of labor,

---

<sup>2</sup> Brand 2001, 18.

ongoing processes which can be borne out and made manifest through language. Tinsley's focus on the language and literature of queer Caribbean women of color presumes and illustrates how their bodies are central to the relations with self, other women, and land which populate their writings.

Another Black feminist theory of literature and embodiment which sensual worldmaking emerges from is Brittney Cooper's notion of embodied discourse. Focusing particularly on "informal and formal autobiographical accounts, archival materials, and advocacy work" produced by Black women in the U.S., Cooper's articulation of embodied discourse "refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their . . . working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak" (Cooper 3). The concept of embodied discourse brings together autobiographical narrative production and Black feminist forms of political participation. Many of the illustrations of sensual worldmaking which follow in this project do not focus on Black women as political actors as such, yet sensual worldmaking positions Black queer autobiographical writing as politicized in the sense that they produce knowledge about forms of power: racism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia, among others. Throughout *Beyond Respectability* Cooper illustrates her interlocutors' use of embodied discourse to present Black bodies, particularly Black women's bodies, in terms which refused the dominant positioning of Black embodiment as abject and illegible. Embodied discourse is therefore a central Black feminist theorization of the ways literature, embodiment, power, and ideas of being are poised to interact.

In this dissertation I attempt to methodologically ground the notion of worldmaking within the narrative practices that center Black women's embodied experiences. Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash describes Black feminism itself as world-making, gesturing to the material and discursive significance of what is imagined within Black feminist thinking.<sup>3</sup> Keguro Macharia takes up world-building, world-imagining, and world-making as characteristic of bodies of thought in his analysis of the queer and corporeal possibilities in Fanon's notion of sociogeny.<sup>4</sup> While world-making is not central to either of these projects, their deployments of the term illustrate Black feminist and queer studies scholars' commitments to positioning a relationship between both conceptual and experiential phenomena and the broader worlds they exist within. My work builds upon these approaches to worldmaking, as I am also interested in situating ideas and experiences within a range of scales, from the psychic and corporeal to the geopolitical.<sup>5</sup>

Sensual worldmaking responds to the recognition that practices of domination are spatial and em-placed by charting the landscapes of domination from the perspective of the non-consensually dominated, but most importantly through narrating arrangements of space that speculate as to what the world could be with another order of power. Sensual worldmaking theorizes identity by narrating how it is experienced and sensed within the body. Sensual worldmaking is therefore a queer project because through it, the received categories of womanhood and gender more broadly are de-prioritized and set aside.

---

<sup>3</sup> Nash, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Macharia 36, 43, 58.

<sup>5</sup> In a different realm of Black scholarship, political theorist Adom Getachew's book *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* develops worldmaking as a tactic deployed by Black political actors in formerly colonized nations.

Instead, the centrality of narratives emerging from sensual experience give us a view into gender being felt as the precondition for it being articulated. In other words, sensual worldmaking narrates Black womanhood as it is variously constructed and lived by subjects who are marking themselves as Black women, rather than as the product of colonial narratives of race and gender.

Within colonial worldmaking, the imaginative and material constructions of the world which reflect colonial and imperial domination, the sensations of pain and violence are normatively attached to Black women's bodies. Hortense Spillers names the socio-political order of the New World as explicitly and violently corporeal:

“that order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* — a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers 67, emphasis in original).

In this passage Spillers names the New World of the Americas and the African diaspora as geographies characterized by their violence against Black and indigenous bodies.

Further, these geographies are both characterized and constructed by a socio-political order, which encompasses—among other things—the law, literature and other cultural productions, as well as philosophical and other forms of academic discourse. The wide reach of this socio-political order into so many areas of life and thinking lays the ground for the resonance between Spillers and Wynter which so many Black studies scholars have taken up, given Wynter's sustained project of naming and analyzing the constituent parts of the New World social order.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Spillers' positioning of the New World and the Black diaspora as geographic locations defined by corporeal violence

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Alex Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2014.

against Black and indigenous people shapes my project's investment in identifying sensuality as a product of Black queer subjects' agential literary productions, and further, in characterizing those sensual expressions as part of contemporary mediations of the Black diaspora.

Spillers names within a series of "externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being* for the captor" (Spillers 1987, 67, emphasis in original). I am interested in the image of this potent and volatile sensuality as quality and utility which is imposed on the captive body from without. While my project does not propose a clear and definitive distinction between the form of violent sensuality which Spillers names and the forms of sensuality which emerge within and from these Black feminist literary texts, I am interested in the different outcomes and uses of these differing forms of sensuality. Specifically, I am interested in the sensations of Black women's bodies as they write and think of them in their own terms.

This project employs Katherine McKittrick's framework of a black sense of place in order to understand the racialized violence against Black people throughout the diaspora as well as the affective and sensorial experiences of black bodies and their various sensations--painful, pleasurable, and otherwise (McKittrick 2011, 948). McKittrick's formulation of a black sense of place uses the singular, as a term, yet is multiple in its recognition of the geographic and historical specificities (McKittrick 2011, 949). McKittrick defines a black sense of place not as "a steady, focused, and homogeneous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and

differential perspectives that are illustrative of, and therefore remark upon, legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of black geographies and their inhabitants” (McKittrick 2011, 950). According to McKittrick, some of the different Black mapping practices which exist “outside the official tenets of cartography” include “fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, [and] music maps” (McKittrick 2011, 949). As Dionne Brand writes, “I have not visited the Door of No Return, but by relying on random shards of history and unwritten memoir of descendants of those who passed through it, including me, I am constructing a map of the region.” (Brand 2001, 19) Memoir, including unwritten memoir, can be used to help create a map, particularly a literary map. The worldmaking aspect of sensual worldmaking identifies geography as a form of knowledge. In contextualizing the different forms of knowledge about the Earth that have accompanied human societies Sylvia Wynter writes, “all such knowledges of the physical cosmos, all such astronomies, all such geographies . . . had still remained adaptive truths-for and, as such, ethno-astronomies, ethno-geographies” (Wynter 2003, 271). All geographies, at whatever scales of knowledge they produce, are culturally specific ways of knowing place and orienting oneself; ways that reinforce the internal logics of the culture/society that created them. Sensual worldmaking identifies Black feminist geographies as ethno-geographies illustrated in literature.

In the following pages, I will illustrate the multidisciplinary genealogies of African diaspora studies and Black feminist and queer literary analysis which are most central to this project. African diaspora studies scholarship, particularly work that theorizes the ontological and existential dimensions of Black life as it has been produced

and constrained within Western modernity, is important for my understanding of how Blackness is historicized, regionally particularized, and otherwise situated in time and space. Along with cultural formations and political imaginaries, the terms ‘African diaspora’ and ‘Black Atlantic’ refer to geographic spaces, sites, and migratory networks. Katherine McKittrick’s 2006 book *Demonic Grounds* asserts the importance of geographic perspectives and practices in the study of the African diaspora and Blackness. This book argues for an understanding of ‘geography’ as simultaneously encompassing the human practice of constructing and assigning both physical and conceptual significance to places, and the practices and discourses that circumscribe the formal academic study of the spaces of the earth. Building from this foundation, McKittrick further argues that the dynamics of colonially informed social, political, and economic inequality mediate the creation, maintenance, and validation of these humanly produced geographies. McKittrick’s project usefully provides a framework for spatializing Blackness that resists a prioritization of how dominant, colonially ordered geographies have failed to recognize or account for Blackness. Instead, *Demonic Grounds* takes on the project of describing the “material, theoretical, and imaginative” work that black geographies do and have accomplished. The text asserts a valuable re-valorization of Black claims to space-making and creative production, but also a subtler insistence that the reader take seriously the material as well as conceptual impacts of philosophical inquiry. This latter concern is manifested through *Demonic Grounds*’ rich interdisciplinary methodology, which informs my own interdisciplinary commitments.

McKittrick adopts the framework of the ‘demonic’ from the work of Sylvia Wynter, a philosopher, playwright, novelist, and thinker whose oeuvre reorganizes

disciplinary constraints. The demonic emerges in Wynter's essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman." Critically reading the absence of nonwhite femininity in William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* as productive of the gendered and racial logics of what Walter Mignolo terms Western modernity/coloniality, Wynter names the "hitherto silenced ground . . . of 'native' Caribbean women and Black American women as the ground of Caliban's woman" (Wynter 1990: 479). McKittrick takes Wynter's concern here literally in order to link the 'silenced ground' of Black and indigenous women to what McKittrick terms the "historical spatial unrepresentability" of Black femininity (McKittrick xxv). McKittrick's deep and attentive interpretations of Wynter's thinking are foundational for my considerations of how place, body, subjectivity and language, as constituent elements of Black diasporic expressive cultures, provide openings for considering geographies and therefore epistemologies that exceed Western hegemonic frameworks.

Sylvia Wynter's body of work deconstructs an epistemological hegemony that penetrates to the level of how 'we'—Westernized subjects, and people of color under Western rule—are able to understand ourselves as human. The root of this critique is her illustration of the way Western epistemologies obscure, and therefore naturalize, the constraints of their frameworks. She argues that the broad range of ways to cognitively understand humanity and being human have been reduced to a single 'mode' or genre of humanity that is attached to "the ethnoclass Man" (Wynter 2003, 315-316). The symbol of 'Man' posits whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, Eurocentricity, and bourgeois class identification as the ideal standard for this understanding of humanity (Wynter 2003). This epistemological critique is critically important for my project, especially as it



pertains to identifying coloniality in the way aesthetic and geographic common-senses are produced in Black literatures. Wynter's epistemological project is particularly visible in her 2003 essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," which provides an extended exposition of the historical, intellectual, and social processes by which Man came to be the sole semiotic of humanity of the West and subsequently the colonized world. The coloniality of being, power, truth, and freedom points to the totality of Man's hegemonic logics. Coloniality in this instance represents a domination in what these terms may signify (Wynter 2003, 327). Elsewhere Wynter gestures towards the example of Black studies, intended to be both liberatory and counter-hegemonic, eventually being subsumed under the 'coloniality' of Western disciplinary and ontological schemas (Wynter 2005).

Paul Gilroy's foundational text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* draws attention to the political dimensions of Black cultural production, initiates a reckoning with the ways that colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade—both of which are integral to coloniality and modernity as we understand them—necessitate non-nationally-bound notions of Black experience and culture, and frames the utility of the slave ship as a productive and embodied metaphor for the movement of people and ideas throughout geographic spaces of the diaspora. The 'black Atlantic' has become a spatial framework considered alongside and in conversation with the African diaspora. However, *The Black Atlantic* itself seems to instrumentalize rather than theorize space: Gilroy names 'the black Atlantic' as a site in which Black lives, identities, and cultures are produced, yet much of the theorization and elaboration of the geographic relations that constitute the Black Atlantic have been accomplished in other scholarship.

One such example of ‘respatializing’ the black Atlantic takes place in Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s essay “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic.” Tinsley’s essay presents a critical engagement with Gilroy’s text in order to highlight and push against the ways that queerness and femininity are marginalized in *The Black Atlantic*. “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic” also attempts to take the space of the Atlantic more seriously, particularly through her readings of the ways that ocean waters metaphorically, symbolically, and literally facilitate Black queer self- and world-making in various literary texts. Tinsley’s other books - *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* and *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* - are critical for me in their thematic focus on Black queer narratives, aesthetics, geographies and epistemologies, as well as their modeling of literarily-grounded interdisciplinarity, or what Tinsley terms ‘theoretical polyamory.’<sup>7</sup>

Saidiya Hartman’s body of work spans genres and narrative styles to link the historical process of the African diaspora with contemporary experiences and perspectives. Her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother* combines memoir and historical analysis to trace a history of the slave routes originating in Ghana’s interior and ending at the southern coast. Hartman’s juxtaposition of archival materials and critical reflection on her affective experience as an African American engaging this history provides me with a methodological model of bringing textual, archival, and lived encounters together. Christina Sharpe’s 2016 book *In the Wake* extends Saidiya Hartman’s argument in *Scenes of Subjection* that Black life is situated as an afterlife of slavery, or that Black life is a continuation of the ontological violence that slavery produced and represented. *In the*

---

<sup>7</sup> Tinsley 2018, 177.

*Wake* uses four metaphors of objects or phenomena that manifest this relation: the wake, as the air or water impacted by the movement of a vessel through air or sea; the ship, as a continued technology of commodification as well as of movement; the hold, as a spatio-temporal region, and the weather, as a way of recognizing antiblackness as quotidian as the air we breathe. I am invested in Sharpe's metaphor of 'the wake' as a temporal and spatial framing of blackness in relation to histories of colonialism and enslavement, and particularly interested in the kind of self-reflection that characterizes her theoretical work.

Through engaging Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts" I confronted the extent to which this dissertation's primary archive, Black queer women's and nonbinary authors' autobiographical writing, is limited by the wake of the transatlantic slave trade: as Saidiya Hartman notes, "there is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage" (Hartman 2008, 3). This is not to say that there are no autobiographical narratives written by Black women on the African continent before and during the period of the slave trade, nor that Black women did not ever write their own autobiographical narratives in the Americas. Marking this gap—the lack of currently existing and institutionally legible first-person accounts of Black women's transatlantic crossing—serves to emphasize the historical conditions that have shaped the unwillingness to recognize and validate Black women as producers of written knowledge, autobiographical and otherwise. This recognition makes visible the material conditions that informs the texts that are the focus of my study: I write about Black queer authors who had access to literacy, relative autonomy, access to the space and time necessary for writing, editing, and publishing, and access to the resources necessary for their writing to be distributed and circulated.

In contrast to the Black women and girl subjects maimed and fractured by the archive who are the subjects of Saidiya Hartman's critical writings, my subjects have indeed been able to generate their own archives through their literary productions. In naming this I seek to recognize that the Black women and nonbinary authors I write about are not necessarily representative of Black women throughout the history of the Americas, but indeed that they are figures shaped within the particular historical and social and epistemic contexts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Americas. My desire to study and understand Black queer authors' autobiographical writing can perhaps be read as a desire to compensate for the historical lack of Black queer women's autobiographies, as "the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them" (Hartman 2008, 8). Hartman's discussion of the method and aims of critical fabulation is accompanied by first-person reflection on her desires and writing process as the crafter of scholarship as well as narrative. Through texts like *Lose Your Mother* Hartman has illustrated her emergence as a person and scholar from this history. Similarly, as I identify critical fabulation as a method for both reading and writing about Black women's lives, I note that the lived experiences, desires, and sensations of the Black woman author constructing this theory—myself—are also present in this project.<sup>8</sup>

M. Nourbese Philip, a Trinidadian poet and literary theorist, argues in *A Genealogy of Resistance* that racial, gendered, classed, and national identities evidence a relationship between power, representation, and identity. In the essay "Earth and Sound: The Place of Poetry," Philip defines place as "that certain location in time and space where historical, social, cultural, and geographical forces coalesce and/or collide to

---

<sup>8</sup> Hartman 2008, 9.

produce the individual” (Philip 57). As discussed earlier, Philip also conceives of s/place as a way to name Black women’s simultaneous experience of internal and external space. Philip’s careful elaboration of the interrelationship of place and space, particularly within the Caribbean, informs my own recognition of the importance of differentiating between these terms. In response to Philip’s request that we understand s/place as the flow between geographic space and embodied place, my own usage of space prioritizes lived and embodied experiences of place as the subjects of narrative work. Putting McKittrick and Philip in conversations has illustrated that Black female geographies which integrate place, body, language, and subjectivity can generate the ‘cartographies of the inner space’ (Philip 106). Mapping is thus extended to the literal, physical, and psychic interiority of Black women and other similarly positioned subjects.

Transnational feminist scholars have long illustrated the need for Black feminism, particularly Black feminism situated in the United States, to be attentive to the specificities of geographical and cultural locations in feminist scholarship. In my work, the emphasis on transnationalism is most clearly paired with an analysis of the African diaspora, the historical and ongoing dispersal of Black, African-descended people throughout the world in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade. Using the African/Black diaspora as an analytic frame enables an understanding of Blackness that is necessarily relational and situated, rather than an understanding of Blackness as monolithic across time, geographic space, and cultural location.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The singular term ‘African diaspora’ can itself become monolithic in its representation of Black movement/dispersal. Scholars have proposed many additional terms to identify and theorize Black dispersals and global communities, each with different intentions and capacities for being attentive to the geopolitics shaping Black movements. I am thinking of the popular use of the term Black diaspora(s), Black Atlantic, and Afro-Atlantic, among others. In this project I use African and Black diaspora interchangeably, recognizing that

There is a long-standing rich body of scholarship on Black life, culture, and thinking which center United States experiences of Blackness. Some, though by no means all, of this work engages in an implicit substitution of African American Blackness for global Blackness, evidenced through strategies such as using United States-based frameworks, definitions, and histories as definitive of Blackness on a global scale, and/or through a failure to recognize how Blackness may interact with other forms of social and political positioning to create diverse material realities of Blackness.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that the sustained centering and unequal concentration of resources in and towards the United States has also resulted in increased attention to the specific manifestations of anti-Black racism and marginalization in the United States.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, African Americans have participated in movements that position U.S. Black experience within a global context and call for solidarity and movement building across disparate geopolitical location, whether through articulations of Pan-African politics or through direct criticisms of U.S. imperialism.

Overall, my analysis of diasporic Blackness is anchored in an identification of colonialism and imperialism as foundational to Western modernity and its organizing categories of race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Keeping in this tradition, *Afrekete's Room*

---

<sup>10</sup> In this vein, Carlos Decena and Jafari Allen draw attention to the ways that having a U.S. passport materially impacts African American men's movement through public space in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, respectively. While there are other settings in which geopolitical specificity significantly impacts how Blackness is lived, international travel is a particularly important arena because of pronounced international and classed disparities.

<sup>11</sup> As one example, I am thinking about the global wave of protests which used the language of "Black Lives Matter" during the summer of 2020, in the wake of the highly visible police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Some of these protests were attentive to the specific contours of anti-Black racism in the countries where they occurred, while responding to the catalyst of U.S. happenings.

<sup>12</sup> See work by Sylvia Wynter, Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, and María Lugones, among others. I am also grateful to Nelson Maldonado Torres, whose seminar on Theorizing the Decolonial Turn provided a rich space to engage these scholars of decoloniality.

considers how the residues of the world-shaping phenomena of colonialism and imperialism are borne out in the ways Blackness is theorized and experienced both within and beyond the geographic and cultural space of the United States.<sup>13</sup> This project attempts to push through the myth of what Audre Lorde has called the “easy blackness as salvation” and the “lances of narrow blackness” by working to identify how the being of Blackness is integrally concerned with the various ways we are positioned, empowered, and marginalized by the social structures of gender, sexuality, class, and nation.<sup>14</sup>

The authors I examine are all migratory subjects in form or another, and these migrations are integral to the narrative movements and theorizations of identity which take place in their autobiographically informed texts.<sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde was born and raised in Harlem to Caribbean-born parents who migrated to the U.S. from Grenada and Barbados. Michelle Cliff spent her childhood and adolescence in transit between Jamaica and the United States. Both Lorde and Cliff discuss their parents’ uneasy relationships with U.S. racial logics: Lorde’s mother, who temporarily passed as “Spanish” in order to keep a job, cautioned her daughters against trusting white people, yet expressed a similar hesitation to be culturally associated with the African Americans in Harlem. Cliff narrates that her parents, who were also able to pass for white in the United States, thought of U.S. white supremacy as crude and saw white U.S. Americans as different than them. Lorde and Cliff narrate their parents’ appeals to phenotypical adjacency to

---

<sup>13</sup> In this vein, I am critical of the use of the term ‘America’ to refer exclusively to the United States of America, as this usage erases the hemispheric register of the Americas, including other countries and territories in North, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean. Throughout this project I refer to the United States of America as the United States or the U.S., though I will sometimes refer to people from the U.S. as Americans.

<sup>14</sup> Lorde, *The Black Unicorn*, 112-113.

<sup>15</sup> “If all identities are socially and historically constructed, then our transit through them stages encounters of disparate histories, investments, and political exigencies.” (Decena, 240).

whiteness—the ability, if conditional and temporary, to pass for white—and articulations of differences between U.S. and Caribbean racial logics as strategies for navigating anti-Black racism and white supremacy in the United States. The consideration of Blackness as a site where cultural, national, and regional differences can be elaborated as well as flattened becomes central for both Lorde’s and Cliff’s narrative discussion of their subjective formation and the ways they theorize identity.

Dionne Brand migrated from Trinidad to Canada at a young age. Hemispheric migrations abound in her writing; she narrates real and fictional migrations from Caribbean islands to continental North America, migrations between Caribbean sites, and between the Americas and Europe. Brand’s reiterative explorations of migration across her body of writing reveal a sustained concern with the evasiveness of Black claims to citizenship. In particular, Brand’s discussions of her experiences with the intensity of Canadian racism, her experience of the Grenada Revolution, and her discussion of the disorienting nature of living in the Black diaspora arrive at the proposal that the endurance of transatlantic slavery is so profound that neither migrating to belong to a white settler nation, nor being a majority-Black nation caught up in the dynamics of imperialism, can patch that rift. Akwaeke Emezi emigrated from Nigeria to the United States, also as a young person, and constructs a similar experience for the protagonist of their autobiographical novel *Freshwater*. However, *Freshwater* illustrates the protagonist’s migration through various internal landscapes of spirituality, self-coherence, and gendered identity to be of greater personal significance than national migration from Nigeria to the United States.



Black feminism is the ground on which this project, and all of my intellectual endeavors, have grown. Black feminism is, among other things, a political and intellectual project that is particularly attentive to gender and race as hierarchical categories through which social life is mediated. More specifically, Black feminism elaborates its analyses of social life while anchored in a critique of the historical and pervasive negation of Blackness and femininity within the hierarchical construction of social categories. My practice of Black feminism is indebted to the formulation offered in the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement": "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (CRC 234). The inherent value of Black women "as human persons," indeed the very recognition of those socially identified as Black women as legitimately occupying the categories of 'woman,' 'human,' and 'person' are notions that have and continue to be the subject of debate. In the light of political, intellectual, and cultural dialogues in which Black women's humanity is under review, the articulations of the Combahee River Collective and similarly minded Black feminists become visible as radical, and necessarily political, proclamations. I gratefully recognize that as I finish this dissertation in 2021, 100 years after the first Black women to earn Ph.D.'s in the United States,<sup>16</sup> I am not under the same burden to argue for the viability of Black feminism and Black women's humanity. This is not to say that Black women's humanity is no longer in question, but rather that there have been so many others who have already done the work of articulating Black women's humanity and illustrating the

---

<sup>16</sup> These women are Eva B. Dykes, Sadie T. Mossell Alexander, and Georgiana R. Simpson. <https://www.jbhe.com/chronology/>

ways it has been undermined.<sup>17</sup> And significantly, many others have carved the hard-fought institutional spaces where my work has been able to flourish.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, *Afrekete's Room* is not a project which seeks to argue for the validity of Black feminist politics and scholarship, as this work has been richly, rigorously, and widely done. *Afrekete's Room* is written for an audience of Black feminist scholars with the intent to examine what Hortense Spillers calls the intramural—the conversations we have within and among ourselves as community.

Much of Black feminist scholarship, including much of this dissertation, has examined the lives, experiences, thinking, and cultural production of various groups of Black women. Black feminist theorizing has also sought the more abstracted questions of how the discourses of gender, sexuality, femininity, and womanhood are themselves racialized. Black feminist scholarship has produced methods, theories, and frameworks for recognizing and producing knowledge, and it has increased the amount, variety, and quality of academic and cultural knowledge about Black people—Black women, in particular. My decision to incorporate Emezi, a nonbinary trans author, into a study otherwise focused on Black women writers has a number of political implications. I have chosen to include Emezi because I understand their work's themes and strategies to fit

---

<sup>17</sup> A partial and non-exhaustive list of crucial Black feminist scholarship: *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Carole Boyce Davies et. al, Eds.; *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, Ed; *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Y. Davis; *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Ed.; *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies*, Stanlie M. James et. al, Eds.; *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde; *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Barbara Smith, Ed.; and many others.

<sup>18</sup> Two genealogies feel particularly relevant here: Dr. Brittney Cooper, my dissertation chair, was advised as a doctoral student by Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, who founded and directs the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College where I received my bachelor's. I met Dr. Jafari Allen, my outside reader, as a student in a queer studies course he taught at Morehouse College—a sibling school to Spelman—where Dr. Allen attended before transferring to NYU. The city of Atlanta is therefore a crucial location in my personal Black feminist intellectual geography.

within a tradition of Black queer feminist expression, and there is insight to be gained from interpreting their work's position within this tradition. Through reading Emezi within a tradition which has been primarily shaped by queer writers who identified as women, I hope to illustrate the ways that Black queer women's feminism has disrupted gender's normativity. In turn, my incorporation of Emezi into this tradition sheds new light on the ways that Emezi and other diasporic queer and trans subjects give us ways of understanding Black queer and feminist experiences outside, adjacent to, and alongside Black womanhood.<sup>19</sup>

### **Chapter Summaries**

This dissertation is organized into four body chapters, with each focusing on an author and one or more of their autobiographically-informed literary texts. The conclusion revisits the major claims in the dissertation and illustrates potential directions for further research. Chapter one, "Pounding Spice: *Zami*'s Black Feminist Geography," illustrates how queer corporeal landscapes and Caribbean diasporic social spaces are entwined in Lorde's narration of moments of erotic intimacy and desire with herself, her mother, and Afrekete. Many of Lorde's acts of narration in *Zami* are acts of reconstructing, from memory as well as from Lorde's own archive of personal writing, relationships and queer encounters with women. In *Zami*, Lorde's sensual worldmaking is produced through materially and sensorially resonant narrative strategies, which ultimately produce the genre of biomythography. In much Western literature, autobiography and memoir are the most recognizable forms of narratives of the self.

---

<sup>19</sup> My decision also illustrates the capacities and limitations of representational strategies. Most press references to Emezi in the period before, during, and shortly after the debut of *Freshwater* misgendered them, using she/her pronouns, referring to Emezi as a woman, and including them on lists for female/women authors. Emezi repeatedly addressed this pattern, including in a series of Tweets.

While they vary significantly in their tones, approaches, and stylistic conventions, they are typically expected to follow particular narrative and subject-affirming conventions. In contrast, Heather Russell posits that biomythography “simultaneously invokes, interrogates, and celebrates the mythic (and/or imaginative) possibilities encoded within acts of representation, providing always a polysemous cast to the ‘historicity’ of events being represented. Myth, dream, and history assume equal footing as efficient causality and equivalent epistemological value” (Russell 60) If biomythography is Lorde’s response to and surpassing of autobiography, it is a response that draws on and validates the forms of knowing—dreams, myth, and, as I propose, sensual knowledge, that are delegitimized in Western knowledge production, including production of knowledge about the self. *Zami* is a collective, rather than a solely individual narrative. Biomythography as a hybrid memoir allows Lorde to put formal and archival hybridity to use for the purpose of narrative self-representation.

Chapter two, “Authoring Claims: Critique, Autobiography, and Imagination in Michelle Cliff’s *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*” argues that Jamaican author Michelle Cliff’s strategic manipulation of self-referential narratives in her memoir *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1980) facilitated her Black, lesbian, and feminist critiques of colonialism and imperialism. This chapter confronts Cliff’s uneasiness with her work’s characterization, by some of her contemporaries, as autobiographical and therefore depoliticized by re-centering the political significance of her narrative and discursive strategies. “Authoring Claims” argues that this under-examined text is a self-conscious challenge to the boundaries of conventional literary genre, colonial representations and narratives of identity, and colonial geographic

imaginaries. Like the Combahee River Collective, Cliff used her material lived experience as a foundation for her writing, yet she explicitly refused the depoliticization that critics assigned to Black and Caribbean women's autobiography. Her writing theorizes the gaps between how identity is experienced and understood by critiquing the ongoing histories of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and colonialism that shape Caribbean and North American societies. Cliff literarily imagines physical and conceptual spaces where Black women are able to author other narratives of reality.

Building on scholarship that locates creative writing, memory, and Black bodies as sites of diasporic memory chapter three, "Being in the Black Queer Diaspora: Archiving Orientation and Embodiment in *A Map to the Door of No Return*," identifies how poet, novelist, and essayist Dionne Brand's unconventional memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), provides a method for identifying how the embodied experiences of Black queer subjects form an archive for understanding operations of power within Black queer diasporas. The close readings in this chapter illustrate how *A Map to the Door of No Return* offers a Black queer embodied archive of experiences and narratives in the Black diaspora. Queerness within *A Map* is located in what Tinsley calls "resistant, creative praxis" which includes but is not limited to the gendered and sexual practices and performances of Black diasporic bodies (Tinsley 2008, 202). This chapter focuses on how Brand manipulates the form of memoir to produce a creative text woven from multiple archives: the author-speaker's Black lesbian embodied experiences, colonial journals and travelogues, and the archive of metaphors used by Black subjects to narrate and understand the African diaspora. In addition, Brand narrates the same and/or connected experiences across multiple literary sites reflecting multiple genres. In so

doing, Brand constructs what Marlene Goldman calls a “community of witnesses” to diasporic Black queerness (Goldman 24). This chapter’s examination of Black queer embodied experiences as archival sites addresses the Black feminist emphasis on embodied knowledge while specifically attending to the communal, geographical, narrative, and archival ruptures of the Black diaspora in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.

Finally, in chapter four, “Vessel of the Spirit: Transcorporeality in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*” I demonstrate how Nigerian-American author Akwaeke Emezi uses Igbo spirituality and ontology in the autofictional novel *Freshwater* (2018) to create a narrative space in which Black life is framed in terms outside of Western humanism and its attendant modes of gendering. In this chapter I illustrate how the phenomena of human embodiment, binary gendering, and Cartesian duality are irreconcilable with the protagonist’s existence as an *ogbanje*, an Igbo deity which typically manifests in a family’s lineage when a mother gives birth to multiple children who die before fully maturing. “Vessel of the Spirit” reads *Freshwater* through Roberto Strongman’s concept of transcorporeality, a Black diasporic religious concept in which the human body functions as a receptacle for subjectivity, both human and divine. This notion of transcorporeality is illustrated through the novel’s figure of a white marble room, which is the representation of the protagonist’s mind and the space where the multiple subjectivities who inhabit the protagonist’s body inhabit. In addition, this chapter addresses Emezi’s self-conscious use of autofictional strategies in order to narrate their perception of the truth of their lived experiences within the genre of the novel.

### Works Cited

- Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2005.
- Allen, Jafari S. *Venceremos?: The Erotics of Self-Making in Cuba*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2011.
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage Canada. 2001.
- Cliff, Michelle. *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*. London: Persephone Books. 1980.
- The Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 232-240. New York: The New Press. 1995.
- Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 2017.
- Decena, Carlos. *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire Among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2011.
- Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. New York: Grove Press. 2018.
- Getachew, Adom. *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2019.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1993.
- Goldman, Marlene. 2004. "Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand." *Canadian Literature* 182 (Autumn): 13-28.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 26 (Vol. 12, No. 2), June 2008: 1-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Black Unicorn: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1978.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1984.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1982.
- Macharia, Keguro. *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press. 2019.
- McKittrick, Katherine. "On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place." *Social & Cultural Geography* 12:8 (2011), 947-963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2006. Print.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. New York and London: New York University Press. 2014.
- Nash, Jennifer C. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Philip, M. Nourbese. *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Spring Valley: Mercury Press. 2008. Print.
- Russell, Heather. *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press. 2009.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2016.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2, "Culture and Counteremory: The 'American' Connection. (Summer 1987): 64-81.
- Stallings, L.H. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2015.
- Strongman, Roberto. *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 14.2-3. (2008): 191-215.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2018.



Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2014.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being, Power, Truth, Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*. Vol. 3, No. 3. (Fall 2003). 257-337.

———. "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman." In Donnell, Alison and Sarah Lawson Welch, (eds.) *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. London and New York: Routledge. 1996. Print.

### Pounding Spice: *Zami*'s Black Feminist Geography

“You could see your own house as a tiny fleck on an ever-widening landscape, or as the center of it all from which the circles expanded into the infinite unknown. It is that question of feeling at the center that gnaws at me now. At the center of what?”

- Adrienne Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location”

Adrienne Rich begins the talk published as “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” with a self-reflexive glance backward from her present self, writing in 1984. Through a series of fragmentary reflections, Rich narrates the processes of reading, thinking, and listening with feminist comrades of color that have led to her understanding of the dynamics of power that circumscribe how social positions are arranged, manipulated, and named.<sup>1</sup> The politics of location claims a critical, conscious awareness of the many ways that one’s body is positioned. In Rich’s case, her body occupied whiteness, U.S. citizenship, cis womanhood, Jewishness, and lesbianism as terrains with uneven topographies of privilege, access to power, marginalization, and vulnerability. Through the politics of location Rich sought to provide herself and other white feminist writers and activists with an analytic framework where they could be accountable for their deployment of whiteness in their persistent self-centering in feminist spaces.

Rich’s articulation of the politics of location is indebted to the long tradition of Black feminist authors who have anchored the narratives in which they analyze and critique structures of social, cultural, and geopolitical power in the experiences of their own bodies. These Black women are thus able to enact a radical self-centering that counters the forms of marginalization imposed on Black people, queer people, women,

---

<sup>1</sup> Rich names the Combahee River Collective, Gloria I. Joseph, Audre Lorde, Bernice Reagon, Michele Russell, Barbara Smith, and June Jordan, along with others, as some of the black women/women of color activists and writers whose work she is indebted to. (Rich 230 -231).

and other racially, sexually, and nationally marginalized groups. These Black feminist authors write against, among other things, the hegemonic centering of whiteness. In this dissertation I develop the term sensual worldmaking to describe the strategies of Black feminist narrative writing which use embodied experience as an authorizing source of knowledge about embodiment, geography, and relational power dynamics. Through emphasis on the sensations and experiences of their bodies, Black feminist writers are able to make other worlds in which the politics that shape identity categories are not only accounted for but thoroughly and creatively critiqued, and where Black feminist visions of intimacy, pleasure, and sensation are centered.

These Black feminist constructions of material and conceptual spaces authored by logics other than white hegemonic domination are a form of geographic theorizing, in that they engage notions of how people, objects, and institutions are arranged in physical space. Black feminist geography, as theorized by Katherine McKittrick, is a way of foregrounding, naming, and examining the spatial investments within black feminist political and intellectual projects as well as within the lived and fictional stories of Black women. McKittrick's book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* analyzes spatial frameworks and metaphors used in 'canonical' United States black feminist theory—such as bell hooks' theorization of Black women's marginality and Barbara Christian's peripheral theory—along with Linda Brent's autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* and the lived experiences of the enslaved Black Canadian woman Marie-Joseph Angélique.<sup>2</sup> The latter two are examples of Black women's stories which, while not self-identified as feminist

---

<sup>2</sup> McKittrick, 55-59.

scholarship, are narratives in which Black women's politicized actions and desires illustrate how their experiences of blackness and womanhood are spatialized. In McKittrick's terms, Black feminist geographies encompass "black women's political, feminist, imaginary, and creative concerns that respatialize the geographic legacy of racism-sexism."<sup>3</sup> Drawing from this multivalent definition of black feminist geography, this chapter shows how Audre Lorde's mythologized narrations in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* evidence how the themes of blackness, queerness, and Caribbeanness in her writing are also generative of a definitive sense of place rooted in the lived experience of Black, queer, and/or Caribbean-American women.

The black feminist geography of *Zami* is not a map of a place, per se. The text does not provide cartographies of Harlem, New York City, nor a transatlantic map tracing routes between the eastern United States and the eastern Caribbean. Yet through its mapping of intimacies which link Black women through experiences, sensations, memories, and desires, *Zami* provides language, frameworks, and imagery that positions these geographic sites in relation to one another, as imagined and narrated by Black women. As author and autobiographical subject, Audre Lorde is both of the key narrative focus and mapmaker of the Black feminist geography of *Zami*, yet she is not its sole subject. The Black feminist geography of *Zami* links Linda Belmar Lorde, her mother; Audre herself; and Afrekete, the Black woman with whom Lorde has a brief yet world-changing love affair. There are other women, Black and otherwise, who are inferred or invoked or evoked in this map, but I privilege these subjects in order to examine the

---

<sup>3</sup> McKittrick, 53.

significant moments of racialized and gendered self-construction that Lorde narrates in relation to each of them.

Lorde produces Black feminist geography in *Zami* through developing the narrative methods of biomythography. Biomythography, the term Lorde coins to name *Zami*'s genre, incorporates elements of biography, mythology, and historical analysis, therefore interweaving personal narrative, figurative and imaginative language, and geopolitical assessment in a way that makes it particularly generative for Black women's theorizations and critiques of how the world is organized.<sup>4</sup> Biomythography's multivalent and critical self-referentiality and narrative constructions of memory draw on both the embodied self-reflection of Black feminist autobiographical traditions and the lyric imagery of Lorde's poetic training. In *Zami* Lorde engages in sensual worldmaking by constructing a spatial knowledge grounded in intimate knowledge of her own and other Black women's bodies, rather than in externally determined cartographic forms. Through Lorde's sensual worldmaking, her body's sensations, pleasures, affects, responses, and intimacies is the foundation for a Black feminist spatial knowledge production.

### **Sensual Worldmaking: Audre Lorde as Jamette Poet**

One of Lorde's most well-known and often-cited ideas is her classic feminist formulation of the erotic, most explicitly theorized in her 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" as an emotionally, spiritually, and physically based "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the

---

<sup>4</sup> As Heather Russell writes, "Deliberately engaged in an African Atlantic-inflected act of revisionism, biomythography simultaneously invokes, interrogates, and celebrates the mythic (and/or imaginative) possibilities encoded within acts of representation, providing always a polysemous cast to the 'historicity' of events being represented. Myth, dream, and history assume equal footing as efficient causality and equivalent epistemological value" (Russell 60).

power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 1984: 53). As the erotic is a sensibility deeply concerned with attending to the multiple valences of feeling, Lorde writes about feeling as an emotional and affective sense as well as an embodied and sensual form of knowledge. Lorde’s theorization of the erotic highlights the body as a site that both materially and intangibly possesses the capacities of the erotic. Specifically, Lorde writes of her body as serving as a barometer for measuring and assessing her joy as it is experienced independently, and as it is experienced in connection with others. She writes, “In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (56-57). Each of these distinct activities are enacted through particular forms of embodiment and physical exertion yet share a capacity for erotic satisfaction which can then be shared with other subjects.

The terms with which Lorde makes this comparison emphasize embodied sensation as a form of being in relation with the world beyond the body. As she writes, the body stretching ‘to’ music can be understood as the body stretching toward, in the direction of, the deepest rhythms of music as well as the rhythms of the body, as well as a stretching with music as a rhythmic accompaniment, as one dances or moves ‘to’ the music. These responsive movements between internal and external rhythms are not exclusive to the body as a coherent whole, but are a characteristic of response to stimulation of the sensory organs as well as forms of mental, emotional, and spiritual stimulation. As I will later demonstrate, Lorde’s narrations of moments in *Zami* such as pounding spices with her mother’s mortar and pestle evidence an understanding of how

her body's capacity for sensing can manifest as deep relationality between her body's internalized sensations and the stimulations of the outside world.

In the essay "Dis Place—The Space Between," Trinidadian poet and literary theorist M. Nourbese Philip argues for an embodied and geographically situated lexical distinction between space—the sexually-informed interior of cis Black women's bodies, the vagina, the 'inner space between the legs'—and place, the geographic realms that extend beyond the skin's surface, distinguished by their being situated outside of the space of the body (Philip 75).<sup>5</sup> Philip argues for conceptually and orthographically linking inner space and outer place in order to create the figure of S/Place: "the immutable and irrevocable linking of the inner place or space" (77). Throughout the essay the term 'dis place' is used to stand in for s/place's linkage. Like other Black feminist theorists, Philip focuses on the vulnerability to sexual and reproductive violence as a defining element of Black cis womanhood, naming the threat of rape as a sexual tool of control as well as the economic utility of rape during New World chattel slavery. Sexual assault against Black women reinforced the racial and gendered power matrix under construction during this period and allowed white men to reproduce their enslaved labor force through Black gestating bodies.<sup>6</sup> Philip argues that the contemporary moment

---

<sup>5</sup> This distinction grows as part of Philip's articulated reckoning, in "Dis Place," with her initial unwillingness to take up a feminist or gendered analysis of poetry in an earlier essay, "Earth and Sound," in which Philip reflects on the racial dimensions of poetry in the Caribbean. "Earth and Sound" juxtaposed the colonial poetic practices of the British and the affirmative relation to national identity and culture that Black Caribbeans produce through their poetry yet neglected a specifically gendered analysis. "Dis Place" is Philip's self-reflexive return to theorize gendered experience as it pertains to the Caribbean region as part of the colonially-defined New World, as it pertains to daily embodied life for Black subjects in the rural and urban spaces of Trinidad and Tobago, and as it pertains to the careful attention to emplacement that Philip claims must attend poetic writing.

<sup>6</sup> See Adrienne Davis' "The Sexual Economy of American Slavery" and Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," among others. Davis and Spillers write primarily about the U.S. while Philip focuses on Trinidad and the broader Caribbean. While there are significant differences in the political and social structures that governed slavery in these two places, the similarity of diasporic experience across the New World leads to a productive juxtaposition.

continues to mark the difficulty of bodily autonomy for embodied experiences of Black womanhood in the afterlife of slavery.<sup>7</sup> Philip writes, “The space between the Black woman’s legs becomes. *The place*. Site of oppression—vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer space” (Philip 76, emphasis in original). The space becomes the place: the Black woman’s bodily interior is in a state of becoming, as the full stop following ‘becomes’ makes clear. Through the economic production of profit from new, enslaved Black children, and through a legally enforced vulnerability to sexual violence that secured white women’s particular femininity, Black women’s lives and bodies became—or become, following Philip’s present tense, a key site for securing the white supremacist patriarchal social order that defines the geographic exterior of Black cis women’s bodies.

Violence is not the only way in which Philip links the interior of Black women’s bodies to their surrounding spaces. Along with (di)s/place, Philip signifies on the derogatory term *jamette*, used to refer to Black Trinidadian women living below the ‘diameter’ of respectability. (77-78). Philip’s use of the figure of the *jamette* crystallizes a broader Black feminist argument that gendering is a racialized process. The derogatory heft of the term is animated by a particular form of misogynoir: the *jamette* is named and identified as a *jamette* through her failure to perform respectable middle-class Black womanhood, keeping in mind that in hegemonic terms Black womanhood is always already failed in relation to white femininity.<sup>8</sup> Against racial and gendered expectations

---

<sup>7</sup> The ‘afterlife of slavery’ was coined by Saidiya Hartman in 2007 book *Lose Your Mother* and theorized by her and other scholars such as Christina Sharpe to name precisely these ways that the material, political, economic, social, and ideological conditions of chattel slavery bear forward to mark Black life in the present.

<sup>8</sup> I find that Philip’s framing of this specificity allows for the possibility of trans and nonbinary theorizations of the *jamette* poet, which I plan to explore further in future scholarship.



that black women passively accept the organizations of space and power authored by others rather than assert their own, Philip names as jamettes are those who are “possessing both the space between her legs and the space around her. Knowing her place.”<sup>9</sup> Jamettes claim possession of their own internal bodily geographies as well as ownership, and therefore authorship, of the external geographies they inhabit.

In “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde democratizes different forms of erotically-fueled creativity by asserting that poetry and other creative forms are enabled by the self-awareness and internal resources that the erotic can make available. Among many possible ways of developing self-knowledge based in the erotic, writing poetry is a strategy whose embodied erotic capacity transcends corporeal limits. As Lorde writes, she experiences “no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love” (Lorde 1984, 58). The physical movements involved with writing a poem—be it by hand, with a typewriter, at a keyboard—are different from those of sharing intimate bodily proximity with a lover. Yet through Lorde’s theorization of the erotic, we are able to understand how the capacity for self-knowledge and meaningful connection with others which characterizes the erotic is accessible through both of these embodied forms. Through Lorde’s prolific body of poetic writing, as well as her incorporation of poetic language into her essays and *Zami*, we see evidence of the linkages between the language, politics, and the erotic which Lorde ascribes to poetry. In this way, Lorde writes as a jamette poet, using the politicized identities of Black woman, lesbian, mother, among others, as a position from which to create and articulate knowledge linking her embodied experiences and the external world.

---

<sup>9</sup> “Dis Place,” 77; 86.

*Zami*'s Black feminist geography, as charted by Lorde, shows Black women's attempts to possess both inner and outer space. As the jamette has a language and a poetry particularly attuned to the inner space, the figure of the jamette poet is helpful as a way of thinking about how Lorde develops a politicized relationship to language as integrally connected to her erotic and intimate knowledge. Philip's concept of the jamette poet precisely locates the intersections of Blackness, womanhood, and poverty as the particular race, gender, and class positions that work together to define jamettes as occupying the wrong side of dominant respectability.<sup>10</sup> Since, as Philip asserts, jamettes develop their own language and their own poetry in which to narrate the experiences of "possessing their inner and outer space," jamette poetry does the intersectional political work gestured to in Patricia Hill Collins' notion of black feminist epistemology: the jamette poet creates poetry as a form of embodied knowledge about Black women's ways of being and living.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, throughout her career, Audre Lorde employed poetry as a multi-sited political tool. Lorde used poetry for political critiques, as a method for pushing back against the ways that Black people, women, lesbians, and poor people have been dehumanized. Lorde used poetry to speak back against the limitations of the politics of respectability by insisting on whole truths and attempting to account for as many aspects of her identity as possible in her writing, even if they are not considered respectable in the eyes of the dominant society. In her poem "Who Said It Was Simple," for example,

---

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the multiple ways that U.S. Black women developed, deployed, and complicated respectability as a means of seeking political and humanistic recognition in gendered terms, see Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London and New York: Routledge. 2008.

the speaker observes “an almost white counterman” at a restaurant dismissing a waiting Black man in order to serve a group of white women patrons who are preparing to attend a political march organized around “women’s” concerns (Lorde 1997; 92). Unlike the white women who “neither notice nor reject” the privileging they are afforded on the basis of their color, the speaker recounts:

“But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in color  
as well as sex  
  
and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations” (ibid).

The observations of this poem offer a critical example of the ‘sister outsider’ position: we do not know where and how the speaker is positioned inside of this restaurant, and in this instance the slight is not towards who we assume to be the Black woman speaker, but rather towards a Black man whose masculinity is temporarily subordinated to the whiteness of white women. The poem’s critique is not one that calls out or directly challenges Black women’s dual vulnerability to racism and sexism, but rather relates the experience of “seeing causes” deriving from multiple politicized identity categories. Through poetry alongside other genres of writing, Lorde offers insight and analysis of intersectional politics both of and ahead of her time.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Lorde’s intersectional analysis informed the politics of all of her writing, but these ideas are most notably and explicitly addressed in the well-known essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” in *Sister Outsider*. For the original use of intersectionality see Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-68. For discussions of how scholarly debates about intersectionality have changed since Crenshaw’s initial publication, see Cooper, Brittney. “Intersectionality” *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. 385-406 and Nash, Jennifer C. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2019.

### ***Zami's Black Feminist Geography***

Black feminist scholars and geographers have explored various discourses of Black women's marginalization and centering. bell hooks' book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* articulates a vision of a world in which feminist thinking is centered within popular discourse, rather than being regarded as a fringe ideology which then justifies the failure to take it seriously.<sup>13</sup> Two of Kimberlé Crenshaw's essays in which she develops the theory of intersectionality employ the figure of 'margins' in their titles.<sup>14</sup> The anthology *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* titles a section of mid- to late-twentieth century Black feminist writings "Beyond the Margins."<sup>15</sup> In her analysis of these and other black feminist engagements with spatial frameworks such as margins, centers, and peripheries Katherine McKittrick traces the paradox of how Black feminist use of the figure of the margin to indicate Black women's exclusion from dominant feminist discourses has itself become "an empty metaphor for 'difference'" through insufficient engagement with "the materiality of real margins and real centers" (McKittrick 58, 57). While McKittrick acknowledges and validates how discourses of the margins have meaningfully contributed to the ways we are able to understand Black women's various social positions, she rightfully insists on ensuring that both the deployment of spatial metaphors in Black feminist thinking and geographers' inquiries about Black feminist thought and Black women's experiences are attentive to the ways metaphor and material reality inform one another.

---

<sup>13</sup> hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press. 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-68; and Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul. 1991): 1241-1299.

<sup>15</sup> Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, Ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: The New Press. 1995.

Alongside this trajectory of Black feminist discussions of marginality, *Zami* allows us to examine instances of centering which are both metaphorically and materially anchored in Black women's and girls' bodies. Both the noun and verb forms of center are meaningful for illustrating how power and identities are spatialized: as a noun, 'the center' is a site around which objects and forces are arranged, while the verb 'to center' is to position an object, person, experience, or perspective as the thing around which objects and forces circulate. Lorde's writing from the perspective of a Black, Caribbean-American queer woman explicitly and implicitly contests the ways that the United States, European whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity are centered within language, dominant knowledge production, and in our self-perceptions. In the essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Lorde writes:

"Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society" (Lorde 1984, 116, emphasis in original).

Lorde positions this mythical norm in which privileges are cohered not as at the center of life in the United States, nor as at the center of our internal narratives, but at the edge of consciousness. This positioning revises the commonsense logic, both within and beyond Black feminist thinking, that Black women and other non-mythical-normative subjects naturally or necessarily occupy an unqualified marginal space. Instead, in Lorde's formulation, non-normative subjects are centered as the textual audience, indicated by Lorde's first-person plural address. More significantly, their experiences of non-normativity are not framed as existing outside of or beyond the center, but as centered in their own right, with prescriptive normativity positioned on the periphery of

consciousness, standing both in contradistinction to what we are, as nonnormative readers, and as evidence of the unequal distribution of power in U.S. society.

The list of identities and characteristics which typically shape Lorde's mythical norm—white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure, are resonant with Sylvia Wynter's elaboration of the concept of Man. Man is how Wynter names the archetypical white, bourgeois, masculine, Western European/Eurocentric subject, around and through which colonial modernity is constructed and maintained.<sup>16</sup> In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick refers to the spatial and temporal organizations that uphold Man's colonial domination as Man's geographies, which are contrasted to the notion of Black feminist geography McKittrick develops in the text. Building on Wynter's trenchant critique of the "overdetermin[ation], normaliz[ation], and naturaliz[ation]" of Man's particular praxis of being human against and above all other forms of enacting humanity, McKittrick proposes that Man's geographies comprise part of the overrepresentation of Man (McKittrick 128). McKittrick examines Man's colonial and imperial domination as it is played out in the disciplinary and the conceptual realms of geography, encompassing "the physical landscape and infrastructures, geographic imaginations, the practice of mapping, exploring, and seeing, and social relations in and across space" (McKittrick xiii).

An example of Man's geographies can be found in the establishment of the Greenwich Prime Meridian in 1851 and subsequently the imposition of Greenwich Mean Time as the standard for international timekeeping. These methods of marking geographic space and time became instantiated with the force of global governing power

---

<sup>16</sup> Wynter 266.

through the combined forces of global British colonial domination, and the related agreement among Western and some colonized nations to be governed by this British reference. The overrepresentation in the instance of the Greenwich Prime Meridian that declared London the cartographic center of the earth, then, is in explicit and implicit denial of the right of its colonial others to assert other geographies in which their own homes were centered.<sup>17</sup> Reading this geographic act as consonant with Britain's colonial and imperial expansion throughout the modern period, the Greenwich Prime Meridian and Greenwich Mean Time are acts of centering that produce the hegemonic white cultural spaces that cohere as the 'centre' of empire.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside and differing from the edicts of imperial geographies, *Zami*'s Black feminist geography asserts alternative cartographies. Lorde's moments of sensual worldmaking offer examples of acts of centering which posit her geopolitical positions as a (post)colonial and (post)imperial subject in the Americas, her subject position as a queer young Black girl, and her sensing corporeal body as a center from which the world can be understood and narratively (re)created. In these moments of centering her world, Audre as the narrative subject identifies and justifies the perspective from which she, and by extension *Zami* as a text, understands the world.<sup>19</sup> Much of *Zami*'s first chapter is

---

<sup>17</sup> In *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed illustrates how the distinct and specific geopolitical positions which undergird conventional cartographies are disappeared and recast as a natural and objective 'zero point' as a consequence of normative colonial and imperial power. She writes, "Cartographic space is, of course, 'flat space' that conventionally describes locations as determined by axes of coordination that are independent of one's bodily location . . . such 'flatness' is itself 'orientated,' in the sense that it still depends upon a point of view, as a point that is lost on the horizon, or that is concealed in the very mode of its operation" (Ahmed 113).

<sup>18</sup> This use of the British spelling gestures towards María Cristina Rodríguez's distinction between center and centre as formulations more focused on material geographic perceptions and cultural/ideological significance, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Throughout this analysis I use "Audre" and "Lorde" somewhat interchangeably, borrowing from Heather Russell's practice of referring to Audre Lorde as 'Lorde' when describing her as an author, and 'Audre' when describing her as the subject of her own narratives.

dedicated to Lorde's recounting of detailed descriptions of the places that Audre's mother, Linda Belmar Lorde, inhabited and encountered as a child growing up in Grenada: Noel's Hill, where she spent her childhood and adolescence, and Carriacou, the 12 square-mile Grenadine island where Linda was born. Though Carriacou was conquered by the British in 1763 along with the larger island of Grenada, Lorde recounts being unable to find this small island on the maps available to her in her early school days.

Towards the close of the first chapter of *Zami* Lorde narrates a complex negotiation of competing geographies: the textually justified pedagogical geography in the form of commercial materials intended to teach geography to children in the United States, in which Carriacou fails to exist, and an experiential geography transmitted through verbal and sensorial communication, in which Carriacou is a home Lorde knows intimately despite never having been there. In this negotiation Lorde uses sensual worldmaking to 'center' the world in her own bodily knowledge.

Carriacou which was not listed in the index of the *Goode's School Atlas* nor in the *Junior Americana World Gazette* nor appeared on any map that I could find, and so when I hunted for the magic place during geography lessons or in free library time I never found it, and came to believe my mother's geography was a fantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned, and in reality maybe she was talking about the place other people called Curaçao, a Dutch possession on the other side of the Antilles.

But underneath it all as I was growing up, *home* was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper, nor to throttle and bind up between the pages of a schoolbook. It was our own, my truly private paradise of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums. (Lorde 1982, 14)

In this passage from *Zami*'s introductory chapter, the first geographic contrast emerges as a cartographic one. If maps are the commonsense markers of geographic authority, then the absence of Carriacou from the maps Lorde comes to know in school



leaves her unable to empirically confirm the spatial reality that her mother has insisted on. Lorde's attempts to reconcile her mother's descriptions of Carriacou with its absence from the Atlas becomes a task to negotiate different forms of knowledge about how space is organized. According to Linda, Carriacou not only existed, but was their home that contained the flora and fruits that sustained their lives, as well as their imaginations when separated from the island. The inability to visually confirm what her mother asserts as truth produces doubt for Lorde, or rather, causes her to propose justifying alternatives to her mother's geography: "a fantasy, or crazy, or at least too old-fashioned."

The second paragraph of this passage reveals Lorde's layered sensual worldmaking act as its second geographic contradiction. To the extent that the island of Carriacou is literally negated by these cartographically authorizing texts, we might read Linda's experiential geography of her home as a geography that maps Black Caribbean women's marginalization within authorized dominant geographies. Lorde negotiates the tension between maternal experience and 'official' geographic texts by insisting, as demonstrated by the turn to possessive language in the second paragraph, on the realness of her mother's geography to herself as well as to her mother. Over and against the cartographic validation Lorde seeks through school is the deeply felt knowledge that "*home* was still a sweet place somewhere else."<sup>20</sup> For Lorde, 'home' exists, in its sweetness, somewhere other than 'here.' Part of the distinction that the 'somewhere else' of home represents for Lorde is precisely Carriacou's cartographic evasiveness. This small island, unlike the larger Grenada, and certainly unlike the Harlem from which

---

<sup>20</sup> Scholars of diaspora studies have written at length about the appeal and elusiveness of home for those within the diaspora, as well as the particularly fraught nature of queer searches for 'home' in diaspora. See Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the subject* (1994) and Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires* (2005) among others.

Lorde was writing, seems to have avoided being ‘captured,’ ‘throttled,’ “bound up between the pages of a schoolbook.” Carriacou, as home for the young Lorde, is different from other places Lorde knows by virtue of its existence being primarily verifiable neither through maps in schoolbooks, nor even through embodied experience in that place—in contrast, for example, to the many embodied childhood experiences of Harlem that are narrated through the first parts of *Zami*. Lorde’s home is a paradise at once ‘our own,’ referring to the collective of her mother telling the stories and her sisters who are hearing them alongside her, and Lorde’s own “truly private” space.

While “underneath it all” begins this part of the passage with a celebratory refutation of traditional cartographic authority, Lorde does not rely on recuperating these terms or this authority in order to assert her knowledge of home. She instead turns to vivid imagistic language culled not from her own memories of Carriacou, but rather from her memory of her mother’s memories, which have been re-animated and given material heft through the cycle of remembering, telling, listening, and imagining. Lorde lists tropical fruits, spices, seeds, and candy as some of the objects to be found in her private paradise. The sweetness of these living, edible objects from home finds resonance with Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley’s analysis of ‘thieving sugar,’ which she defines as a way to name Black Caribbean women’s recuperation of the geographies and symbols of sugar in their loving and writing.<sup>21</sup> If the ‘theft’ for Tinsley refers to the unsanctioned status of the queer love between women, and to the recuperation of spaces and symbols of geographic ownership, then Lorde’s narrative attachment to the sweetness of the fruits and spices that

---

<sup>21</sup> This definition is drawn from Tinsley’s book *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Tinsley cites the phrase’s origin in the first page of Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here*. (Tinsley 2-3).

represent her maternal home space can be a theft of paradise. By narrating what home once was, Lorde asserts her knowledge of a place whose geographical materiality exceeds the limits of dominant cartography. The narration of this sensual worldmaking undermines colonial geographies and demonstrates that *Zami*'s map is charted by the bodily knowledge and Black feminist subjectivity that comprise a Black feminist geography, rather than traditional cartographic tools.

### **The Erotic S/Place of Womanhood**

Lorde dedicates significant textual space to narrating the events of the day that she first menstruates. While Lorde engages the commonsense cultural narratives of menstruation marking a transition or passage into womanhood, menstruation is emphasized within *Zami* because of the change in physical sensations and self-knowledge it engenders in Lorde's body. Given this emphasis, Lorde's discussion of menstruation as a coming-of-age process goes beyond reproducing a normative, static, and biologically deterministic notion of womanhood, but instead illustrates Lorde's identification with a form of queer womanhood defined by an increased bodily capacity for sensing, feeling, and being in relation as others. Lorde's interpretation of experiences and sensations within her body—narrated in *Zami* through sensual worldmaking—are crucial to how she genders herself as a woman, with womanhood in turn being central to her theorizations of poetry, of family, and for the possibilities for joy, pleasure, connection, and growth produced by the erotic.

As an expression of care and quiet celebration of this physiologically and culturally significant moment, Linda allows Audre to choose what the family will have for dinner on the evening of her first menstruation. Lorde chooses souse, a meal that

requires her to pound spices in a traditional mortar and pestle. Lorde narrates each aspect of this task: setting up the mortar and pestle, gathering and arranging the roots and spices to be pounded, and the physical labor necessary to complete the task. Through the use of the mortar and pestle, which are objects that were carried from her mother's home and therefore her own, spice is transformed through Lorde's learned, intuitive, semi-autonomous bodily movements into material for sustenance and erotic pleasure. Linda Lorde's mortar and pestle participate in Audre Lorde's construction of woman as a meaningful category of self-identification. However, the womanhood that Lorde defines for herself is different than the womanhood her mother is eager to inaugurate her into. Lorde had spent the first part of the summer in which she gets her period bearing witness to her mother's worries: that summer, Audre was fourteen and a half and her mother surreptitiously asked multiple doctors why her daughter had "breasts, but no period" (75).<sup>22</sup> Linda's relief when the awaited menstruation finally arrives is thus born out a sense of assurance at her daughter's progression towards normative womanhood.

Sara Ahmed discusses how language can be used within family settings to (re)produce heterosexuality as category of normativity. Ahmed writes of how 'utterances' such as referring to a young boy as a "little" version of his father's name serves to "position the child as the not-yet adult by aligning sex (the male body) and gender (the masculine character) with sexual orientation (the heterosexual future). Through the utterance, these not-yet-but-to-be-subjects are 'brought into line' by being 'given' a future that is 'in line' with the family line" (Ahmed 83). Upon finding the blood in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Lorde's minimal knowledge about the biological processes of menstruation, ovulation, and pregnancy are the result of a combination of conducting library research in the wake of being sexually assaulted by another child when she was ten years old and being informed about the mechanics of sex by a female classmate.

bathroom that Audre leaves for Linda to discover in lieu of having to communicate through her embarrassment and confusion, Linda provides her summary of “all of this”: “It’s nothing to get upset over, you are a woman, not a child anymore” (Lorde 76). Linda interprets Audre’s menstruation as a confirmation of Audre’s natural and appropriate procession on the ‘line’ of nascent heterosexual cis womanhood, as Linda’s own life has seemingly modeled for Audre and her older sisters. With her affirmative statement, Linda authoritatively positions Audre as a woman and adult, rather than a child. Her designation of Lorde’s adulthood is made in response to the physiological fact of menstruation, as she is not in sufficient communication with Lorde to know or seek to understand the impact of this physical transition on Lorde’s capacity to sense, feel, and know differently. Linda uses utterances, gestures, and shared objects in order to communicate her investment in Lorde’s new ability to reproduce the ‘line’ of heterosexuality.<sup>23</sup>

Significantly, Audre’s new womanhood is also hailed by Linda with a series of warnings that evoke the respectability politics many Black women have chosen to adopt as a method for trying to secure their safety and that of their children. As Lorde recounts dialogue between her and her mother from that day, she recalls Linda’s reminders for Audre to keep her sanitary napkins out of her father’s sight, and warnings for her to “not be so friendly with every Tom, Dick, and Harry,” a warning which confuses a young Audre who admittedly “[did] not know any boys” (77). Linda’s attempts to welcome her daughter into womanhood are necessarily cognizant of the vulnerability of Lorde’s s/place, yet are also constitutive of a normative, hetero-patriarchal kind of gendering that

---

<sup>23</sup> Audre’s later daydream of sexual and emotional intimacy with her mother disrupts the neat continuance of this line by moving with her female sexual body and gender identity of woman not towards heterosexual reproductive motherhood, but towards a queer extension of her womanly body into that of her mother.

proposes womanhood as a condition defined by particular biological reproductive capacities and attendant vulnerabilities.

If the condition of womanhood had previously been externally conferred through maternal warnings about greater vulnerability to sexual violence, Lorde's narration of her experience of menstruation demonstrates her bodily-centered experience of womanhood as affirming. The sense of womanhood that Lorde narrates in the wake of getting her period is a queer and erotic self-authored form of sensual knowledge, rather than an externally authored condition. While the arrival of her period triggers young Audre's own sense of relief that she was not pregnant as the result of a childhood sexual assault years earlier—confirming that an aspect of her gendered experience has involved vulnerability to gendered and sexualized violence—this recognition is narratively subordinated to the experiences of pleasure and deeper sensual awareness that follow. As mentioned earlier, in the wake of Lorde's first period the ritual task of pounding spices with her mother's mortar and pestle is experienced as erotically stimulating. Even before menstruating, Lorde has described this kind of work as deeply and sensually engaging. The first time that she introduces the reader to the process of pounding spice, Lorde narrates being “transported into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound” by the intensity of the pleasurable sensations that this task involves (74).

When pounding spice on the day of her first period, Lorde is explicit about the sexual character of the pleasure she gains in this act. She writes:

“The jarring shocks of the velvet-lined pestle, striking the bed of spice, traveled up an invisible pathway along the thread into the center of me, and the harshness of the repeated impacts became increasingly more unbearable. The tidal basin suspended between my hips shuddered at each repetition of the strokes which now felt like assaults. Without my volition my downward thrusts of the pestle grew

gentler and gentler, until its velvety surface seemed almost to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar.

The whole rhythm of my movements softened and elongated, until, dreamlike, I stood, one hand tightly curved around the carved mortar, steadying it against the middle of my body; while my other hand, around the pestle, rubbed and pressed the moistening spice into readiness with a sweeping circular movement.

I hummed tunelessly to myself as I worked in the warm kitchen, thinking with relief about how simple my life would be now that I had become a woman. The catalogue of dire menstruation-warnings from my mother passed out of my head. My body felt strong and full and open, yet captivated by the gentle motions of the pestle, and the rich smells filling the kitchen, and the fullness of the young summer heat.” (79)

In this scene’s sensual worldmaking, Lorde illustrates how the act of pounding spices is part of constructing a sensual geography of a self-centered, body-centered queer womanhood. Whereas in earlier instances of undertaking the work of pounding spice Lorde finds the process—using her two hands to place vegetables, roots, and spices in a mortar, to grip and hold a pestle, and to rhythmically and repeatedly bring the two into contact—sensually exciting and is aware of the way that the sensations transport her, in the wake of her period she dedicates more narrative space and more descriptive detail to relate the explicitly erotic aspects of this experience. Lorde’s increased sensual sensitivity in the wake of her period and the self-knowledge it produces illustrates how, as Sharon P. Holland puts it, “the body itself becomes a repository for both feeling and knowledge” (Holland 224). The body’s knowledge is quite literally corporeal for Lorde, who positions her newly menstruating womb as a basin of blood “made real and available to [her] for strength and information” (Lorde 1982, 78). This language directly recalls her earlier characterization of the erotic as an internal bodily resource located “on a deeply female and spiritual plane” (Lorde 1984, 53). The self-authorship of young Audre’s womanhood is further illustrated by the contrasts between the discourses of warning and respectability that Linda admonishes Audre with, and how Lorde narrates cooking, her period, her

physical body, and womanhood once she is alone in the house. The transition of menstruation makes her body feel “strong and full and open,” as opposed to fearful in response to her mother’s warnings. Through the moments of heightened sensual sensitivity and ultimate orgasmic ecstasy that this passage demonstrates, Lorde narrates the process of learning the depths and heights of what her body, as a queer woman’s body, can feel.

In light of the intense pleasure that Lorde gains from this act, it is noteworthy that Lorde reveals that the day of her first period is the last time that she pounds spices with her mother’s mortar and pestle. The objects of the mortar and pestle thus play a significant role in Lorde’s transition into womanhood, both externally imposed and internally defined womanhood, and in Lorde’s transition out of a form of intimacy with her mother, which can be marked through these two women no longer sharing the use of the mortar and pestle. In her analysis of queer objects, Sara Ahmed states that they:

“support proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*. A queer object hence makes contact possible. Or to be more precise, a queer object would have a surface that supports such contact. The contact is bodily, and it unsettles that line that divides spaces as worlds, thereby creating other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen” (Ahmed 169, emphasis in original).

Linda’s life follows the racialized and gendered line of heterosexual marriage to a fellow Black Caribbean, reproduction, and domesticity. Audre’s life line is queered, or slanted, by her movements through interracial marriage to a white Jewish man, having and raising children, divorce, long-term queer partnerships with women, and the active construction and maintenance of lesbian community throughout her life. As Audre’s menstruation literally and symbolically marks her transition into queer womanhood, I therefore read



the mortar and pestle as queer objects which facilitate the crossing of these two women's differently gendered and lifelines.

The bodily contact supported by the surface of these queer objects is quite literal. The lush, descriptive language Lorde uses to describe both her body and the use of the mortar and pestle illustrates how the sensuality of both of these phenomena are tactilely connected. For instance, Lorde describes a growing feeling, as she pounds spice, of a 'vital connection' between her working hands, touching the pestle, into the 'molten core of [her] body' all the way into the basin of her womb (Lorde 1982; 78). The 'tiding ocean of blood' situated within Audre's womb is sensitive and responsive to Audre's repetitive and ritual movements with the pestle. The act of pounding spice and Lorde's physical response to it become narratively entangled through the nouns and verbs Lorde uses to describe them: shudders, strokes, repetition, thrusts, elongation, moistening, gentle, velvety, caress, and liquefying describe the transformation of herbs and spices in the mortar and pestle as much as they describe Audre's escalating sexual arousal and ultimate orgasmic release. Looking closely at the surface of the mortar and pestle we notice, following Lorde, that the acids and juices from the roots and spices used in the mortar and pestle contribute to the disintegration at the basin of the mortar and the end of the pestle, the points of repeated contact. This disintegration has changed the texture of both objects such that they bear the impressions of this repetitive intimacy. The sense of touch is used to link spices, the erotic landscapes of the interior of Lorde's body, and the mortar and pestle which originates in Carriacou. Narrating touch thus becomes a sensual worldmaking strategy through which Lorde conveys knowledge about queer womanhood which emerges from sensual experiences.

Ahmed's conception of queer objects is not only about contact, though. Specifically, she claims that queer objects facilitate touch and contact between lives lived on parallel lines, which would not otherwise meet. With this in mind, for Ahmed's definition of queer objects to make sense in the case of Linda Lorde's mortar and pestle we must account for the geographies of the mortar and pestle itself. The chapter this scene takes place in begins by situating mortars and pestles as definitively Caribbean and definitively gendered: "Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar" (Lorde 1982, 71). West Indian mortars are authoritatively and favorably compared to Puerto Rican mortars, which are positioned as the less-desirable alternative should one not have access to a West Indian mortar. While the reader is not explicitly told that Linda's mortar was brought with her from Grenada, Lorde's admiring description of the object implies that the mortar and pestle in use in her childhood came from "the vicinity of that amorphous and mystically perfect place called 'home'" (Lorde 1982, 71). As I argued earlier, Lorde is able to construct an identification with Carriacou as 'home' through her mother's embodied memories, in lieu of her own. With Carriacou as the metaphorical if not literal geographic site of origin of the mortar and pestle, Lorde's transformational menstrual connection with the queer objects of the mortar and pestle serves as another form of attachment to Carriacou.<sup>24</sup>

The womanhood that Lorde narrates herself entering is queer in the sense that it is self-centered, self-constructed, and is premised on the new forms of erotic bodily

---

<sup>24</sup> In addition to reinforcing a shared connection to the islands of Carriacou and Grenada as a homeland, the mortar and pestle facilitate a crossing of what could otherwise be the parallel lines of each woman's geographical trajectory in the African diaspora. Linda was born in the Caribbean then migrates to the United States, where she spends the rest of her life. Audre was born in the United States, where she spends most of her formative years. As an adult Audre travels throughout the world as part of her literary career, including many years spent in the Caribbean, and dies on the island of St. Croix.

knowledge she is able to access. Lorde's intimacy with queer objects facilitates this queer self-construction, therefore paving the way for intimate connections with other Black queer women. The advent of her menstruation marks her body as a vehicle with an increased capacity for sensual awareness and erotic pleasure. While young Audre's sense of relief at the sense of simplicity that she anticipates as a new woman may initially read as comically naive, it speaks to the optimism and self-assurance produced by the mode of womanhood she understands herself as entering. Through Lorde's literary narration of this knowledge in descriptively rich terms, the textual space of *Zami* becomes a secondary site of sensual worldmaking. While pounding spice serves as a metaphor for how intimacy with meaningful objects can be a vehicle for gendered self-knowledge, Audre Lorde's relationship with Afrekete, which closes the narrative of *Zami*, illustrates how intimacies between bodies can produce gendered self-knowledge as well as facilitate encounters between different bodily geographies. Assessing interpersonal intimacies between Black queer women is responsive to Treva Carrie Ellison's call to "de-naturalize assumptions surrounding the category of Black womanhood and sharpen our analysis of how Black womanhood is relationally crafted" (Ellison 12).

### **Afrekete and Intimacy**

The third significant point in *Zami*'s erotic geography is the healing Black queer relationship between Audre and Kitty. Readers are introduced to Afrekete—or Kitty, as she is nicknamed—towards the end of *Zami*'s narrative, as Audre is navigating her final break-up with her white partner Muriel, which had been her longest relationship to date. Lorde recalls having met and danced with Afrekete at a house party in Queens a year prior. When they meet again, the recently single Lorde is in the midst of navigating the

feelings of loneliness and isolation generated by the breakup and by navigating predominately white lesbian social spaces in search of community. In contrast to the social separation Lorde has recently felt, her brief and powerful relationship to Afrekete is narrated as a series of sensual, corporeal, spiritual, and geographic intimacies.

The concept of girlfriend subjectivity allows us to understand why and how Lorde's narration of erotic skin-to-skin intimacies with Afrekete reflects an elaboration of self-understanding as much as it accounts for a bond between two subjects. Kevin Quashie uses the term 'girlfriend subjectivity' to name Black women's praxis of relational subjectivity in which "the boundaries of self, metaphorically but also literally, are disrupted, severed, transcended; the self and its girlfriend become contiguous and sometimes indistinct subjects" (Quashie 16). The boundaries between self and other are disrupted through the Black woman subject's vacillation between "identification *with*," in the sense of inhabiting a shared positionality with the other, and "identification *as*" the other, in which the Black woman subject does not recognize a distinction between herself and her other, the girlfriend.<sup>25</sup> The term girlfriend, as Quashie discusses, has particular significance as a way of naming expansive forms of "nonfilial, visceral bonds of sisterhood between adult Black women" in Black women's interpersonal and media cultures, especially among African American women (Quashie 18).

Drawing on the work of various Black feminist scholars who think about these kinds of relationships, such as Alice Walker's conception of womanism, Cheryl Clarke's call for "voluptuous Black woman sexualities," and Toni Morrison's signal portrayal of Black women's friendship and intimacy in the novel *Sula*, Quashie recognizes that the

---

<sup>25</sup> Quashie 16.

praxis of girlfriend subjectivity disrupts heteronormativity through a definitive centering of black womanhood.<sup>26</sup> Audre and Afrekete's 'girlfriend' relationship disrupts heteronormativity in an additional way: the use of 'girlfriend' to name their intimate relationship as Black women must also foreground the denotation of girlfriend as an erotic and romantic partner. Lorde and Kitty's relationship reflects a girlfriend subjectivity that is decidedly queer: while their girlfriendness encompasses the elements of intimate friendship that characterize most 'girlfriend' relationships, the physicality of the erotic and romantic partnership fuels their encounters. Knowledge of and intimacy with each other's bodies is therefore critical within Lorde and Afrekete's relational co-construction of Black queer womanhood.

Knowledge of one another's bodies begins on the night of their reintroduction with intensely intimate dancing. As Audre's and Afrekete's bodies come into contact on the dance floor, Lorde describes the sensation of her skin transitioning from feeling "cold and hard and essential, like thin frozen leather that was keeping the shape expected," into "a warm, almost forgotten, slip of anticipation, that ebbed and flowed at each contact of [their] moving bodies" (1982; 245). This physical shift represents a transition from the sensory numbing that accompanied her post-breakup isolation into an affirmation of the sensual and erotic intimacy with Afrekete that is to come. The language and imagery with which Lorde describes the sensual experience of her initial, softening intimacy with Afrekete recalls the language she uses to describe her sensual entry into womanhood when pounding spice. In both instances Lorde describes temperature: first the heat of summer and the sweat of her working and menstruating body, and later the warmth of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Quashie 35-37. Clarke citation is from "Living the Texts Out: Lesbians and the Uses of Black Women's Traditions," cited in Quashie 36.

“slip of anticipation” enveloping her skin in contrast to the coldness she had felt while isolated. The changing textures of physical reactions are also eroticized as Lorde describes the transformation of solid herbs, roots, and spices into the aromatic and “liquefying mash,” and then the melting of the ‘carapace’ of her skin into a substance that “ebbed and flowed” with bodily contact. Lorde’s act of pounding spice in the wake of her menstruation was a form of constructing a queer, self-authored womanhood, but the beginning of her physical intimacy with Afrekete introduces a girlfriend, another presence of Black queer womanhood for Lorde to understand and construct herself in relation with.

Lorde’s methods of narrating her and Afrekete’s intimate relationship illustrate the ways that these women experience each other’s bodies as sources of pleasure, but also as spaces with their own particular geographies. In describing the sexual coming together of their bodies, Lorde writes:

*“I held you, lay between your brown legs, slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests, slowly licking and swallowing as the deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh. Our bodies met again, each surface touched with each other’s flame, from the tips of our curled toes to our tongues, and locked into our own wild rhythms, we rode each other across the thundering space, dripped like light from the peak of each other’s tongue.*

We were each of us both together. Then we were apart, and sweat sheened our bodies like sweet oil.” (Lorde 249, emphasis in original).

This paragraph’s shift to italics, which elsewhere in *Zami* has signaled dreamlike and mythological reflections, is accompanied by a shift from a first- to second-person address: Audre is speaking directly to Afrekete as she narrates this encounter in detail. This passage reflects movement across metaphorical topographies, from the trees and forests of Afrekete’s legs and vulva, the deep oceanic seascapes of her vagina, and the

celestial imaginary in which the surfaces of their bodies meet. These movements are unhurried, as the refrain of ‘slowly’ indicates. Sugary ripe banana becomes continuous with Afrekete’s body as it mixes with her vaginal fluids, allowing Lorde to consume tropical fruit as she consumes Afrekete’s body. In this way, the spaces of the Caribbean and Lorde’s imagined home of Carriacou are connected to the landscapes she shares with Afrekete.

The second half of the passage illustrates the simultaneity of self and other which defines the praxis of girlfriend subjectivity. Audre’s understanding of herself as a unique subject coming into contact with Afrekete as another subject is indicated by Lorde’s pluralities: ‘our’ bodies, ‘our’ various bodily surfaces as points of connection, ‘our own wild rhythms,’ and the triumphant imagery of riding one another across space. And yet, both second- and first-person tenses are used to seamlessly shift between Lorde’s independent actions to narrating her and Afrekete’s ostensibly distinct bodily experiences with one voice. As the penultimate sentence reads, “we were each of us both together. Then we were apart . . .” Lorde’s narration of this encounter evidences what Quashie terms the “chaotic grace of material and spiritual edges that normativities would to calcify” (Quashie 16). Put differently, the girlfriend subjectivity which characterizes Audre and Afrekete’s relationship enacts the breakdown of clear and calcified boundaries, corporeal as well as affective, between self and other which is manifest in Lorde’s narration of a simultaneous ‘I’ and ‘we.’

Lorde also situates the geographies of her and Afrekete’s intertwined bodies within the larger context of Black Atlantic diasporic geographies. In the last erotic encounter between the two women which Lorde narrates, she and Afrekete make love on

Afrekete's apartment rooftop, colloquially referred to by urban dwellers as Tar Beach.<sup>27</sup>

In these final pages of her biomythographic text, they descend from the roof and out to the street. Lorde narrates her and Afrekete's emergence into the particular geographic and cultural space and time of "the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem summer" (Lorde 252). Juxtaposed alongside the characterization of where they currently *are* is a specific assertion of where they are *not*. Lorde writes, "It was not onto the pale sands of Whydah, nor the beaches of Winneba or Annamabu, with cocopalms softly applauding and crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous, beautiful sea. It was onto 113th Street that we descended after our meeting under the Midsummer Eve's Moon" (Lorde 253).

Lorde's references to West African beaches in Ghana and Benin as places that she and Afrekete are not located in, yet very well could be, foregrounds the geographical and cultural spaces of the African diaspora as integral to their positioning as Black queer diasporic subjects. The land- and waterscapes Lorde evokes here hold multiple levels of significance. Reference to these beaches and coastal locations resonate with Lorde's repeated characterization of Afrekete's body in oceanic terms, whether describing its "tidal motions" or likening their conjoined sweaty bodies to a sacred high tide. The "tar-laden and treacherous" quality of those otherwise beautiful West African seas mirrors the tarred roof which gives Tar Beach its name in order to gesture towards the material residues of Transatlantic slave trade ships left behind in the oceans, as well as a recognition of the various violences that the seas have represented for Black peoples

---

<sup>27</sup> Lorde published this final chapter of *Zami* as a short story called "Tar Beach" in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith. The phrase also recalls, of course, Faith Ringgold's iconic 1991 picture book and quilt of the same name.



throughout the diaspora.<sup>28</sup> Through these narrative references, Lorde evokes imaginative spaces in which the geographies of the African diaspora are the necessary background for her and Afrekete's intimate praxis of girlfriend subjectivity.

Within *Zami*'s narrative space, Audre and Afrekete's girlfriend relationship is an important refiguring of Lorde's first girlfriend relationship with Gennie. Genevieve, or Gennie, was a Black girl and high school classmate of Lorde's with whom Lorde experienced her first relationship of chosen and reciprocal erotic intimacy. As Lorde writes, "Gennie was the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving" (87). Their love took varied forms, all of which were expressed through the length and quality of time that the two girls spent together. While they are certainly distinct subjects, Lorde's literary portrayal of Afrekete echoes the portrayal of Gennie in a number of ways: Gennie was a sole daughter raised by her mother and nearby grandmother, while Afrekete has a daughter who was being kept by Afrekete's mother at the time of Afrekete and Audre's relationship. Both were performers—Afrekete as an occasional lounge singer, and Gennie as a dancer being trained in classical ballet. However, the similarity between them which leads Lorde to make a connection between the two characters is that Afrekete's apartment is in the same neighborhood as that of Ella, Gennie's grandmother. The recognition of this shared geography leads into a reflection on Lorde's anger and frustration at the social conditions that negatively impacted both her and Gennie's young lives. Echoing their geographical proximity Lorde has positioned this kind of elegy to Gennie's loss at the hands of "[Audre's] silence and [Gennie's] pain and despair, to both

---

<sup>28</sup> These subjects bear another literary connection to Africa: within Afro-diasporic religious traditions in the Americas, Afrekete is the name for Eshu/Legba's female counterpart, the trickster goddess of the crossroads.

our angers and to a world's cruelty that destroys its own young in passing" both narratively and chronologically proximate to her relationship to Afrekete, emphasizing the shared significance of these two figures.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly before her 17th birthday, Gennie commits suicide. Lorde is shattered, and her reflections on "things I never did with Genevieve" are equally descriptive of the physical, imaginative, and emotional intimacy of their relationship. Lorde writes:

*"Things I never did with Genevieve: Let our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt. Go to a Village gay bar, or any bar anywhere. Smoke reefer. Derail the freight that took circus animals to Florida. Take a course in international obscenities. Learn Swahili. See Martha Graham's dance troupe. Visit Pearl Primus. Ask her to take us away with her to Africa next time. Write THE BOOK. Make love."* (Lorde 97, emphasis in original)

So much of the girls' relationship involved shared flights of fancy, as illustrated by the more playful and seemingly absurd situations Lorde has described here. We can understand their girlfriend subjectivity as teenagers through Lorde's narrations of the ways Gennie and Audre tried to "bring more of [themselves] into consideration, to imagine [themselves] in a wild safety" (Quashie 18). The majority of the scenarios that Lorde mourns here indeed illustrate the active and vital processes of imagination that characterized the girls' relationship. Certainly, for Lorde as an adolescent navigating a restrictive and constraining home environment, and likely for Gennie as a young person seemingly battling major depression, sharing a robust imaginative life was a meaningful representation of deep intimacy and security with the other.<sup>30</sup> Lorde's mourning of the elements of physical intimacy that she never shared with Gennie marks them as

---

<sup>29</sup> Lorde 251.

<sup>30</sup> As Jafari Allen writes of deep, queer, friendship: "These visions of raising consciousness, mending wounds, telling stories, moving between one place and another, and making new worlds, are the work of friendship" (Allen 134).

unfulfilled possibilities. Audre and Gennie's girlfriend relationship was one in which the two girls experienced tremendous intimacy and closeness, yet also one in which both depression and youthful immaturity presented limits to the ways that their intimacy could develop. While Lorde confronts a unique sadness in the loss of Gennie as her first Black queer erotic companion, the significance of her intimacy with Afrekete years later is a reclamation of the possibilities for intimacy and relational recognition produced by another Black queer woman.

## **Conclusion**

The methods of sensual worldmaking used throughout *Zami* allow Lorde to construct a Black feminist geography rooted in her embodied experiences and the intimacies she shares with other Black women. My dissertation takes its title from the closing scenes of *Zami* discussed in this chapter because of the ways that Lorde's narrations of Afrekete's space—the external and internal spaces of her body, as well as the domestic space of her apartment—encapsulate how Black queer womanhood produces its own geographies. The locations marked on the Black feminist map of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* include Audre Lorde's experience at an early age learning to privilege a knowledge of home space that is maternally transmitted and personally felt over a knowledge that must be validated through external and colonial forms of validation. Lorde's first experience of menstruation is a location which inaugurates her construction of a self-authored and bodily-centered definition of queer womanhood, one which honors her body's robust capacity for sensation. In relationships with Gennie, then echoed and elaborated with Afrekete, Black queer womanhood is located in the intimate spaces of queer girlfriend subjectivity, in which one's emotional, physical, and spiritual

self is intertwined with the ‘self’ of the other. This constellation of moments, taken individually and collectively, provide clarifying ways for understanding Black queer womanhood, the knowledges produced by erotic intimacy, and the construction of space both within and from within Black queer women’s bodies.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2006.
- Boyce Davies, Carole. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London and New York: Routledge. 1994.
- Busia, Abena P.A. "Miscegenation as Metonymy: Sexuality and Power in the Colonial Novel." in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Ed. New York and Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan. 2005. pp. 245-257.
- Clarke, Cheryl. "Living the Texts Out: Lesbians and the Uses of Black Women's Traditions." In *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Ed. A Busia and S. James. New York: Routledge. 1993. 214-227.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London and New York: Routledge. 2008.
- Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 2017.
- . "Intersectionality" *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. 385-406.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-68.
- . "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul. 1991): 1241-1299.
- Davis, Adrienne. "'Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle': The Sexual Economy of American Slavery." *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies*. By Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith. Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York, NY: Feminist, 2009. 215-39. Print.
- Ellison, Treva Carrie. "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender." *The Black Scholar* 49.1: (2019). pp. 6-16.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2005.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, Ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: The New Press. 1995.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2007.

- Holland, Sharon P. "To Touch the Mother's C(o)untry: Siting Audre Lorde's Erotics." in *Lesbian Erotics*, Edited by Karla Jay. New York and London: New York University Press. 1995.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press. 1984.
- Lorde, Audre. *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc. 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Tar Beach." *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1982.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2006.
- Nash, Jennifer C. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Philip, M. Nourbese. "Dis Place—The Space Between" in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Spring Valley: Mercury Press. 2008. 74-112.
- Quashie, Kevin Everod. *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 2004.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Notes toward a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979 - 1985*. London: Virago. 1986.
- Rodríguez, Maria Cristina. *What Women Lose: Exile and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Caribbean Writers*. New York: Peter Lang. 2005.
- Russell, Heather. *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press. 2009.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books. 1993. Print.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*. 17(2): (1987). 64-81. Print.
- Stephens, Michelle Ann. *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2014.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2010.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*. Vol. 3 No. 3 (Fall 2003): 257-337.

Authoring Claims: Critique, Autobiography, and Imagination in Michelle Cliff's  
*Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*

“I am untangling the filaments of my history.”

- Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*

When Jamaican American author Michelle Cliff was asked in a 1994 interview to confirm whether or not her 1980 prose-poetic text *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* was autobiographical she answered, rather obliquely, “some places are close, others are rough.”<sup>1</sup> Neither denying autobiographical influence nor affirming the text as a purely or primarily faithful account of her life, Cliff’s ambivalence marks *Claiming* as autobiographically indeterminate. Across the multiple literary genres she employed throughout her career—novels, short stories, essays, lyric and prose poetry—Cliff incorporated elements of her lived experiences, with varying levels of factual accuracy, within her narrative material. If we take as a given that autobiography, particularly autobiography written by Black subjects in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, should never be assumed to be ‘factual’ representations, we are freed to focus on how an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical text invites its readers to perceive and understand the author as literary subject, the narrative being relayed, and the political, cultural, and social context the narrative and subject are situated within.<sup>2</sup> *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (sometimes shortened in this chapter as *Claiming*) is a book-length collection of episodic lyric and prose poems organized around themes of

---

1 Opal Palmer Adisa, “Journey into Speech—A Writer between Two Worlds: An Interview with Michelle Cliff,” *African American Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1994) Black Women’s Culture Issue, 275.

2 When theorizing transaesthetics in black trans autobiographies L.H. Stallings writes, “scholarship on slave narratives, oral histories, the dozens, and biomythographies in black literary tradition reminds anyone that autobiography, authorial control, and tropes are often strategic manipulations to take into account differences of gender, class, nation, and sexuality between authors and their audiences. Sometimes an autobiography is as much fiction as fact, as much omission as revelation.” L.H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 216.



how socioeconomic class position, skin color, and gender inform movements through trans-Atlantic cultural and national spaces; how the violent commitment to silences, invisibility, and withdrawal from community shapes family legacies; and how the histories of British colonialism and U.S. imperialism continue to shape Jamaican culture and society. These themes are the filaments Cliff speaks of untangling in this chapter's epigraph.

The previous chapter illustrated the ways that Audre Lorde used lush and descriptive language in *Zami* to narrate her embodied intimacies with other Black and queer women. Lorde's coining of the term biomythography to describe *Zami*, explicit signaling of the book's autobiographical character throughout its narrative, and detailed reflection of her sensuous and embodied experiences illustrates sensual worldmaking as a tool of self-revelation, both in the sense of making something known and in the sense of supernatural communication. In contrast, I suggest *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* reflects a different autobiographical logic. I propose that the autobiographical logic of this text is one of self-referentiality rather than self-revelation, with the emphasis on reference in its singular representing one source among many potential sources, as well as reference as passing mention or allusion.

This chapter examines how the performance of self-referentiality—through the use of the first-person reflections and the corroboration of personal narratives across multiple literary sites—is central to the critiques of colonial knowledge production and identity construction which characterize *Claiming* and Cliff's body of work more broadly. In other words, Cliff's novels, short stories, poetry, and essays selectively and strategically engage elements of Cliff's familial histories, memories, and other lived

experiences as one source of imaginative material among others. As an example, one of the more obvious and frequently cited elements of autobiographical and literary crossover in Cliff's writing shows up in the similarities between Cliff herself and Clare Savage, the protagonist of her novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*.<sup>3</sup> Both Michelle Cliff and Clare Savage are light-skinned queer women identified as having Creole heritage, born and partially raised in Jamaica to economically privileged families, and were educated abroad in the United States and Europe. Reading these novels in conjunction with Cliff's collections of prose, poetry, and essays reveal that beyond similarities of appearance and background, Clare Savage and Cliff as author articulate similar critiques of the racial and class hierarchies of late-colonial and post-colonial Jamaica.<sup>4</sup> Through her use of narrative strategies across multiple genres to enact these critiques, Cliff's writing illustrates links between heteronormative notions of gender, violent constructions of whiteness and Blackness in the Americas, and the uses of British literary and cultural traditions to maintain social inequalities. Cliff disrupted colonially-imposed norms of narrative subjectivity and narrative authority in order to challenge colonially-imposed distinctions between different literary genres. In Cliff's reading, maintaining strict and exclusive boundaries around distinct genres served to reinforce the distance of Caribbean literary audiences from their colonial, geographic, and cultural histories.

---

3 Michelle Cliff, *Abeng*. New York: Plume, 1984; and Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*. New York: Vintage International, 1987.

4 For in-depth readings of *No Telephone to Heaven* see the following book chapters: 1) Heather Russell, "Race, Nation, and the Imagination: Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*" in *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 81-107; 2) M.M. Adjarian, "White Skin, Black Masks: Michelle Cliff and the Allegory of a Dream Deferred" in *Allegories of Desire: Body, Nation, and Empire in Modern Caribbean Literature by Women*. (Westport and London: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 15-49; and 3) Judith Raikin, "'With the Logic of a Creole': Michelle Cliff" in *Snow on the Cane Fields, Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 177-204.

However, in light of these apparent connections, Cliff's discussions on the topic of autobiography in her work ranged from ambivalent—as in the Adisa interview cited above—to fiercely critical of what she understood as the depoliticization that Western critics imposed on Black and Caribbean women's narrative writing. In an essay called "Sites of Memory" from a collection titled *If I Could Write This in Fire* Cliff reflects on an experience participating in a conference dedicated to "Transitional Identities" at the University of Mainz in Germany. She writes,

"My particular problem with the literary participants of the conference is their determination that they read my fiction—and other Caribbean fictions—as autobiography, diluting and undermining the politics of the narrative. They want to reduce the collective to the individual. They want to define who we are: What are 'transitional identities' anyway? None of the organizers seems able to respond. Are we seen as lone riders between the rainforest and the Black Forest, the island and the metropole?"

I am not a metaphor. My place of origin is not a metaphor. I inhabit my language, my imagination, more and more completely. It becomes me. I do not exist as a text. I am spoken into being—as Léopold Sédar Senghor said of the world. I speak myself into being and with that speech my place of origin. I use this speech to craft fiction, which is not a record of myself, which is self-consciously—self-confidently—political. I do believe in the word, that a new world may be spoken into being."<sup>5</sup>

Cliff asserts that critics' insistence on naming Caribbean fiction as autobiographical when it is not marked that way functions within and is reinforced by an assumption that autobiographical writing lacks political intention. Edward Said, for example, dismisses what he terms the "post-imperial testimony" within the literary criticism written by (post)colonial subjects regarding British literature.<sup>6</sup> The suggestion is that testimony, linked to autobiography through their shared production of highly personalized narratives, is not only inferior to but also incompatible with more robust "theoretical

---

5 Cliff, "Sites of Memory," 57-58.

6 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 65-66.

discourse.”<sup>7</sup> For Cliff, writing within this postcolonial academic context, the equation of one’s literature to autobiography has the effect of ‘diluting and undermining the politics of the narrative’ as is modeled by Said’s mischaracterization of testimonial writing.

Cliff then turns to an assertion of how her politics, as an author and an individual, are grounded in her capacities to fashion language. By asserting that neither she nor her place(s) of origin are metaphors Cliff articulates opposition to being transformed into a symbol, a figure, or a representative of some other object or concept. Through contrasting the accusations of metaphor with an assertion of inhabiting her language and imagination, Cliff equates being metaphorized with a hollowing out, or an evacuation of meaning. In opposition to static and externally-authored definitions—being a metaphor, being a text, existing as a single and consumable record of one’s life—Cliff claims a dynamic process of becoming and creating oneself. The use of speech to craft self-consciously and self-confidently politicized fiction is a manifestation of Cliff’s belief that “a new world may be spoken into being,” confirming the relationship between acts of literature and language and the processes of constructing reality. Michelle Cliff’s body of literature is thus simultaneously invested in generating a new world through incisive critiques of our present world, and in utilizing lived experience as one resource for narrative material among others.

This study shares with existing scholarship on Cliff an understanding of this author as committed to challenging colonial domination through her fictional narratives

---

7 Ibid. Said’s position helps to illustrate the ideological and methodological distinctions that separate post-colonial from de- and anti-colonial modes of thinking and scholarship. While Said is sympathetic to a critique of colonial attitudes and power in Joseph Conrad’s *Kim* or *Heart of Darkness*, his prioritization of ‘current theoretical concerns’ reifies the centering of dominant, Eurocentric knowledge production practices that have rendered first-person challenges to colonialism marginal in the first place.

of Jamaican history and identity. Scholars such as Judith Raiskin, Angeletta Gourdine, and Nada Elia have traced the constructions of creole identity, including queer creole identity, in Cliff's fiction.<sup>8</sup> Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley departs from other scholars' primarily triumphant readings of Harry/Harriet, a genderqueer trans woman character in *No Telephone to Heaven*, in order to interrogate the limits of Cliff's engagement with queer Caribbean identity.<sup>9</sup> Others, such as Heather Russell, Noraida Agosto, and Abid Labidi Larbi, center their readings on Cliff's myriad interrogations of dominant colonial histories and received notions of a history/fiction binary.<sup>10</sup> Sally O'Driscoll's writing directly examines how the critical perception and engagement of Cliff's authorial identity is dependent on both the geographical and cultural identity locations of her critics.<sup>11</sup> Despite the comments cited above, a theme less explored by contemporary feminist critics of Cliff's writing is the role of the autobiographical in her work. For example, M.M. Adjarian is one of few critics who explicitly takes up questions of autobiographical methods in Cliff's writing but does so primarily to claim that Cliff insists on maintaining distance between herself and her literary constructions.<sup>12</sup>

---

8 Judith Raiskin, "'With the Logic of a Creole': Michelle Cliff, 177-204; Angeletta Gourdine, "'Write it in . . . Put the sex right up on in there!': Walker, Cliff, and Aidoo Sexualize and (Re)map the Diaspora," in *The Difference Place Makes: Gender, Sexuality, and Diaspora Identity*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 80-102; and Nada Elia, "'A Man Who Wants to Be a Woman': Queerness as/and Healing Practices in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*," *Callaloo* 23 no. 1 (Winter 2000), 352-365.

9 Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Transforming Sugar, Thieving Revolution: Male Womanhood and Lesbian Eroticism in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*," in *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

10 Noraida Agosto, *Michelle Cliff's Novels: Piecing the Tapestry of Memory and History* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Abid Larbi Labidi, "Dismantling the Prison-House of Colonial History in a Selection of Michelle Cliff's Texts," *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 7, no. 5 (October 2016): 64-69, Heather Russell, *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2009).

11 Sally O'Driscoll, "Michelle Cliff and the Authority of Identity," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 28, no.1 (Spring 1995), 56-70.

12 M. M. Adjarian, *Allegories of Desire: Body, Nation, and Empire in Modern Caribbean Literature* (Westport and London: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 26.

The emphasis on the fictional rather than the autobiographical or self-reflective in Cliff's work is evident in the relative lack of critical attention paid to *Claiming* in comparison to Cliff's novels, particularly *Abeng*, *No Telephone to Heaven*, and *Free Enterprise*.<sup>13</sup> Given Cliff's reflections on the dangers of misreading Caribbean women's fiction as autobiographical, I agree that while an interpretation of Cliff's novels as autobiographical could become reductive, there are different political stakes of such an analysis for *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, a text that is not marked as fictional. My analysis of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* therefore presents a revision of the way most scholars approach questions of genre and autobiography in Cliff's work. A significant exception to this pattern is Carole Boyce Davies' brief discussion of *Claiming* in her book *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, which describes Cliff's text as a "somewhat autobiographical exploration of identity" in which "personal history, family history, and people's history and culture all converge."<sup>14</sup> Davies' cogent précis of Cliff's text names many of the themes I examine within Cliff's work, including "gender, heritage, sexuality, and the sense of place defining that identity."<sup>15</sup> Building on Davies' approach, my study prioritizes an examination of the anti-colonial and feminist critique enabled by the combination of autobiographical reflection and politicized analysis used in Cliff's memoir, rather than a preoccupation with identifying the presence of autobiographical influence in fiction. My reading is grounded in the framework of sensual worldmaking, a style of Black feminist self-

---

13 Cliff, *Abeng*; Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*; Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1993).

14 Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 122-123.

15 Davies, *Black Women*, 122.

oriented narrative writing that uses embodied, sensuous experiences as the basis of its theorizations and critiques. Using sensual worldmaking as an analytic frame identifies how the embodied experiences of Black women literary subjects are narrated in ways that generate knowledge about the self, intimate relationships, and how their bodies are positioned within structural power dynamics.

In the first chapter of *Afrekete's Room*, I identified sensual worldmaking as a narrative process that uses embodied experience as an authorizing source of knowledge about physical spaces and identity-based power dynamics. In my reading of *Zami* I analyzed specific embodied experiences whose narration encapsulated Lorde's use of her body as a site of spatial knowledge production within the text. The bodily knowledge production narrated in *Zami* serves to confront and refute colonial acts of marking space and time, instead centering an experience of Black queer girlhood that forms the foundation of Lorde's self-authored Black queer womanhood. This chapter turns to identify the use of sensual worldmaking to articulate political analysis which is simultaneously anchored in lived experience and reflective of broader power dynamics. I illustrate how Cliff's deft manipulation of multiple strategies for offering political critique through narrating the self disproves accusations that autobiographical writing lacks sophistication or is an insignificant mode of knowledge production.

Sensual worldmaking is used, for example, to identify disconnection as a theme of Cliff's childhood. Various passages in *Claiming* are set on the plots of forest and farmland owned by Cliff's maternal grandmother in Jamaica. Reflecting on a childhood experience of watching women wash clothes in the river on this land Cliff writes,

"This is *our* land, *our* river—I have been told. So when women wash their clothes above the place where I swim; when the butcher's wife cleans tripe on Saturday

morning; when a group of boys I do not know are using *my* pool—I hate them for taking up *my* space. I hate them for taking up space; I hate them for not including me.”<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Cliff describes and alludes to places that her body inhabits in order to illustrate the sense of ownership she feels about this collectively used land. Being told by family members that the land is “ours” serves to create, as this passage’s emphases illustrate, an exaggerated contrast between those within the ‘my’ and ‘our’ of Cliff’s family, and the other inhabitants of this land who are excluded from ‘our.’

Unsurprisingly, this will to exclude and the class differences between Cliff’s family and their ‘others’ result in both physical and social distances between Cliff and the other people she observes at the river. Cliff thus vacillates between feelings of superiority and entitlement and the frustration of disconnection from community. This passage enacts sensual worldmaking through its use of embodied experiences and memories to give insight about how Cliff and her family are positioned within the larger structures of white supremacy and classism in Jamaica. This tension and Cliff’s different forms of reckoning with it pervade *Claiming*.

Given the fluidity of Cliff’s narrative methods and her skepticism of autobiographical labels, one could argue against a reading of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* as autobiographical. After all, by no means are all texts which employ and prioritize the first-person address of “I” necessarily reflective of the author’s lived experiences. However, the consistent use of “I” in *Claiming* constructs and invites a kind of relation between the narrative author and the narrative subject. Renée Larrier’s notion of autofiction—defined as Caribbean prose texts with first-person narrators—is

---

<sup>16</sup> Cliff, *Claiming*, 15. Emphasis in original.



helpful here because it analyzes first-person narratives from the perspective of their narrative construction.<sup>17</sup> While autofictional strategies are found across works published as memoir, autobiography, and fiction, Larrier notes that this analytic does not reproduce the obsession with ‘authenticity’ or “separating fact from fiction” which have plagued readings of Caribbean first-person texts.<sup>18</sup> Larrier claims that the narrative *I* is privileged in Caribbean literature as “one direct response to [the] particular historical circumstances” of Western colonial and imperial domination in the Caribbean.<sup>19</sup> Within this broad context of Caribbean literature, the use of the narrative *I* “inscribes subjectivity, making the previous object of discourse, the subject.”<sup>20</sup> In this way, the “I” of Caribbean autofiction is a political strategy concerned with contesting colonial erasure through narrative construction.<sup>21</sup> Building on the analysis of autofiction Larrier offers, my reading for the ways that *Claiming* strategically manipulates autobiography prioritizes the political positioning of the text’s narrative *I*.

Through my analysis of sensual worldmaking in *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* I contribute a close attention to the role that narratives of lived and embodied experiences play within Cliff’s larger critical project. In the next section, I position *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* and sensual worldmaking within a genealogy of Black feminist politicized writing that uses narratives and theorizations of lived experience as the anchor for political critique. I then explore how

---

17 Renée Larrier, *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 6.

18 Ibid, 21.

19 Ibid, 6.

20 Ibid, 7.

21 Larrier distinguishes the *I* of Caribbean-authored text from the *I* of colonial or imperial outsiders, which means that the subject of this *I* of autofiction “benefits from insider knowledge, resists the dominating gaze, bears witness (témoignage), and transmits ancestral memory.” Ibid, 7.

Cliff critiques the structures of white supremacy and heteronormative gendering through narrations of her relationship with her mother. Finally, I illustrate how Cliff uses *Claiming*'s textual space to narratively create Black feminist community, in contrast to the absence of connection with Black women narrated elsewhere in the text.

### **Personal and Political Black Feminist Narratives**

*Claiming* mobilizes first-person reflections not for the purpose of presenting a knowable record of Cliff's life, but in order to critique the narratives and terms of colonial knowledge production. Cliff's use of self-reflective writing across genre is part of a long trajectory of Black feminist writing.<sup>22</sup> The politics underlining this tradition are aptly stated in the Combahee River Collective's coining and definition of the term 'identity politics' in their "Black Feminist Statement." For the Collective, identity politics named their understanding of Black feminism as emerging from "the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black women's lives."<sup>23</sup> The Collective produced the term identity politics to describe their belief that "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of [their] own identity."<sup>24</sup> They articulated themselves as situated within multiple marginalized social identity categories simultaneously. The Collective recognized that as poor and working class Black people, Black women, and Black lesbians, they had neither "racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have the minimal access to

---

22 Early African American feminists like Maria Miller Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell directly drew on their personal experiences in order to generate the narratives they produced to advocate for African-American political recognition. Zora Neale Hurston is known for her pioneering of autoethnography, a different form of self-focused critical writing.

23 The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 233.

24 Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 234.

resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.”<sup>25</sup>

By identifying the lack of dominant conversations examining “the multilayered textures of black women’s lives,” the Combahee River Collective assert the need for articulating their particular experiences as multiply marginalized subjects.<sup>26</sup>

Building upon this emphasis on articulating experience, Black women writers’ use of lived experiences within their writing serves as a means of correcting the historical pattern of under-examining Black women’s—particularly Black queer women’s—lives and perspectives.<sup>27</sup> The Collective’s theorization of this notion of identity politics emerged from genealogies of Black women writers in the United States, across genre, who invoked various forms of self-referentiality in their rhetoric. Cliff engages this Black feminist concept of identity politics by situating marginalized subject positions—Black, creole, woman, lesbian, post-colonial subject—as positions from which knowledge has been and currently is produced.<sup>28</sup> Cliff’s assertion of authorial identity by incorporating autobiographical material serves to counteract the double-edged sword of black women’s

---

25 Ibid, 236.

26 Ibid.

27 To briefly and partially summarize other points in this tradition, Black feminist literary critics Carole Boyce Davies and Barbara Christian foregrounded the ways black women authors theorized black women’s subjectivity in their work, and both Davies and Christian utilized self-referential anecdotes in this analytical work. Audre Lorde defined the genre of her landmark text *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* as biomythography, a genre combining autobiography, fiction, history, and mythography. Numerous contemporary Black women writers and scholars have made their lived experiences the direct subject of critical works about the Black diaspora. See Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*; Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1997); Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 115; and Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982) Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007) Hazel Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2019); Brittney C. Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: Picador, 2018); and M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005).

28 For more on black feminist geographies and positions of knowledge production. See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

epistemic invisibility which assumes on one hand that non-white, non-masculine, non-European subjects lack the authority to be producers of knowledge, and claim on the other hand that the only forms of knowledge that racialized, sexualized, gendered, and colonized subjects can lay claim to are the purely autobiographical. *Claiming* therefore simultaneously critiques colonial forms of knowledge production and demands that readers recognize Black and Caribbean women's textual, narrative, and discursive authority.<sup>29</sup>

Across multiple sections of *Claiming*, Cliff reflects on the different ways that the light skins and mixed creole heritage of the Cliff family signify within Jamaica, the United States, and in Europe. A key critical method within *Claiming* is the literal juxtaposition of colonial literary and cultural narratives with Cliff's embodied experiences and family background, both real and imagined. Cliff therefore uses her narrative authority within the space of *Claiming* to signify upon texts in the (post)colonial canon, therefore contesting their cultural authority. In the eponymously titled section of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, Cliff invokes the character Bertha Mason Rochester of the 1848 Charlotte Brontë novel *Jane Eyre*, as well as that character's revision as Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys' 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As Dionne Brand has pointed out, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a counternarrative to *Jane Eyre*. Brand illustrates how Rhys, a white Creole woman born and raised in Dominica before moving to England, revised Charlotte Brontë's choice to obscure the material realities of

---

<sup>29</sup> I read Hazel Carby's *Imperial Intimacies* within this tradition as well. Carby puts her historical and archival training to use in the literal archives of the British empire in order to find traces of her mother's Welsh family, her father's Jamaican family, and the British colonist in Jamaica from whom her father's family descended. *Imperial Intimacies* raises questions regarding historical and narrative authority in the context of colonialism similar to the address of these questions in *Claiming*.

slavery and colonialism on which the novel's themes of wealth, social structure, and normative white gender roles are based.<sup>30</sup>

Within *Jane Eyre*, the transatlantic slave trade and ongoing colonization of the Caribbean is physically represented in the form of Bertha Mason, the white Creole woman Rochester has married for her wealth, locked in the attic, haunting the sprawling English house she is confined in with her moans, yells, and attempts at arson. As Brand puts it, “the colonial event is hidden in *Jane Eyre*, albeit elaborating itself and growling above in the attic at Thornfield Hall. The hidden violence, the hidden plantation, slavery, in Jamaica, all hidden” (Brand 2020, 30). Rhys’ counternarrative positions Bertha, renamed as Antoinette, at the center of her own narrative. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the story of Antoinette Cosway, a white Creole girl growing up in a recently post-emancipation Jamaica, as she tugs against the threat of marriage to an English man. Rhys locating the character of Bertha, now Antoinette, and the Caribbean space she comes from as narratively central rather than marginal, gives Bertha another life within *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s narrative space. Cliff’s rewriting of Bertha in *Claiming* is similar to Rhys’ counternarrative in the sense that both authors’ revision of *Jane Eyre* is rooted in their own lived experiences as Caribbean subjects. However, while for Rhys this relation is mediated through the distancing strategies of fiction and the novel, Cliff uses a first-person invocation, intimately and imaginatively linking herself to this character:

“To imagine I am the sister of Bertha Rochester. We are the remainders of  
slavery—residue:  
white cockroaches  
white niggers  
quadroons  
octoroons  
mulattos

---

<sup>30</sup> Brand 2020, 34.

creoles  
white niggers.”<sup>31</sup>

Cliff’s musings connecting herself to Bertha follow citations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, therefore positioning her imaginative construction of Bertha as a counternarrative in conversation with Brontë and Rhys. By aligning herself with Bertha under the umbrella of “remainders” or “residue” of slavery, Cliff likens Bertha’s white creole madness and Rochester’s necessity to sequester it in the attic with the Cliff family’s need to hide, obscure, and fail to confront their non-white heritage. In so doing, Cliff both illustrates colonial literature’s construction and perpetuation of white supremacist categories and hierarchies, and explicitly names her own family history as a site for examining the impact of colonial identity narratives. Through close narratives of embodiment, Cliff explores her personal and family history as a history of conflicts over the ways that identity is understood, negotiated, and talked about.

This section of *Claiming*, while sharing some aspects of with *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s interest in critiquing *Jane Eyre*’s silencing of colonial and Caribbean materiality, departs from the earlier counternarrative’s investment in leaving white supremacy unacknowledged and unchecked. As Brand notes, “*Wide Sargasso Sea* also has these Black figures (as opposed to people) who populate the text, as crowd or townsfolk, whose actions and movements and whisperings are unexplainable, surreptitious, belligerent, without explanation, and therefore purely malevolent. (Malevolent as opposed to rebellious—or desirous of taking and making freedom.)” (Brand 2020, 35). *Wide Sargasso Sea* therefore makes an appeal for Antoinette’s white creole feminine humanity

---

31 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 44.

while leaving Blackness to exist as its irrational opposite.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the counternarrative Cliff creates in *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* exposes the anti-blackness which subtends both *Jane Eyre*'s silencing of the Caribbean and *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s re-voicing of it. Cliff's listing of the blatantly and casually offensive terms used to describe those who, like herself and Bertha, occupy Caribbean forms of non-European whiteness reveals the ways Blackness is imagined by those in the colonial center to stain all in its geographic proximity. *Claiming*'s counternarrative of these two texts deploys an imagined shared heritage with Bertha Rochester/Antoinette Cosway—based on Cliff's actual Creole heritage—as a sensual worldmaking strategy which acknowledges and reimagines the formative role which colonial literature has played in her cultural and academic education.<sup>33</sup>

Elsewhere in the section titled “Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise” Cliff negotiates the tension between her white skin and the privileges it grants her in Jamaica and abroad, and the Blackness of her family heritage. Indeed, the very titling of the text as well as its first-person address attempts a “radical act of renaming and redefining the self.”<sup>34</sup> *Claiming* is an effort to reclaim a specifically Jamaican as well as broader diasporic Blackness and a simultaneous reckoning with the social, cultural, and familial disconnections which the social privileges of whiteness require. Relatedly, throughout *Claiming* Cliff narrates a fraught relationship rooted in a frustrating lack of intimacy with her mother. This relationship pattern can be read as a function of the

---

32 Cite Wynter and also perhaps Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*.

33 In a future project I am interested in more substantively engaging Cliff's discussions of her conception of her own whiteness throughout her literature. Specifically, I want to look to theorizations of Creole identity emerging from Jamaican and Caribbean cultural theorists, as well as scholars of race as a global construction. For more on Cliff's racial identity in the context of her writing see Judith Raiskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields*.

34 Russell, *Legba's Crossing*, 62.

disconnection from self and others which the Cliff family's legacy of aligning with whiteness has demanded and rewarded. Cliff describes the experience when, at twenty-two years old, she confronts her mother about the fact of their family's Blackness. Her mother responds:

“You don't know what it was like when we first came here. No one wanted to be colored. Your father's family was always tracing me. And these Americans, they just don't understand. My cousin was fired from her job in a department store when they found out she was passing. I stopped seeing her because your father was always teasing me about my colored cousin. Things are different now. You're lucky you look the way you do, you could get any man. Anyone says anything to you, tell them your father's white.”<sup>35</sup>

According to Cliff's mother, the stakes of the negotiating racial identity are clear: being or being read as “colored” makes one vulnerable to various forms of anti-Black racism. Being aligned with Blackness generates ridicule, mocking, and loss of income and economic opportunities. Perhaps what Cliff's mother feels that Americans don't understand is Jamaica's complex, yet still fundamentally anti-Black racial and color hierarchy, which operates somewhat differently than U.S. racial logics. Relatedly, this passage reveals that Cliff, her mother, and her father are each differently positioned with respect to their ability to pass for white. Cliff's father's family may have been ‘tracing’ her mother due to their suspicion that the mother was not sufficiently ‘white,’ or at least not as ‘white’ as they were. Cliff, on the other hand, is reassured by her mother that if she is ever questioned about her identity she can respond by asserting that her father is white. With this statement, Cliff's mother positions her daughter and Cliff's father as having a visual claim to whiteness different than her own.

---

35 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 47.



Within the space of the United States, the social privileges of whiteness are achieved at the cost of negating Blackness within oneself, one's family, and the broader society.<sup>36</sup> For Cliff's mother, claiming whiteness demands separation from family members and maintaining silence about the full truth of one's heritage. This silence extends to one's children, hence Cliff's formal encounter with this family heritage once she is already an adult. Cliff's mother's comments reveal how her investment in white supremacy is simultaneously an investment in heteronormative gendering, generating an additional level of silence that disrupts the relationship between mother and queer daughter. In this passage, Cliff's mother's assessment of Cliff's saving grace is that Cliff's appearance will allow her access to "any man," with a presumed emphasis on white men. In her mother's eyes, heterosexual coupling and reproduction with a white man would allow Cliff and her assumed future children more secure and less tenuous access to whiteness. This future which Cliff's mother imagines for her daughter makes Cliff's queer desires an impossibility. For Cliff, then, ascribing to whiteness and its social privileges would require a negation of her Black heritage as well as her queerness.

Reading *Claiming* through the framework of sensual worldmaking reveals how Cliff narrates these layered silences and emotional distance as manifested through her feelings of unfamiliarity and lack of intimacy with her mother's body, as a child as well as an adult. Cliff writes "A space is left where knowledge of her body should be. I fill this space with a false knowing: I mis/take my flesh and contours for hers—my voice

---

36 Reflecting on the ways that U.S. popular culture stabilizes anti-Black racism through narratives of immigration Toni Morrison writes, "It doesn't matter anymore what shade the newcomer's skin is. A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open." Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," *Time Magazine*, Dec 2, 1993, <https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Morrison-On-the-Backs-of-Blacks.pdf>.

speaks for those parts of her she cannot reach or show.”<sup>37</sup> In the absence of knowledge about her mother’s body Cliff narrates a ‘false knowing’ of this body through perceiving her own body, voice, and subjectivity as representing that of her mother. This projected representation produces the appearance of knowledge of her mother’s body, yet it is unable to resolve the crisis produced by the lack of intimacy. The lack of access to the intimacy and honesty that knowledge of her mother’s body would necessitate requires that Cliff herself attempt to voice the aspects of her mother which her mother is unable or unwilling to show. More specifically, Cliff’s efforts to claim an identity she was taught to despise is in large part an effort to claim the Blackness that her mother wears like an open secret. Cliff’s use of both literal and metaphorical embodied experiences in order to theorize her maternal relationship is an enactment of sensual worldmaking within this text.

*Claiming* textually illustrates Cliff’s efforts to claim Blackness and intentionally disrupt the assimilation into whiteness she has been trained to desire. Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed theorizes white supremacy through the notion of ‘habits’ and ‘habitual’ practices. Ahmed writes, “White bodies are habitual insofar as they ‘trail behind’ actions: they do not get ‘stressed’ in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness ‘goes unnoticed.’”<sup>38</sup> In white supremacist spaces, the bodies of white people are the physical referent of their normativity. Moving through space with a white body can thus allow that body to be taken for granted, rather than serve as a site of stress or friction in encounters with others. However, in *Claiming* Cliff narrates whiteness’

---

37 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 12.

38 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 132. I am interested in a deeper engagement with phenomenology, including Ahmed’s reading of the phenomenology of whiteness.

absence of friction and stress as a simultaneous absence of the frictions of intimacy.<sup>39</sup> In a chapter titled “Passing” she writes:

“I thought it was only the loss of the mother—  
but it was also the loss of others:  
who grew up to work for us  
and stood at the doorway while the tv played  
and stood at the doorway while we told ghost-stories  
and ironed the cloths for the tea-trays.  
but this division existed even then—

Passing demands a desire to become invisible. A ghost-life. An ignorance of connections.”<sup>40</sup>

In this passage, the figure of the ghost makes visible the ways whiteness is at work within Cliff’s domestic space. As the ghost stories are told and traded among those who are accepted and recognized as members of the family, the non-familial others are relegated to the perimeter of the ghost story circle, present yet not included. Cliff’s reflection on passing does not focus solely on the spaces of the external world in which whiteness is dominant but focuses here on how white supremacy demands a disruption of intimacy even in intimate home spaces. Thus, the ‘ghost-life’ demanded of passing requires that one is not fully seen, lest the ‘fact’ of one’s blackness be visually confirmed. This passing also requires negating connections such that one can pass through space unencumbered by the possibility of rubbing up against an other—whether a mother, a cousin, or a long-time family connection—whose more visible Blackness might make one’s own Blackness more visible through reflection and proximity.

---

39 Here I am thinking with Keguro Macharia’s formulation of frottage as a “relation of proximity” within the black diaspora, which “gestures to the creative ways the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds.” Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.

40 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 5.

Both the title and the larger critical project of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* function as a rejection of the common-sense logics of white supremacy which offer some the possibility of a ghost-life, neither fully seen nor able to be touched. Cliff's narrative presents a situation in which claiming Blackness is the function of an intentional choice which seeks to honor one's full heritage and culture. She writes, "The question of my identity is partly a question of color: of my right to name myself. That is what I have felt—all along."<sup>41</sup> Cliff's color is undoubtedly a site of privilege in that she has the capacity to pass through some spaces with more ease than Black people with darker skin. Yet in bringing her race to the foreground, including her color and its privileges, she makes visible the moments in which she refuses to 'sink' into the easy non-notice of whiteness that white privilege affords.<sup>42</sup> The simultaneity of Cliff's white skin and Black heritage complicates notions of racial reproduction which are anchored in the body's identification.<sup>43</sup> Sara Ahmed writes, engaging bell hooks' notion of eating the other, "to become black through proximity to others is not to be black, it is to be 'not black' by the very extension of the body toward blackness" (Ahmed 128). For Cliff/Clare, there is a desire to avoid consuming Blackness in this way, but instead to use proximity to Blackness to validate Blackness, or not-whiteness, that is understood as inherent to one's identity, yet must be actively chosen.

---

41 Ibid, 8.

42 Here, I see connections to conversations happening among Latinx scholars, on Twitter and elsewhere, about the intersections of whiteness and Latinx identity. Specifically, calls to account for non-U.S. forms of whiteness as having the potential to be similarly positioned in relation to white racial power could productively complicate my reading of Cliff's and her family's whiteness in Jamaica.

43 In future work I am interested in further thinking about how Cliff's skin and skin color, specifically, mediated her movements through geographical spaces. I am specifically interested in engaging Michelle Stephens' thinking on skin in *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, And the Black Male Performer*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

The autobiographical content of Cliff's narratives thus functions as "discourse that signifies beyond the materiality it represents" not simply through representing the materiality of Cliff's lived experiences, but by also intentionally drawing a connection between Cliff's experiences, the literary and cultural contexts they were shaped within, and a larger project of constructing anti-colonial discourse.<sup>44</sup> Her invocation of Bertha Rochester as a literary example of someone whose Caribbean whiteness causes friction in the colonial center of England facilitates a reading of how such frictions have been negotiated within Cliff's family. The use of these lived and familial experiences is a form of sensual worldmaking, in the sense that sensuous and embodied experiences are central to the project of narrative knowledge production. Elsewhere within *Claiming*, Cliff also turns away from visibly autobiographical methods, opting instead to speculatively construct Black women's embodied experiences as integral to the process of Black feminist historical knowledge production.

### **The Historians: Writing Black Feminist Space**

This chapter has argued that autobiographical narrative is used throughout *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* to critique colonial knowledge production and identity construction in the Caribbean. Significantly, the chapter "Against Granite" is the only section of the text that does not include a first-person narrative. The absence of first-person narrative in this section, particularly when contrasted with the first-person narration present in the other nine sections of the text, functions as an intentional distancing of the narrative from the appearance of autobiographical or memory-based reflection. "Against Granite" is therefore the section of *Claiming* which

---

<sup>44</sup> Adjarian, *Allegories of Desire*, 8.

registers most clearly as fictional. Despite the absence of first-person reflection, this section nonetheless develops a critical narrative emerging from embodied experience. “Against Granite’s” sensual worldmaking articulates the speaker’s Black feminist imagination through the narrative of an imagined physical and social space which materially centers Black women’s physical comfort and pleasure as well as their acts of collaborative knowledge production.

“Against Granite” opens with an old Black woman, seated in the basement of a marble building, naming herself as a historian. Cliff describes the geographical space that comprises and surrounds the marble and granite building:

“Here is where black women congregate—against granite. This is their headquarters; where they write history. Around tables they exchange facts—details of the unwritten past. Like the women who came before them—the women they are restoring to their work/space—the historians are skilled at unraveling lies; are adept at detecting the reality beneath the erasure.

Out back is evidence of settlement: a tin roof crests a hill amid mountains—orange and tangerine trees form a natural border. A river where women bathe can be seen from the historians’ enclave. The land has been cultivated; the crops are ready for harvest. In the foreground a young black woman sits on grass which flourishes. Here women pick freely from the trees.”<sup>45</sup>

The images relayed here contest stereotypical notions of continental white European masculinity as the taken-for-granted representation of the discipline of History. In this way Cliff is in conversation with what Barbara Christian calls theorizing—processes of theoretical knowledge production, specific to people of color, women, and queer people, which are not bound to the aesthetic and structural parameters of what white academic authorities recognize as Theory. Christian writes, “our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in

---

45 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 30.

riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, “Against Granite” theorizes the ways that Black Caribbean women “do” history in part by illustrating how work that the historians do is not separated from the work that other Black women do—the historians “plant, weed, hoe, raise houses, sew, and wash—and continue their investigations.”<sup>47</sup> Cliff therefore radically reimagines what the work of history entails by asserting an image of Black women engaged in the processes of creating and maintaining life as simultaneous producers of knowledge.

Readers are informed that these Black women have congregated to write histories of incarceration and of ‘the unwritten past.’<sup>48</sup> A history of incarceration will require accounting for histories of the transatlantic slave trade, in which these Black women historians are necessarily implicated. For Black women historians, the work of history reflects Black people’s violent enmeshment within colonial historical processes.<sup>49</sup> Through describing the work the historians undertake as the processes of “exchang[ing] facts—details of the unwritten past,” Cliff alludes to Black women’s histories as both erased and unwritten, yet recoverable through the collaborative work of dialogue, oral history, and in conversation with the formal archives laid on the tables where they

---

46 Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (Spring 1987): 52, emphasis in original.

47 Ibid, 30-31.

48 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 29.

49 The Epilogue of Marisa Fuentes’ book *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* presents a particularly helpful discussion of some of the methods undertaken to narratively reconstruct enslaved Black women’s personhood in the face of colonial archives which staunchly refuse their visibility. Fuentes writes, “History is produced from what the archive offers. It is the historian’s job to substantiate all the pieces with more archival evidence, context, and historiography and put them together into a coherent narrative form. The challenge this book has confronted is to write a history about what an archive does not offer.” Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 146.

gather.<sup>50</sup> This commentary functions as a critique of white supremacist and colonial forms of historical knowledge production which exclude Black people, women, and queer people as subjects of—let alone authors of—history. In this way, Cliff prefigures a tradition of scholars including, among others, Saidiya Hartman, M. Nourbese Philip, Marisa Fuentes, and Jessica Marie Johnson, each of whom interrogate the limited capacity of archival practices and politics, and therefore the traditional discipline of History, to fully account for the lives of enslaved Black women across the Americas.<sup>51</sup>

While autobiographical reflection grounds the sensual worldmaking in *Claiming's* other sections, “Against Granite” enacts sensual worldmaking through its positing of Black women’s imagined, yet embodied, experiences as central to reimagining the process of producing historical knowledge. Sensual worldmaking allows Cliff to challenge colonial geographies of domination, and in their place write Black feminist geographies in which spaces are arranged to meet Black women’s needs and desires. The world constructed in this chapter is defined by its support of Black women’s collective nourishment and intellectual engagement: the long passage quoted above illustrates the granite and marble building as a space dedicated to Black women’s gathering, while the land which surrounds the gathering place accommodates Black women’s physical sustenance, bathing, and relaxation. As author, Cliff guides the reader through the visual field (description of the topography, flora, and built landscape) and parallel sensory registers (the sounds of the women’s gathering, the description of the haptic textures of

---

50 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 29.

51 For discussions of archival failures in the context of chattel slavery, see works such as: Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2020. and M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).



their physical interactions) which serve as this section's setting. "Against Granite" therefore offers a rare perspective in that its reader's experience of the space constructed within the narrative is mediated through the ways that Black women subjects experience this world.

Around the perimeter of this nearly-idyllic space for Black women are border guards who represent threats to Black women's bodily well-being through forms of colonial and imperial institutions. The border guards are peripheral, "those who would enforce silence," and the way that they are hailed in the text registers their violent and invasive relationships to Black women's bodies:

"slicers/suturers/invaders/abusers/sterilizers/infibulators/castrators/dividers/enclosers . . . Upjohn, Nestle, Riker's, Welfare, Rockland State, Jesus, the Law of the Land—and yes, and also—Gandhi and Kenyatta."<sup>52</sup> The hardness and oppositional relation between the granite and the Black women inhabitants of the space described in the narrative suggest that these 'border guards' are continuous with granite. Through titling this section "Against Granite" and referencing granite throughout the narrative, Cliff draws attention to the contrast between granite as a hard, impermeable, architectural material and the permeable organic material that populates the semi-utopian space of this gathering of black women. The Black feminist world centered in "Against Granite" critiques actual and symbolic purveyors of misogynist and patriarchal violence by reorienting them: placing them at the literal margins of the narrative space and defining them through their violent relation to women rather than as the natural occupants of the center of the universe. This re-writing aligns with Katherine McKittrick's definition of Black feminist

---

<sup>52</sup> Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 30.

geographies as “black women’s political, feminist, imaginary, and creative concerns that respatialize the geographic legacy of racism-sexism.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite the ominous presence of the border guards, the work of the historians continues unabated. Even in light of the possible harm they may face at the hands of these violent figures, the Black women persist in building and maintaining communal space. “Each evening at dusk, the women gather under the tin roof which shelters the meeting-house: the progress notes of the day’s work are read—they then cook dinner, talk, and sing: old songs whose noise carries a long distance.”<sup>54</sup> Given the sense of estrangement from Black feminist community which Cliff has narrated elsewhere in the text—feeling excluded at the river, feeling distance from the mother—her use of this narrative space to imaginatively construct a community of black women community stands in significant contrast. “Against Granite’s” narrative prioritizes Black feminist community building with an emphasis on the ways that Black women take care of each other’s bodies. In this way, this section of *Claiming* reorganizes the forms of colonial, racist, and sexist power that have marked Caribbean sites. In their stead, Cliff creates narrative space for anticolonial realities that are Black, queer, and feminist. The strategy of voicing this critique not just through autobiographical reflection, but also through the speculative creation of the alternative world(s) one imagines, affirms, as other Black diasporic women have modeled, that imagination and autobiography can be purposefully and powerfully combined. “Against Granite” ultimately constructs a world oriented towards justice, care, protection, dignity, and creative agency for Black women.

## Conclusion

---

53 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 53.

54 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, 31.

As an author, Michelle Cliff deployed a self-referential narrative method to put forward critical analyses of colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. She manipulated genre and narrative forms in order to advance her texts as robust political critiques and was therefore highly critical of attempts to use elements of her narrative or authorial subjectivity to depoliticize her writing. By refusing to either fully embrace or reject the label of memoir for *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, Cliff prioritized the politicized dimensions of building narrative subjectivity in order to reshape the discourses of authorial and narrative authority. *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* is therefore part of a Black feminist tradition in which lived, personal experiences provide a foundation for political analysis as well as narrative production. First by positioning herself in relation to canonical colonial literature, and later through a fictionalized imagination of a Black feminist geography, Cliff uses Black women's lived and embodied experiences to both critique racist and colonial hierarchies of identity and to reimagine writing history as a Black feminist process. Cliff uses narrative expressions of her lived experiences to affirm her heritage as a Black queer woman, light-skinned and class privileged, in contrast to white supremacy's disruptions of intra-communal and intra-familial intimacies.

Michelle Cliff's use of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise's* indeterminate genre and autobiographical influence to stage a confrontation with the intersection of literature and cultural power is similar to Dionne Brand's construction of *A Map to the Door of No Return*. For both Brand and Cliff, their literary education on Caribbean islands still colonized by the British produced a familiarity with the construction of the world—including their own Caribbean worlds—from the perspective

of those who occupied the colonial and imperial center. From this recognition grew analyses of the most intimate and quotidian impacts of colonial narrative. Significantly, both Cliff and Brand, as we will see in the next chapter, committed to developing their own forms of narrative worldmaking through which they not only named and critiqued imperialism, but constructed the worlds they knew and desired as Black queer women.

## Works Cited

- Adisa, Opal Palmer. "Journey into Speech—A Writer between Two Worlds: An Interview with Michelle Cliff," *African American Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1994) Black Women's Culture Issue: 273-281.
- Adjarian, M. M. *Allegories of Desire: Body, Nation, and Empire in Modern Caribbean Literature by Women*. Westport and London: Praeger Publishers, 2004.
- Agosto, Noraida. *Michelle Cliff's Novels: Piecing the Tapestry of Memory and History*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Brand, Dionne. *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*. Alberta: University of Alberta Press. 2020.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Carby, Hazel. *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands*. London and New York: Verso Books, 2019.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (Spring 1987): pp. 51-63.
- Cliff, Michelle. *Abeng*. New York: Plume, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Claiming an Identity They Taught me to Despise*. London: Persephone Books, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *No Telephone to Heaven*. New York: Vintage International, 1987.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sites of Memory," in *If I Could Write This in Fire*, 49-64. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- The Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Words of Fire: an Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 232-240. New York: The New Press, 1995.
- Cooper, Brittney C. *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. New York: Picador, 2018.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Elia, Nada. "'A Man Who Wants to Be a Woman': Queerness as/and Healing Practices in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*." *Callaloo* Vol. 23.1. (Winter 2000): 352-365.
- Fuentes, Marisa. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Gourdine, Angeletta KM. "'Write it in . . . Put the sex right up on in there!': Walker, Cliff, and Aidoo Sexualize and (Re)map the Diaspora." In *The Difference Place Makes: Gender, Sexuality, and Diaspora Identity*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Johnson, Jessica Marie. *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
- Labidi, Abid Larbi. "Dismantling the Prison-House of Colonial History in a Selection of Michelle Cliff's Texts." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 7, no. 5 (October 2016): 64-69.
- Larrier, Renée. *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006.
- Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982.
- Macharia, Keguro. *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Morrison, Toni. "On the Backs of Blacks." *Time Magazine*. Dec 2, 1993.  
<https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Morrison-On-the-Backs-of-Blacks.pdf>
- O'Driscoll, Sally. "Michelle Cliff and the Authority of Identity." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 28, no.1 (Spring,1995): 56-70.
- Philip, M. Nourbese. *Zong!* As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 2008.
- Raiskin, Judith. "'With the Logic of a Creole': Michelle Cliff," in *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity*, 177-204. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: Popular Library, 1966.
- Russell, Heather. *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2009.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Stallings, L.H. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Tate, Claudia. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1986.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Being in the Black Queer Diaspora: Archiving Orientation and Embodiment in *A Map to the Door of No Return*

In *A Map to the Door of No Return* Trinidadian-Canadian author Dionne Brand recalls the role of two particular books in shaping her experience of desire: a text on the Haitian Revolution called *The Black Napoleon*, whose author she cannot recall, and D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Brand 2001, 183-188). Despite the different thematic foci of these texts, and the very different ways Brand recounts experiencing them—a deeply private and individual encounter with the histories of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines on one hand, and a surreptitious but communal schoolgirl consumption of a story about a forbidden romance on the other, they share the status of foundational texts in Brand's lifelong reckoning with literature. Though the themes of Blackness, colonialism, gender, and intimacy introduced in these texts have also been taken up in Brand's body of work, she is clear that the primary resonance of these two books in her own life is in their corporeal trace.

“Books leave gestures in the body; a certain way of moving, of turning, a certain closing of the eyes, a way of leaving, hesitations . . . These first two books shaped me, and I suspect I have been writing these two books ever since, recalling and reimagining them. I had been seduced by them. The fact is, I remember them only in my body. I cannot quote a single line from them, and I have not ever felt the need to return to them physically, though I know that I always return to them as I write” (ibid, 191-192).

I am interested in using this passage as a starting point from which to think about embodiment, feeling, and narrative creation as an intertwined and recursive set of concerns in Brand's writing. The writing found in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, like Dionne Brand's other works, demonstrates how the embodied experiences of diasporic Black queer women can be used as archives from which to generate theoretical and



material understandings of how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the Black diaspora, as well as how queerness and womanhood are lived within diaspora.<sup>1</sup> These embodied and textual archives allow us to understand diaspora as an existential condition which negotiates various forms of gendered, racialized, and sexualized orientation and disorientation. I propose that Brand uses the methods of sensual worldmaking in order to explore the capacity of our bodies to orient us within the world, to understand conditions like the Black diaspora, and to carry the memories of large-scale violence like war and imperialism.

Amber Jamilla Musser writes that sensation “marks the body’s existence as a perceiving subject and the world’s existence as an object to be perceived” (Musser 2014, 1). Sensation is both structural, as evidenced by the use of language and other forms of exchange to communicate overlapping but not identical meanings of a phenomenon like heat or pain, and individual, to the extent that sensations are housed and experienced from within individual bodies. Musser therefore theorizes sensation as a way to critically read the convergences of bodies with societally produced identities. She writes, “by theorizing sensation we acquire a way to understand structures at a level beyond the discursive. . . . Though each body reacts differently, we read structure as a form with multiple incarnations and many different affects” (ibid, 23). An attention to sensation thus enables an analysis of how structures of perception and structures of power—heat and pain as well as race and gender, for example—are made manifest within individual and embodied subjectivity.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this essay I use Black diaspora and African diaspora interchangeably.

Sensual worldmaking borrows from Musser a focus on the ways sensation encompasses both structural and individual phenomena, with a particular focus on what Black feminist literary scholar Barbara Christian identifies as literature's capacity to communicate the sensuality of experience. Christian writes, "For me, literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense" (Christian 1988, 77-78, emphasis in original). Speaking as a literary critic, a scholar, and as a Black Caribbean American woman reading other Black women's literature, Christian identifies sensuality as a central component of literary language, and therefore as holding a privileged role in allowing Black women to have their individual experiences of reality affirmed. As evidenced by the passage cited earlier, literature appears to have played a similar role for Brand in both confirming and creating reality through the gestures, sounds, and pacing books leave in the bodies of their readers as well as their authors. The co-construction of embodied experience and literature is thus critical for the ways Brand theorizes Blackness, queer womanhood, and diaspora.

Brand's body of work bears a sustained concern with what Black queer women's embodied experiences suggest about the ways Black women are positioned within structures of power, and pays particular attention to the ways they can be rendered marginal and disposable in the world in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>2</sup> Two overlapping patterns in Brand's work illustrate this sustained concern: on one hand is a pattern on self-reflective writing, which ranges from personal essays in the collection

---

<sup>2</sup> For an extended theorization of the metaphor of Black diasporic life in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade see Christina Sharpe (2016.) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

*Bread out of Stone*, to the memoir reflections of *A Map to the Door of No Return* and *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*, among others. Another pattern is found in her writing about the Grenada Revolution and U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. The poetry collection *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun*, the essay “Nothing of Egypt,” sections of *A Map to the Door of No Return*, and the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* are some of the places where Brand writes about the Grenada Revolution and the U.S. invasion which is often described as bringing about its fall. Brand herself traveled to Grenada in order to participate in the revolution and witnessed both the invasion and the chaotic events which preceded it. In many ways, then, the threads of self-reflective writing and writing about the Grenada Revolution are intertwined within Brand’s body of work. These two threads also illustrate Brand’s literary investment in materializing and personalizing the politics of the Black diaspora.

The conditions of the transatlantic slave trade and the ensuing Black diaspora have resulted in the far-reaching dispossession of people of African descent and have both produced and sustained cultural and historical erasures. Scholars have discussed the ways that Black subjects are visible within the archives of colonialism and slavery primarily as economic objects, and/or as subjects *to* the law who are simultaneously denied human subjectivity within the eyes of the law. *A Map to the Door of No Return* turns to embodied experience as an archival source, not to fix or immobilize or render transparent the experiences of Black diasporic subjects, but as the necessary material for a textured accounting of how Black lives are lived in this diasporic wake. Early in the text, Brand recalls a childhood experience of her grandfather’s forgetting, though he once knew, “what people we came from” (Brand 2001, 3). Describing the disappointment and

frustration young Brand and her grandfather shared she asserts, “we were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were” (ibid, 5). Recognition of this crisis of historical identity animates the discussions and explorations in this *A Map to the Door of No Return*. As Erica L. Johnson writes, “Brand structures something as intimate as personal memory and identity as an intervention in the archive,” an intervention which recasts what archives are to be consulted, where they are found, and what questions to ask of them (Johnson 2014, 150).

Brand’s archival interventions are legible within a context of Black feminist scholarship which has theorized various possibilities for literary narratives as methods of interrogating and contesting archives of slavery. Marisa Fuentes’ historical work *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* narrates the violences against enslaved women in 18th century urban Barbados. The text speculates on how these violences, most often visible in the archive through the first-person accounts of white men, might have been experienced from the perspective of the enslaved women themselves. Fuentes details how her quest to “tell a story from the standpoints and thoughts of the women about whom [she] wished to write” was made impossible by the overwhelming absence of Black women’s subjectivities in the archives—their voices, their perspectives, their handwriting (Fuentes 2016, 145). Fuentes’ scholarship meditates on the revisions to archival and other historiographical methods—and therefore the discipline of history itself—which are necessary in order to research, write, and teach about the lives of enslaved Black women rendered fragmentary at best, and inhuman disposable refuse at worst, in the dominant archives of slavery and colonialism. *Dispossessed Lives’* immanent critique of history’s disciplinary emphasis on producing

coherent and empirically substantiated narratives insists on an increased attention to the kinds of narratives that can(not) be produced while historicizing the lived experiences of Atlantic slavery and its aftermaths (ibid, 146).

Elements of Fuentes' historical critique are previewed with a literary focus in Saidiya Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts." Hartman argues that historical archives are necessarily sites of violence when they are used in an attempt to recover information about Black women and girls whose lives were constrained by the very kinds of violence the archive necessitates and produces (Hartman 2008, 2). Hartman's article simultaneously contends with the myriad violences which can and have happened through acts of narration and identifies narrative as a set of strategies and tools which allow for a partial telling, a partial (and potential) recovering, of the lives of the enslaved (ibid, 11). Crucially, Hartman introduces the term *critical fabulation* as a writing method for a studied speculation of that which cannot be found in the archive. Critical fabulation takes the shape of "straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive" while simultaneously "enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration" (ibid). While Hartman's article is explicitly focused on processes of academic knowledge production, critical fabulation offers a way to theorize fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and memoir which are thematically concerned with Black histories.

*A Map to the Door of No Return's* incorporation of the archival traces of Caribbean colonialism into a creative literary form is central to Johnson's concept of the neo-archive. Drawing on traditions of post-colonial Caribbean literature which have grappled with the violent histories of slavery and colonialism, Johnson proposes that the

neo-archive is comprised of “fiction that creates history in the face of its absence” (Johnson 2014, 157). Johnson considers *A Map to the Door of No Return* as an exemplar of a neo-archival method, focusing particularly on Brand’s self-reflective engagement of archival sources such as colonial travelogues and maps, as well as her use of affective knowledge—forms of knowledge based in self-observation, looking, and feeling (ibid, 160). Even as she insightfully draws attention to the ways that *A Map* exceeds the traditional genre constraints of memoir or autobiography, Johnson does not specifically mark neo-archive’s particular relationship to these autobiographical forms (ibid, 162).<sup>3</sup> In contrast, I am particularly interested in the ways that *A Map to the Door of No Return*’s position as a memoir, even an unconventional memoir, facilitates the deployment of Brand’s lived and embodied experiences as part of the affective knowledge of the neo-archive. Brand’s incorporation of embodied experiences provides a model of how Black queer women’s bodies can serve as archives of experience in post- and anti-colonial literature. In order to make sense of how memories of bodily experiences—stress, pain, and tension as well as pleasure, intimacy, and rest—are narrated within *A Map to the Door of No Return* and what role they play in Brand’s theorizations of life in the contemporary Black diaspora, I turn again towards the concept I term sensual worldmaking.

### **Sensual Worldmaking: Perceiving the World from Elsewhere**

Throughout *A Map to the Door of No Return* Brand examines memories which convey the experience of being positioned, as a Black diasporic formerly colonial subject,

---

<sup>3</sup> In one instance, Johnson remarks on the way Brand ‘historicizes her feelings’ as a form of work that is simultaneously archival and memory-work, yet does not discuss the particular ways that memoir facilitates such a historicization differently than neo-archives constructed in fiction or poetry texts, for example.

on the margins of the ‘centers’ claimed by colonial metropolises and geographic imaginaries. In one such example Brand illustrates her experience of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) radio station as a technology of anchoring British imperial control during her childhood in Trinidad and Tobago in the small town of Guayaguayare. In the rare moments when Caribbean islands are referenced or discussed on the BBC news reports, they are positioned within colonial narratives. The experience of listening to and being hailed by the BBC, as Brand narrates, is thus to experience a form of colonial worldmaking. She writes,

“You hear that you are living elsewhere. The BBC announcer is calling you, telling you the news. Elsewhere is not a bad place at all. It is simply elsewhere. You have heard it described as an island. You have read of islands, such as in the *Tempest* described as uninhabited except for monsters and spirits; you have read of pirates and buccaneers on islands; you have read of people banished to islands, prisoners. You have seen on the borders of maps of islands, natives, nubile and fierce. You are living on an island, banished or uninhabited, or so it seems through the voice of the BBC. You are therefore already mythic” (Brand 2001, 13).

The imposition of elsewhere conscripts the listeners into an understanding of geography in which ‘elsewhere’ is positioned against a ‘here,’ a center, which is definitively not where the colonized subject listener is positioned. For those listeners like Brand positioned in Trinidad and other island states colonized by the British, there is a dissonance between the ‘here’ which they might actually inhabit, be it the particular island, the (post)colonial nation, the region of the Caribbean, and/or the Commonwealth, and the use of multiple forms of narrative to enforce that the post-colonial here is actually the metropole’s elsewhere. William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is referenced for its role as an authorizing colonial text, while additional unnamed narratives perpetuate other tropes of island experience such as pirates and prisoners, and colonially produced maps

portray island inhabitants as uncivilized ‘natives.’<sup>4</sup> The cumulative effect of these sonic, textual, and cartographic colonial narratives is to subordinate the island’s inhabitants’ ways of living, being, and knowing to those represented by the imperial reach of the BBC.

We can understand the repeated practice of listening to the BBC as acts of both narrative and physical incorporation into colonial worldmaking, in which understandings of the world are constructed in order to reflect and justify arrangements of colonial power. The subsumption of the local Caribbean ‘here’ into the ‘elsewhere’ imposed by the narrative technologies of colonial worldmaking is also manifested as a particular orientation of embodiment. This section of the text is interspersed with reflections on the forms of physical engagement involved in listening to the radio: Brand opens the section by positioning the reader within the “ovular sound of the BBC” at the first eight a.m. broadcast, “your ear against the radio again at four in the afternoon,” and the tactile adjustments necessary to protect the radio wires from sea rust (Brand 2001, 13-14). As illustrated by the production of the Caribbean islands as ‘elsewhere,’ these bodily movements and adjustments in order to hear the BBC day after day function as a mode of gaining a kind of entry through “the door to being in the big world” (ibid, 14). Brand recounts a collage of fragments of world news headlines spanning events in the 1940s - 70s, covering events in other Commonwealth nations, European nations, Britain itself, and elsewhere in the Americas (ibid). The juxtaposition of these events, including the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Hulme, Peter. “Hurricanes in the Caribbees: The Constitution of the Discourse of English Colonialism.”

In *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*. Francis Barker, Ed. Colchester: University of Essex, 1981. 55–83 and Wynter, Sylvia. “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s Woman.” In Donnell, Alison and Sarah Lawson Welch, (eds.) *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. London and New York: Routledge. 1996. Print.



death of world leaders, traveling politicians, and civil conflicts, demonstrate how the quotidian daily acts of tuning in to the radio are also a mode of being connected to broader world events, both within and beyond the colonial ordering of power.

If listening to the BBC was a form of incorporation within colonial worldmaking, the periods of time defined by their absence from radio enabled other ways of making the world according to something other than the arrangement of colonial power. Through close narrative attention to the sensual experiences of the times in which the BBC was not a priority, Brand uses the method of sensual worldmaking to illustrate an alternative to colonial worldmaking. On Sundays, for instance, when there were no BBC broadcasts, “the island was the island; the island was itself, quiet, cicadas signalling across fields. Sun absorbing everything into light, sleep blessing the eyes after lunch at two o’clock; or the rain dipping the island grey, drench it into the same silence” (Brand 2001, 15). While Brand as the narrator admits to having found these Sundays boring in contrast to the “strange intimacy of . . . envied cosmopolitanism” felt on the other weekdays, the experiences of Sundays are narrated with an attention to how bodies orient themselves to the here of the island, rather than how they are oriented to the narrative technologies which construct the island as elsewhere (ibid). This is not to suggest that life on the island was idyllic away from the radio, as Brand points out that the school days which fell between eight a.m. and four p.m. were dedicated to instructing students in the ‘proper’ forms of bodily comportment and language, with proper signifying, as with elsewhere, the existence of a center or a ‘here’ against which one’s position must be confirmed (ibid). Nonetheless, Brand’s narrative portrayal of her encounters with the presence and absence of the narrative and communication technologies of the BBC radio illustrates

how narrating embodied experiences can be a form of expressing how orientations to knowledge can take shape in bodily orientations.

### **Diasporic Orientations**

In her important reading of the queerness of *A Map to the Door of No Return* and its signification on the diasporic metaphor of the Black Atlantic, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley argues that the text is “fundamentally queer... Rather than eroticize individual bodies, it offers what Chela Sandoval calls a ‘social erotics’ . . . and puts together the fragmented experiences of those whose lives, as Butler writes, were never supposed to ‘qualify as the “human” and the “livable”’” (Sandoval 2000 and Butler 1999, cited in Tinsley 2008, 208). Tinsley locates *A Map to the Door of No Return*’s queerness in its emphasis on narrative, historical, and intimate linkages among individuals and groups in the Black diaspora who have been made subject to processes of dehumanization. In this way, *A Map to the Door of No Return* and Tinsley’s analysis of it conduct the *work* of what Jafari Allen terms black/queer/diaspora, a process of “interrogat[ing] dynamic, unsettled subjects whose bodies, desires, and texts *move*” (Allen 2012, 214-215, emphasis in original). Tinsley’s and Allen’s frameworks make visible some of the conceptual possibilities of reading Blackness and queerness together not only to identify or examine Black queer subjects, but to understand more deeply how both terms have operated in relationship to processes of exclusion from and reclamation of humanity.

*A Map to the Door of No Return* illustrates literature as a site where Blackness and queerness become experienced as embodied difference. The novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, as we learned in this chapter’s introduction, is one of the books that Brand remembers “only in [her] body,” and has deeply impacted her relationship to writing and

language since first encountering it as an adolescent. Brand describes the encounter with this book in plural and communal terms; her experience of the book is inherently linked with her experience of the community of other twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls with whom she shares the restructuring of the self which this book promises. Encountering the theme of gender in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* becomes an entry for the girls' encounter with the difference, embodied and imaginative, which Blackness and queerness present. This tension is itself embodied, as the book produces the desire for identification, for the girls to imagine themselves inhabiting the roles and the imagination of the lady or the gamekeeper (189-190). Brand recalls the feeling "as if I had been let into another skin, a woman's, a man's" (Brand 188). And yet, the identification with a literary other which the act of reading requests—"a book asks us to embody," in Brand's words—is interrupted as the girls become aware of their inhabitation of colonial and racial difference.<sup>5</sup> "So we wanted to be her, we wanted to be them, we wanted to be there. Yet we recognized the cleavage, the primitive in his cottage at the bottom of the garden, modernity attracted and repelled by him. We were him. We, on an island at the bottom of the New World, we too were representations of the primitive" (Brand 2001, 190). If in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the primitive was also represented through the masculine and through darkness, the girls' recognition that their positioning as representatives of the primitive within that novel's imaginary also represented a challenge to their identification with Lady Chatterley's femininity. The social structure of femininity, as Black feminism teaches us, is racialized.

---

<sup>5</sup> Brand 2001, 190.

Brand and the other girls embody the dissonance of trying to learn a form of embodiment from a text and finding that their bodies, marked as Black and colonized, are unable to fully inhabit the embodiment the text imagines. “When we entered the book, entering for the purposes of identifying and enacting, we were flung apart. We disintegrated, we abstracted. We emerged having reconstructed the novel into a more complex, more fluid sense of desire” (Brand 191). I read in this narrative an implicit proposal that as part of these young Black girls’ learned and desired embodiment, the tenets of womanhood which imagine whiteness as necessary for successfully inhabiting the social roles of gender are ‘flung apart’ and ‘abstracted’ in the process. I read the “more complex, more fluid sense of desire” that Brand and her classmates construct through this encounter with the novel as necessarily more complex than the white gender normative heterosexuality it demonstrates. As readers we do not know which, if any, of Brand’s fellow readers come to embody queerness in the way that Brand embodies being a lesbian. Yet the queerness of the shared encounter with *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* does not depend on sexual orientation or gender identity. Instead, this recollection reveals Blackness and therefore the queer positioning of Blackness relative to normative gender positioning as ways of reading which allow a reader to emerge with a more complex sense of desire from an embodied encounter with a text.

Like literature’s invitation to embodiment draws together queerness and Blackness as forms of difference, I propose that the metaphor of the door of no return presents another vehicle for exploring the intersection of imaginative language and embodiment. As a title figure of *A Map to the Door of No Return* as well as a key symbol of the African diaspora, the door of no return emerges throughout this text as both real

and not real. “The door, of course, is not on the continent but in the mind; not a physical place—though it is—but a space in the imagination” (Brand 2001, 96-97). By deemphasizing the physical materiality and geographic specificity of the door and prioritizing its presence in the mind and in the conceptual narratives of the Black diaspora, Brand redirects the narrative and conceptual focus of the text away from locating this figure in the physical sites of the door, instead examining the door as a locus of disorientation. The disorientating violence of the door of no return is transgenerational, linking enslaved ancestors with those presently living and through diaspora. “Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing; one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space. . . . Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space” (Brand 2001, 20). The un- or semi-conscious space of the surreal locates Black subjects with unstable access to the forms of consciousness and coherence on which the orienting strategy of an explanatory narrative must be based. When understood through the framework of sensual worldmaking, Brand’s framing of the Black diaspora as de-spatialized through the metaphor of the surreal door of no return allows for a metaphorical and material re-spatialization based on embodied experiences.

In light of Brand’s use of metaphor to de- and re-spatialize the Black diaspora, the representative function of metaphors and the limited representability of the Black diaspora suggest that metaphors of the Black diaspora are necessarily imperfect and incomplete. Through this incompleteness, “metaphors provide conceptual bridges between the lived and the possible that use language queerly to map other roads of becoming,” which makes the exploration of metaphors and language essential for

practices of worldmaking within the Black and queer diaspora (Tinsley 2008, 212). Brand addresses this need explicitly:

“To have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction — a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness like art. To be a fiction in search of its most resonant metaphor is then even more intriguing” (Brand 2001, 18-19).

Metaphors and fiction, as forms of creation, are positioned as integral to revealing the existential crises of Blackness in the Americas in the wake of transatlantic slavery while simultaneously providing evidence of language’s inability to resolve this crisis. Black diasporic subjects must therefore negotiate the ways that their lives have been narratively and materially constructed through forces of imperialism and colonialism. I read Brand’s analysis of forms of orientation in the Black diaspora through the figure of the door of no return as a form of what Tinsley calls “using language queerly” in order to illustrate forms of queer bodily orientation (Tinsley 2008, 212). By doing so, Brand constructs a queer vision of the African diaspora that illustrates how queer framings are consonant with those of diasporic Blackness. Paying attention to what Tinsley calls materially-informed metaphors, I read the above passage’s references on movement and positioning—lodging, inhabiting, inside, outside, escape, in search—as reflections on corporeal as well as symbolic locations. What Brand describes as the resultant contingency of Black belonging, the being of ‘a being living inside and outside of herself,’ for instance, is a form of queer diasporic bodily orientation. Indeed, ‘hav[ing] one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor’ can lead Black and queer subjects to experience self-alienation and distancing from their selves through the perpetual awareness of being

‘outside of [one]self’ and ‘unable to escape [the sign that one makes]’. This is not to say that all Black diasporic subjects are queer, but that queer Black diasporic subjects have to engage in their own narrative creation or risk misrepresentation. *A Map to the Door of No Return* suggests that recognizing one’s positioning within the Black diaspora is a condition in which one becomes intimate with learning how to alternatively embody the texts and narratives of white, imperial, and gendered normativity. Using or relating to language queerly can therefore facilitate embodying queerly, including identifying the ways that gendered and sexual scripts are complicated by race.

Sara Ahmed’s theorizations of orientation and coherence are helpful for making further sense of how the metaphor of the door of no return is borne out bodily. Ahmed writes, “objects become objects only as an effect of the repetition of this tending ‘toward’ them, which produces the subject as that which the world is ‘around’” (Ahmed 2006, 120). Through its charting of the ways that Black subjects in the African diaspora repeatedly turn themselves towards the door of no return, *A Map to the Door of No Return* proposes that Black life in the diaspora shares a tending *towards* the door. However, Ahmed notes that this logic of orientation informs normative power, namely whiteness and heteronormativity. Black people tend towards the door in uneven ways that are informed by trauma, rather than hegemonic and representational power. There is no ‘straight line’ towards, or away from, the door. Black people are therefore interrupted as subjects because the world is so rarely ‘around’ us, and the door as an object is shaped by the ways that the ‘tending towards’ it is informed by wounding. The orientations toward the door and around Black subjects which characterizes Black life in the diaspora are subsequently disrupted.

Brand's use of the methods of sensual worldmaking in her writing illustrates how embodiment in the Black diaspora spans a range of experiences of orientation and disorientation in relation to objects and knowledges: one is oriented and some contexts and disoriented in others, even when those contexts exist within the same moment of space and time. Expanding on the earlier discussion of the use of the BBC radio to produce bodily orientations towards the colonial center, for instance, Brand reflects on the ways traveling to London reaffirms the British Empire as an orientating device. "Landing in London is landing in the familiar," Brand writes (Brand 2001, 77). The putative consistency of British colonial urban engineering—"I know the narrowness of the street; I know the circus I'm walking toward"—and the shared cultural and educational experiences imposed upon other post-colonial subjects passing through airport customs—"we stood in lines waving flags at completely indifferent royals, we sang English airs"—grants Brand a sense of a kind of familiarity in otherwise unfamiliar cities, such as London, England and Sydney, Australia (ibid, 75, 76). Brand has already been made a subject of the colonial worldmaking which emerges from London and the empire it represents. To walk down London's streets and feel a sense of familiarity may mean that one is familiar with the ways that objects, streets and buildings, are arranged in space relative to one another, yet this familiarity does not preclude discomfort, nor does it preclude sensations of being disoriented. In spite of the potentially alienating distancing from oneself, sensual worldmaking and other forms of fictionalizing and creating oneself are potential strategies for attempting to resolve the existential crises of Black diasporas.

Brand's luggage is lost while she is en route to a poetry reading in Amsterdam. The uprooting represented by the loss of her luggage is also borne out in the movement



through the city while she waits to be reunited by her belongings. “I walk along the canal, getting lost, losing my bearings, until something else takes me eyes, a window. A woman is in the window, she is standing next to a table, she looks at ease. . . . My character Maya stares at me impatiently, waiting for me to recognize her” (Brand 2001, 210). Brand narrates experiencing Amsterdam as the site of the loss of her belongings as well as her orientation. Thinking trans-temporally and trans-regionally, she contrasts her experience of being lost and being disoriented with the narrative, material, and ideological possessions of white male European colonially mandated travelers, specifically the 18th century British geographer Thomas Jeffreys. “I have no compass. Nor do I have a dispensation from a king to map a shoreline or, in my case, a city . . . I cannot reflect, question, demonize, or assimilate the monuments of Europe. I have no centre which domesticates the periphery. I do not even have my own luggage” (ibid, 209). Brand describes this disorientation as emerging from a lack of access to the technologies of colonial worldmaking, as she has neither a compass, nor special instructions to try and overtake the society, nor a militarily-backed ideology of superiority.

Brand’s narrative of this disorientation argues that the kinds of orientation which accompanied white European travelers on their colonial conquests are unavailable to Black diasporic subjects. This returns us to thinking about Ahmed’s framing of orientation as both a racialized process and as a process of racialization. Ahmed theorizes links between spatial and bodily orientation and whiteness by illustrating the ways that “whiteness becomes a social and bodily orientation given that some bodies will be more at home in a world that is orientated around whiteness” (Ahmed 2006, 138). The familiarity and comfort experienced by white subjects in a world orientated around

whiteness provides “the promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (ibid, 134). Disorientation, in contrast, is experienced as a range of disruptions to one’s ability to feel one’s body moving easily and comfortably through the world. While whiteness as an orientation has been buttressed by state power which facilitates the transformation of white disorientation into the logics of ‘discovery,’ ‘encounter,’ and ‘exploration,’ Black diasporic travel—and to a certain extent existence—is denied access to these forms of meaning-making.

Crucially, Brand also traces the connections between this disorienting trip to Amsterdam and her highly-regarded novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Significantly, Brand is able to make sense of an unnamed Black woman she encounters by reminding herself of Dutch colonialism in the Caribbean. When “this window, and this woman, the one sitting so casually, find their way into the novel,” it is through the form of the character Maya, a third-generation descendant of Bola, a woman born into slavery who spent her life feeling as fully as her body would allow (Brand 2001, 210). Ahmed writes that queer orientations “are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy” (Ahmed 2006, 107). The character Maya, as well as her ancestors Bola and Marie Ursule, might not be visible in a genealogy which privileges whiteness and paternity. Brand transforms an experience of embodied disorientation into a queerly oriented narrative of multigenerational and embodied Black diaspora. The self-reflection in *A Map to the Door of No Return* on the narrative process of creating *At the Full and Change of the Moon* allows us to turn to the second thread in Brand’s oeuvre, her writing on the Grenada revolution.

## Sensual Worldmaking and Disorientation in the Grenada Revolution

Scholars of the Caribbean have developed rich interdisciplinary narratives historicizing cultural responses to the Grenada Revolution, the period between the takeover of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) political party in 1979 and October of 1983 when the charismatic NJM leader Maurice Bishop was assassinated, and the United States invaded Grenada under the direction of Ronald Reagan. Shalini Puri's *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* carefully excavates hundreds of cultural products, ranging from plays, visual art installations, government documents, blogs, books, and more as an attempt to witness and make sense of the enduring cultural legacy of this period. Literary scholar Laurie R. Lambert's *Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution* gives an explicitly gendered account of literature produced about the revolution.<sup>6</sup> Lambert argues that Brand's writing "forms part of a postcolonial and Caribbean feminist archive of revolution that is constantly rethinking how and why revolutions of the past remain a part of our ongoing present," with a focus on the ways that Brand's "autobiographical interventions offer readers a sense of the way [she] positions herself in the world and how she thinks through connections between the solitary work of writing and collective efforts to resist neocolonialism" (Lambert 2020, 112-113).

As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, Dionne Brand traveled to Grenada in 1983 in order to participate in the Grenada Revolution. Brand's writings on the Grenada Revolution and the following U.S. invasion include poetry, essays, fiction, and memoir,

---

<sup>6</sup> While an extended historical treatment of the Grenada Revolution is beyond the scope of this paper for a fuller discussion of these events see Lambert, Puri, and David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*.

and they span a range of at least 1984-2001. Thusly, the significance of these events as an influence on her writing cannot be overstated. This section of the chapter assesses some of Brand's writings on this event to draw attention to the ways that she uses sensual worldmaking to critique the U.S. invasion of Grenada from an explicitly Black, lesbian, feminist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial perspective. Viewed from this lens, Brand's writing on the Grenada Revolution illustrates how instances of anti-Black imperial violence are experienced within a Black queer woman's body and processed through a diasporic Black feminist subjectivity. I suggest that Brand's narrations of the events of October 1983 frame her embodied experiences as reflecting orientations, in the sense of positions and directions, of a plural experience of the invasion. Brand thus uses her bodily experiences as a ground from which to theorize the embodied, political, and existential conditions of those who witnessed the revolution in Grenada as well as those of people engaged in struggles for freedom elsewhere in the world. I examine five textual sites where Brand explores experiences of orientation and disorientation: the 1994 essay "Nothing of Egypt," the 1996 novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, two short stories in the 1989 collection *Sans Souci*, and *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

Across these texts, Brand creates a refracted narrative of a plural voice and plural body, using sensual worldmaking as a method of "invention and imagination, to remember specifically the lives of black women, including black queer women, whose radicalism may not fit within traditional definitions of Caribbean revolution" (Lambert 2018, 56). This sense of refraction is drawn from Lambert, who suggests that Brand creates liminal spaces within her writing to account for the multiple valences of 'wins' and 'losses' during the Grenada Revolution by "refracting [historical events] through the

genres of poetry and fiction” (ibid).<sup>7</sup> This refraction of the Grenada Revolution also recalls Johnson’s neo-archives. In this instance, Brand’s writing about the event of the revolution uses multiple genres and voices to both intervene in and construct alternative historical narratives. While Lambert reads Brand’s poems in *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* as functioning as “her own ethnographic account of the revolutionary events [Brand] and others experienced,” and not as a universalized experience, I read Brand’s prose as voicing something in the middle—a voice and experience that is individual and singular in some ways, yet gestures towards a larger collective body in a way that does not seek to claim a colonizing or imperial universal, but instead constructs a community of witnesses—with witnessing as a kind of seeing that implies accountability from the viewer—to a Black queer woman’s account of revolution (Lambert 2018, 60; Goldman 2004, 26).<sup>8</sup>

In the essay “Nothing of Egypt” from the collection *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand reflects on her personal negotiation of participation in Black political movements in Toronto before going to Grenada:

“despite the uneasy feeling that Black women’s experiences were secondary and that men exemplified the voice, the life, the physical body and spiritual breath of the movement . . . The movement did not examine patriarchy. It examined white patriarchy but only as something that white men did to Black men not as something that men did to women, and in this it deserted its highest goals: freedom from all exploitation and oppression” (Brand 1994, 137).

The failure of these revolutionary goals experienced at the communal level in Toronto—Black men’s failures to disinvest from the patriarchal forms which harm Black women—

---

<sup>7</sup> Brand also writes about books giving her a “refractory hunger.” Brand 2001, 191.

<sup>8</sup> Relatedly, “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report,” Audre Lorde’s studied and impassioned examination of how the United States government built upon its existing patterns of anti-Black racism and capitalist imperialism in its invasion of Grenada calls for a similar kind of diasporic witnessing. I am interested in discussing this essay alongside Brand’s writing on Grenada in a future project.

help spur Brand towards Grenada. “Somewhere, despite the call to weakness, I had the idea that ultimately the struggle would allow me to operate for my own human self” (ibid, 137). Brand recognized and rejected the injunction to perform or inhabit feminized weakness, even as a condition of participation in revolutionary Black struggle.

In this light, we can read her travel from Toronto to Grenada as a desire to exchange revolutionary participation conditioned on a disempowering and dehumanizing form of feminized gendering for a form of revolutionary engagement whose achievement might bring the freedom of one’s *own human self*. Such a goal was articulated and echoed by the Combahee River Collective’s call for recognition as “human, levelly human” (Combahee River Collective 234). Brand’s narrations of the political atmosphere of revolutionary Grenada describe a political space which facilitates an encounter with one’s gendered humanity outside of the particularly gendered demands of Toronto’s political scene. Despite the ultimate failure of the Grenada Revolution to bring about the full political or individual freedom sought by Brand and its other participants, “Nothing of Egypt” shows how the changes of revolutions are deeply tied to individual bodies, therefore illustrating how the failures of movements to meet their goals might also be borne out corporeally. Brand writes,

“Revolutions do not happen outside of you, they happen in the vein, they change you and you change yourself, you wake up in the morning changing. You say this is the human being I want to be. You are making yourself for the future, and you do not even know the extent of it when you begin but you have a hint, a taste in your throat of the warm elixir of the possible” (ibid, 138).

In this passage, the strategies of sensual worldmaking are at work through the explicit linking of embodied experience to embodied knowledge of potential revolutionary futures. The embodied self is the site of change as well as the evidence of

future possibility. This passage articulates revolution as not only an external process, but also as an internal process of making decisions about how to remake oneself. The use of the second-person address in this personal essay registers the voice as plural, linking both speaker and audience in its revolutionary possibility. Gender does not disappear from this passage, but it is relegated to the background of the question of the type of human being one wants to be. While this essay thinks about how embodiment is situated in the revolution, the fictionalized narratives of *In Another Place, Not Here* more directly engages gender and sexuality in the landscape of the Grenada Revolution.

In some ways, the forms of violence that Brand narrates about the Grenada Revolution and US invasion are not necessarily exceptional within the broader network of misogyny and homophobia Black queer Caribbean women can be situated within. It is instead, as Lambert illustrates, amplified. Lambert writes of Elizete and Verlia, the queer Caribbean women characters at the center of Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, "for the women represented in Brand's later text the end of the violent revolution is not so much a surprise as it is a recursion, albeit on a spectacular scale, of the hardships and trauma they have faced their entire lives" (Lambert 2018, 57). From here, we can more clearly understand the ways that the sensual disruption and embodied disorientation experienced during the US invasion is consonant with the ways both fictional and real queer Caribbean women have experienced other forms of misogynist and homophobic violence.

The character Verlia was born in the Caribbean and migrated to Canada at a young age, and as a young adult traveled to an unnamed Caribbean island in order to participate in an unfolding anti-capitalist revolution, modeled after the Grenada

Revolution. *In Another Place, Not Here* is not strictly an autobiographical novel, despite clear resonances between Verlia's movements and those Brand has narrated elsewhere, such as in "Nothing of Egypt," though it is deeply attentive to the embodied experiences of its protagonists. Renée Larrier identifies the use of the first person as a defining characteristic of what she terms Caribbean autofiction, Caribbean creative writing which explicitly centers the narrator's subjectivity in "direct response to . . . slavery and its legacy of economic exploitation" in the Caribbean (Larrier 2006, 6). While Serge Doubrovksy's original definition of autofiction depends on a consolidation of author, narrator, and protagonist, Larrier's theorization of the cultural specificity of Caribbean autofiction is instead "a first-person narrative that may or may not overlap with autobiography" (Larrier 21). For Larrier, the first-person in Caribbean autofiction is important for its utility in anchoring the text within Caribbean subjectivity (Larrier 7). Reading *In Another Place, Not Here* as a form of Caribbean autofiction bypasses the questions of authenticity and facticity which often accompany readings of first person texts, focusing instead on the twin processes of testimony and *témoignage*, or witnessing (ibid, 21- 24).

*In Another Place, Not Here* resists some of the typical markers of narrative coherence: it is not linear, its geographic and temporal locations are often unmarked, and its unnamed chapters are alternatively narrated by Elizete and Verlia. The chapter towards the end of the novel which takes the form of entries in Verlia's journal after she has traveled back to the Caribbean therefore presents a break from the tone, structure, and overall narrative clarity of the rest of the book. These journal entries are a form of



documentation of the revolution which are rooted in its author's—Verlia's—body and provide mediated access to Verlia's internal dialogue.

“Today I feel calm but I don't want anyone to touch me and I'm not turning the radio on. I'm not leaving this place. I'm not moving.  
Five o'clock in the morning I heard the droning of their planes in the sky. I am so angry I will break.  
The radio is playing up-tempo music as if nothing is happening. I can't stand it. I wish Elizete would turn the fucking thing off. I've got to get out of here. If I don't my head will split in many, many pieces.  
I'm putting my clothes on. The radio went off. I'm going to meet the other cadres. My head is hurting me” (Brand 1996, 227-228).

While “Nothing of Egypt” constructs a plural voice, invoking the reader with a second-person address, this section's use of the first person constructs a plurality through an invitation to witness. In reading these journal entries readers are brought into contact with how Verlia feels physically and emotionally as she cycles through stillness, anger, and anxiety, and are therefore called to witness the revolution in its intimate and personal unfolding. Through the turn to a first-person account for Verlia's character Brand places a Black queer woman's subjectivity at the center of its narration of the violence which ends the revolution. In her use of sensual worldmaking strategies to appeal to or address an audience of Black diasporic witnesses, Brand illustrates that Black queer womanhood is lived within community—illustrating Black queer women's relationships to one another, to broader Black communities, and to the larger structures of power which target multiple aspects of their identities.

Elsewhere, Brand further illustrates Grenada. The short story “. . . seen” which concludes the collection *Sans Souci* is an extremely brief—3 pages, to be exact—account of the things and places a woman encounters on an unnamed island. Read in the context of Verlia's journal entries, I interpret this story as a thematic preview of *In Another*

*Place, Not Here*. “. . . seen” bears little plot movement. The unknown protagonist, known only through the pronoun ‘she,’ “had come home to work,” and “to live here, to understand this” (Brand 1989: 148, 150). The character’s relationship to this island as a returned home is reflected in the description of the island’s landscape with simultaneous familiarity and wonder. The flora and fauna of the island are not described technically or with detached observation, but such that the reader understands the protagonist as relationally intertwined with the setting. This relationality is present in the seemingly banal decision of whether or not to kill insects.

“Sometimes, at nights, sitting at her small table with the lamp, the most exotic of insects passed in her presence . . . Sometimes she spared their lives. At other times she killed them and thought that she would be punished in another life. So she tried to kill them without malice. But there was a closeness in their appearance, a humility in a place where pesticides could not be purchased cheaply and fecundity rose in the smell of all things rotten and decaying and ripening to be eaten” (Brand 1989, 148-149).

Even the insects, specifically attached to this island in their exoticism, merit consideration as other beings with whom the protagonist shares living space and whose lives she may be held accountable for. With chemical pesticides not a feasible option and the cycles of ecological reproduction made palpable through the smell of fecundity, learning to (somewhat) peacefully live alongside the island’s insects seems to be part of the reconnection work the protagonist seeks through her time back at ‘home.’ In this way, “. . . seen” engages this island’s *landscape* as it is theorized by Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, that is, not as “trees, rivers, or flowers but an imagined relationship between all these as something other than already formed entities . . . landscape emerge[s] as [an] ongoing *process* that can be interrupted and redirected” (Tinsley 2010: 3). The subject’s intimate reckoning with the decision of whether or not to take the life of passing insects

stands in stark contrast to the large-scale violence which characterizes the U.S. invasion of Grenada.

In another autofictional connection to Grenada, “I used to like the Dallas Cowboys,” a story from the collection *Sans Souci*, the first-person narrator develops the U.S. football team the Dallas Cowboys as an allegory for US imperialism. The story moves between the present tense where the narrator is “lying in a corridor at 3:00 a.m. in the morning the middle of a war,” and flashbacks to the previous moments in her past in which she developed and refined her love for the Dallas Cowboys (Brand 1989, 116). The speaker’s affinity for the team is described in the context in which it develops: seeing images of football players in American magazines as a child in the Caribbean, staving off boredom in the perpetual Canadian winter as a college student, seeking uneasy community with men who are skeptical of the validity of her interest in the sport. By the time the speaker has arrived at the present moment, hunkering down in an apartment as the island she lives in is bombed, the connection between the masculine performative violence of sports and militarism has been clearly drawn.

“The day I finally creep to the door, the day I look outside to see who is trying to kill me, to tell them that I surrender, I see the Dallas Cowboys coming down my hot tropical street, among the bougainvillea and the mimosa, crouching, pointing their M16 weapons, laden with grenade-launchers. The hibiscus and I dangle high and red in defeat; everything is silent and gone. Better dead. Their faces are painted and there’s that smell, like fresh blood and human grease, on them. And I hate them” (Brand 1989, 129).

In this context of actual war and invasion, the layered imperial violence of the Dallas Cowboys as a cultural institution and as allegory for the U.S. military is apparent. The role of invaders calls forth the obvious, though normalized, echoes of cowboys as both mythic and literal foot soldiers of settler colonial invasion in North America, particularly

the United States. The physical presence of this cowboy army echoes the stances of the sport the narrator has observed over years of watching, the crouching and the pointing, and the use of under-eye or face paint. While the subject of “. . . seen” understood the island’s landscape as a shifting arrangement of lives in which they were relationally positioned, the invading army lacks this relation. The bougainvillea, mimosa, and hibiscus bear no relation to this army, other than defeat, silence, and absence.

Moving across texts, *A Map to the Door of No Return* dedicates the chapter/section “October” to illustrating Brand’s experience of events of October 1983 as the “particular origin” of “[her] present fear,” a fear described as an uneasiness related, though not singularly due to, living alone in a rural and nearly entirely white Canadian town (Brand 2001, 154-155). The chapter recounts the memories of that October: Brand and her companions in Grenada waking up to hear the sounds of the U.S. military invading Grenada, remembering how a few days before the invasion Brand narrowly escapes being caught in the crowd where Maurice Bishop was assassinated, remembering how “the curfew lasted for three days and then there were battleships out in the ocean” (Brand 2001, 168). The facts which anchor this period in world history are given their richest expression through the narration of embodied sensations which accompany them. More than fifteen years since Bishop’s assassination, Brand acutely recalls the painful and feverish headache which plagued her that day and afterwards. The fever seems not only symbolic of the pain and chaos which was the shortly besiege the island, but also a fitting narrative vehicle for illustrating the intimate ways that this large-scale violence became embodied. She writes, “The fever I had on the first morning of the crisis seemed to last for years. As in a fever you do not always know where you are. And then again,

you know precisely and dreadfully where you are” (Brand 2001, 169). Here, the pain experienced in Brand’s body is the narrative and corporeal symbol of the way that the weight of witnessing the demise of the Grenada Revolution, of which she had been an enthusiastic participant, is carried forth in Brand’s reckonings with orientation and disorientation in the context of the Black diaspora.

This disorientation is palpable when, immediately preceding this passage from *A Map*, Brand narrates the aftermath of the U.S. military’s three-day siege in what feels like a second-person continuation of the short story “I used to like the Dallas Cowboys.” Brand writes, “You climb into a car taking you to a U.S. army base on the island. You look at your hands and you look at your feet and you don’t recognize them and you wait for what more there is to be done to you. You find yourself at another base in another coming night waiting for an airplane to lift you out. But there is no you.” (Brand 2001, 168). If the disorientation Brand felt after losing her luggage in Amsterdam was narrated as an absence of the ideological and cultural authority which underlie colonial forms of orientation, disorientation in the wake of imperial violence is experienced as a detachment from one’s own body. After the pain and fever felt at the beginning of the crisis, the days of being constantly tensed and prepared for death, Brand’s inability to recognize her hands and feet as parts of her own body registers as a kind of numbness and sensual detachment as the consequence of trauma. The use of the second-person address in describing this separation from the self both implicates the reader as an audience witnessing this detachment and emphasizes the sense of the narrator’s disconnect from their body by interrupting the first-person narration. The passage ending

with the narrator's revelation that 'there is no you' gestures to the depth of the self-shattering that this period of violence has produced.<sup>9</sup>

Just as *A Map to the Door of No Return* describes disorientation as a bodily disconnect, it imagines desire as a form of bodily and sensual reintegration, as "putting the senses back together" (Brand 195). Similarly to the protagonist of ". . . seen," who returns home to work and to understand something that she did not previously understand, and in echo of the first-person musings of "Nothing of Egypt," *A Map to the Door of No Return* gestures towards the desire for freedom, both personal and communal, which influenced Brand's desire to travel to Grenada.

"You had come here for some purpose. Small, certainly; foolish, certainly. It's still hard to say what it was without someone sneering at it as if it is childish and impossible. I wanted to be free. I wanted to feel as if history was not destiny. I wanted some relief from the enclosure of the Door of No Return. That's all" (Brand 2001, 168).

The repetition of want in this passage emphasizes the central role of desire in this particular recollection and the larger project of the book. For Brand, desire is as ubiquitous as it is ephemeral, scattered across phenomena from "assigned objects" to "repetitive, clichéd gestures" (ibid, 195). If we follow the discussion of the return across these multiple literary sites—"Nothing of Egypt," ". . . seen," and *A Map to the Door of No Return*, we see that the return to islands which Brand repeatedly narrates is a pursuit of freedom. Even when it isn't clear what that freedom looks like in social or communal terms, freedom must involve the way one feels in one's body. By illustrating both the shattering of the senses and desire as an effort and longing towards putting the senses together again, *A Map to the Door of No Return* theorizes embodiment and sensation as

---

<sup>9</sup> This scene also resonates with Fanon's discussion of the Black man as "an object in the midst of other objects" in the chapter "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

they are implicated within orientations and disorientations. The framework of sensual worldmaking allows us to identify how the book approaches what Tinsley names, riffing on Brand, as the queer coupling of “*putting the world together* and *putting the senses back together* at the same time” (Tinsley 2008, 211, emphasis in original). Both sensual worldmaking and the ‘making sense’ of Brand’s framing of desire require an explicit reckoning of the ways bodily senses are engaged, whether in response to violence or to pursuits of freedom.

## Conclusion

Through *A Map to the Door of No Return* and other first-person texts which foreground the bodily experiences of their narrators, Brand is able to invoke a politicized diasporic collective in bodily terms without collapsing her own body into that of others or collapsing the condition of diasporic subjects into that of their enslaved ancestors. These texts demonstrate how the condition of disorientation is carried forth in the wake of slavery and detail the alternative forms of place- and meaning-making that emerge in the spaces of the Black diaspora. Diaspora is thus a space where the history informs the sensual experiences of the present. Brand’s work understands language, particularly in the forms of metaphor and literary fiction, as providing key ways of imagining and producing embodiment. Grounding Brand’s concerns with diasporic communities and their politics is a commitment to exploring, imagining, and creating pleasure. In an interview Brand states,

“ultimately, politics is about pleasure . . . I think Eros is ultimately what we have been fighting for. To express ourselves in the most lustful and pleasurable ways. When you’re fighting for or organizing towards a society that you would want to live in, it surely would be a society which is not just about making rules, but about making life pleasurable, and opening spaces” (Abbas 6, quoted in Goldman, 24).

We can therefore read pleasure as at least one goal of Brand's literary construction of the world in the terms of sensual, rather than colonial, worldmaking, her illustration of the queer orientations of diasporic Blackness, and her textual documenting of the embodied experience of the Grenada Revolution. Brand's writing "in the most lustful and pleasurable ways" works in service of constructing new societies and worlds through close examination of the worlds that currently exist. This world and the worlds being created are not only pleasurable, but the attention to embodied sensation which Brand has cultivated throughout her literary career provides models for generating deeper understandings of the kinds of knowledge anchored in embodied experience.

The sensual worldmaking found in Dionne Brand's writing often reflects forms of disorientation produced by a dissonance with the aspects of the world around the narrator, whether the existential conditions of the African diaspora or the specific and enduring violences of imperial violence. *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand's longest explicitly autobiographical book, develops the door of no return as a metaphor characterizing diasporic lived experience as disorienting at individual and communal scales. In the next chapter, we will turn to Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*, which narrates forms of internally produced disorientation. In *Freshwater* we encounter a lived experience of a more contemporary Black diaspora in the form of a 21<sup>st</sup> century migrant from Nigeria to the U.S. The metaphor best describing this novel's diasporic experience is not the door of no return, but rather the gates between the human and the spiritual realms, a space where the novel's protagonist Ada finds herself continually caught.



## Works Cited

- Abbas, Nuzhat. 1999. "An Interview with Dionne Brand and Nuzhat Abbas" *Herizons* 13, no. 3: 18-22.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Allen, Jafari S. "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjecture." 2012. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2-3: 211-248.
- Brand, Dionne. 1984. *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*. Toronto: Williams-Wallace Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. *Sans Souci, and other stories*. Ithaca: Firebrand Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. "Nothing of Egypt." in *Bread Out of Stone*. Toronto: Coach House Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *In Another Place, Not Here*. New York: Grove Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2020. *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Christian, Barbara. 1988. "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring): 67-79.
- Combahee River Collective.
- Fuentes, Marisa. 2016. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goldman, Marlene. 2004. "Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand." *Canadian Literature* 182 (Autumn): 13-28.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 26, 12.2 (June): 1-14.
- Johnson, Erica L. 2014. "Building the Neo-Archive: Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*." *Meridians* 12, no. 1: 149-171.
- Lambert, Laurie R. 2018. "When Revolution Is Not Enough: Tracing the Limits of Black Radicalism in Dionne Brand's *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* and *In Another Place*,

*Not Here.*” in *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present*, edited by Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder, 55-76. New York: Fordham University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2020. *Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.

Larrier, Renée. 2006. *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2014. *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. New York: New York University Press.

Puri, Shalini. 2014. *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodologies of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Scott, David. 2013. *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. 2008. “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 14, no. 2-3: 191-215.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2010

### Vessel of the Spirit: Transcorporeality in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

The previous chapters of this dissertation have illustrated sensual worldmaking as it is borne out in various forms of memoir: Audre Lorde's biomythography, Michelle Cliff's prose-poetic memoir, and Dionne Brand's long autobiographical essay. Akwaeke Emezi's debut work *Freshwater* presents sensual worldmaking in the genre of the autofictional novel, demonstrating how fictional strategies can be meaningfully used in life-writing. In addition to exploring an explicitly fictional form, the sensual worldmaking of *Freshwater* offers theorizations of gender which depart from the other authors examined in this dissertation due to its sustained engagement with spirituality and its exploration of nonbinary gendering. This chapter argues that *Freshwater* deploys the strategies of sensual worldmaking to articulate a mode of spiritual being which theorizes gender outside of binary terms. I illustrate how Emezi's thinking through and about gender integrates the contributions of Black diasporic feminism and queer Black diasporic religious studies.

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, I propose sensual worldmaking as a way to name Black queer writers' use of lived and embodied experiences in autobiographically-influenced writing as a source of literary and theoretical knowledge production. The composite words of sensual worldmaking point to the emphasis on embodiment, the experience of sensations, and an erotic capacity, in the sense of "a considered source of power and information within our lives" (Lorde 53). Worldmaking indicates an attention to the constructive aspects of literary creation as well as the argument that the knowledge produced through lived experience is knowledge used to create theoretical insight about how the world operates, particularly social-produced

identities such as gender, race, sexuality, and class.<sup>1</sup> The ‘worldmaking’ of sensual worldmaking is also an adherence to Katherine McKittrick’s claim that Black life is necessarily geographic.<sup>2</sup> Sensual worldmaking brings together writing, sensation, and imaginative construction of the world from the perspectives of how Blackness and queerness are lived.

*Freshwater*, published in 2018, is a coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist is more concerned with integrating—quite literally—her body, mind, and spirits, than with seeking reconciliation with the world around her. Spirits are plural because Ada, the human Igbo girl whose life we follow from birth in southeastern Nigeria to young adulthood on the east coast of the United States, shares the space of her flesh and mind with three distinctly named spiritual entities: Smoke, Shadow, and Asụghara. Since Ada’s conception, the space of her body and consciousness have also been inhabited by these other spirits, the “children [of gods], the hatchlings, godlings, ọgbanje.” (Emezi 6). Misty Bastian, drawing from ethnographic research in Nigeria and personal communication with Igbo friends and colleagues, defines ọgbanje as “‘returning children’ . . . a mischievous, spiritual person—one who is interested in human life, who could almost be said to experiment with the idea of being human, but who is not him/herself human and who has little interest in committing to a human lineage” (Bastian 59). A tempting question for a western reader is thus, where do the ọgbanje end and Ada begin? Who is the real Ada? Even as Emezi rehearses this question, knitting it into the tension of the

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Patricia Hill Collins on Black feminist epistemology. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge. 1990.

<sup>2</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

text, Ada is resolutely multiple: she is and the *ogbanje* are, all together, a whole.<sup>3</sup>

*Freshwater* is a series of recollections of a childhood and adolescence spent living with oneself as multiple selves, of confronting how human embodiment both enables and severely limits spiritual movement, and the ways that the necessary integrations of one's body, humanity, and spiritual being are complicated by intimacies with other human beings.

*Freshwater* moves between narrators, with its early chapters voiced by Smoke and Shadow, who name themselves 'We.' 'The Ada,' as her spirits call her, is always present among them, though the novel does not prioritize her independent voice. After a childhood in Nigeria shaped by emotionally and physically absent parents, Ada moves to Virginia for college. As a child, Ada embodies the tension between the realm of living humanity and feeling the *ogbanje*'s tug towards the realm the of the gods through emotional and physical volatility, though as a child she never directly confronts her nonnormative spiritual multiplicity. In college, Ada is repeatedly sexually assaulted by a partner while she is sleeping, the recognition of which both shatters a part of Ada's emotional stability and brings forth Asughara as a third distinct presence within Ada's body and mind. While Ada had always lived with Smoke and Shadow's presence, Asughara's arrival signals a new type of engagement between Ada and her other spiritual selves.

---

<sup>3</sup> Many white reviewers of this novel read it as a narrative of schizophrenia and mental illness. While madness is an explicit theme and Emezi has talked about struggles with their mental health during the period described in the novel, this reading of the novel's fractured subjectivities in exclusively medicalized terms reflects a lack of engagement with the spiritual realities proposed in the novel. My thanks to Ahmed Ragheb for drawing my attention to this point.

Upon her arrival into Ada's consciousness, which is illustrated throughout the novel through the figure of a white marble room, Asughara promises to protect Ada from the kind of assault she has just experienced by committing to always being the self who is present for sexual intimacy with other humans, keeping Ada tucked away deeper inside of her own body. For the remainder of the book, much of it narrated by Asughara, Ada tries various methods to cope with the unsustainable tension between a human body consistently met with violence and a roster of *ogbanje* intent on dragging her, and themselves, out of the land of the living. Ada is never able to remove the presence and voices of Smoke, Shadow, and Asughara from her mind, and by the end of *Freshwater* she has stopped trying. In the absence of this struggle and through her reconnection with the god Ala, the mother of *ogbanje* and therefore Ada's mother as well, Ada's voice emerges with the clarity that her wholeness strengthens her.

*Freshwater's* use of sensual worldmaking to theorize nonbinary spiritually informed gendering turns on two concepts articulated by Black religious studies scholar Roberto Strongman: transcripturality, a spiritually inflected mode of writing which reflects an ethnographer's spiritual possession or inhabitation by another spirit, and transcorporeality, a mode of embodiment emerging from Black diasporic religions where subjectivity can be understood to be separate from a single coherent body.<sup>4</sup> Strongman defines transcripturality as an 'ethnopoetic' style "in which [an] ethnographer transcribes raw field notes, thus giving the text a mystical, transcendental, and disorienting quality" (Strongman 91).<sup>5</sup> Moving beyond the disciplinary constraints of anthropology and

---

<sup>4</sup> While the term transcorporeality was coined by Graham Ward in the book *Cities of God*, Strongman sees his project as producing "a fuller elucidation of the term" (Strongman 4).

<sup>5</sup> Jafari Allen likewise evokes transcendence in his theorization of "transcendent erotics and politics" as a "sensuous practice" which "insists on creation of a new space . . . in which there is the creation of racial

ethnographic study, Strongman proposes transcriptural be more broadly understood as “the act of cultural creation—painting, photography, film, and particularly writing—in an altered or exalted state of consciousness that mirrors trance possession and prompts or suggests a similar experience in the receiver of such a work of art” (Strongman 252).

*Freshwater* most powerfully resonates as an act of transcriptural through an emphasis on the ‘altered or exalted state of consciousness,’ and the notion of possession.<sup>6</sup> Spiritual possession provides a useful, if imperfect, way of understanding Ada’s existence as oḡbanje, with Smoke, Shadow, Asūghara, and Ada’s human ‘self’ collectively inhabiting her body and mind. In addition, I propose that the illustration of Ada’s mind as a white marble room be read as an exalted state of consciousness. With this image Emezi draws on the aesthetic associations with white marble which are popular in the hegemonic Eurocentric cultural imaginary—including classical statues, opulent architecture, and a general referent of white material wealth—allowing these associations to exalt Ada’s consciousness as similarly formal and ennobled. Emezi’s use of the white marble room is simultaneously an inversion of these normative associations, reclaiming white marble as a literal space of Black queer spirituality.

In Strongman’s theorization, transcorporeality is an ontology which identifies multiplicity and movement as inherent to Afro-diasporic spiritual cultures. More specifically,

“Afro-diasporic religions operate under a transcorporeal conceptualization of the self that is radically different from the Western philosophical tradition. Unlike the

---

subjectivity and fertile ground for *communitas*” (Allen 95). In this formulation, transcendence is found both in the exercise of agency grounded in universal human rights, and in the “spiritual or psychic” sense (Allen 95). *Freshwater* speaks to transcendence in each of these registers; through transcriptural writing Emezi transcends humanity to write through spirit, and the character Ada is able to build queer community through this this transcendence of humanity.

<sup>6</sup> In a future project I am interested in putting a greater emphasis on the connection between the ‘receiver’ of a transcriptural work and the notion of readerly audience in *Freshwater*.

unitary soul of Descartes, the immaterial aspect of the Afro-diasporic self is multiple, external, and removable. The various subjectivities rest upon a concave corporeal surface reminiscent of a saddle or an open calabash” (Strongman 17).

Such a conceptualization of the self, as multiple, mobile, and co-habiting an embodied receptacle, productively maps with Emezi’s narration of Ada as *ogbanje*. In lieu of the concavity of a calabash or rider’s saddle, Emezi locates the receptacle quality of Ada’s human body in the cavernous chamber of her mind, the white marble room. Through the framework of transcorporeality the shifting presence and distinct articulations of Smoke, Shadow, Asùghara, and Ada in Ada’s body are equally legible as different subjectivities, both god and human, and simultaneously constituting a coherent self. Specifically linking the two concepts, Strongman describes transcriptuality “as the specific textual manifestation of the broader theoretical concept of transcorporeality” (Strongman 252). Following this interrelation, I read *Freshwater* as a literary theorization of transcorporeality in order to draw attention to the intricate conceptual work Emezi undertakes in this autofictional novel: by using the methods of sensual worldmaking *Freshwater* articulates, rather than argues for, a non-western, non-Cartesian self.

*Freshwater*’s genre is critical to its deployment of transcriptuality and transcorporeality. The term autofiction was first used to describe *Fils*, a novel by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky. An English translation of Doubrovsky’s description of this book specifies autofiction in contrast to autobiography: “fiction, of events and facts strictly real” (Lévesque-Jalbert 71). Further, within autofiction “author, narrator, and main character are multiple aspects of the same subjectivity, sharing the same name and the same psyche” (ibid). Given this elaboration of the self as multifaceted, autofiction facilitates a confrontation with the intricacies of one’s psyche in which “the fictionalizing



process of narration . . . is the process of the cure” (ibid). Emezi’s novel moves Doubrovsky’s self-assessment a step further by not only proposing the overlap of author, narrator, and protagonist, but by illustrating how all three of these entities are inherently multiple: *Freshwater* bears multiple narrators, multiple protagonists, and its author is similarly multiple. In interviews, Emezi has described *Freshwater* in similar ways. Asked about the book’s connection to their personal experience in an interview with *The Guardian* Emezi responds,<sup>7</sup>

“It’s an autobiographical novel – a breath away from being a memoir. There are chapters in there that are my journal entries which I copied and pasted. There are a couple of things about writing it this way: first, the things that people think are fictionalized are not fictionalized. Second, I wanted to make clear it was autobiography, otherwise it would be considered to be very fantastical. I wanted readers to be sure that it was not magical realism or speculative fiction. It’s what has actually happened! *I’m using fiction as a filter for it.*” (Akbar, emphasis added).

The breath separating this novel from memoir is the filter of fiction, according to Emezi. Emezi’s use of fictional narratives to reflect, filter, and otherwise mediate their lived experiences while emphasizing the fundamental truth of these narratives is simultaneously a strategy of sensual worldmaking and of the genre of autofiction. A tangible example of this autofictional mediation is found in naming. Smoke and Shadow narrate the English definitions of the Igbo first name Ada is given—“the python’s egg” and “precious child” (Emezi 9, 218). These are the English translations of the name Akwaeke, the author’s name, though this Igbo name is itself never given in the text. In this instance the narrative facts of Ada’s true first name and the ultimate significance of this name with respect to Ada’s relationship to the god Ala, are directly consistent with the author’s life. Black queer lived and embodied experiences ground the narrative

---

<sup>7</sup> Emezi identifies as nonbinary and trans, and uses the gender-neutral pronouns they/them.

movement and theoretical insights of *Freshwater*. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw attention to three sites in the novel which elaborate the concepts of transcorporeality, nonbinary gendering, and Black queer community: the white marble room of Ada's mind, Ada's gender-affirming surgeries, and Ada's encounter with a priest named Lëshi.

### **The White Marble Room: Staging Ọgbanje Transcorporeality**

The constructive aspect of sensual worldmaking is most literally rendered in the space of the white marble room, the figure used throughout the novel to represent Ada's mind and the location of her subjectivity. The white marble room is the metaphor for Ada's existence as a human/nonhuman, spirit and flesh being. Emezi constructs the white marble room as a space where Smoke, Shadow, Asùghara, a manifestation of Jesus Christ named Yshwa, and another non-ọgbanje spirit named Saint Vincent take visual form as distinct entities, interact with Ada and each other, and enact changes to Ada's physical body. The room is a physical and spatial manifestation of the mind, presenting a significant contrast from the frequent Western portrayal of the mind as diametrically opposite to the fleshiness and physicality of the body. Heather Russell, drawing on Paget Henry, notes that Western philosophy differs greatly from some West African philosophy through its construction of a singular, autonomous, Cartesian-split subject as the most privileged form of the self.<sup>8</sup> West African and African Atlantic discourse reflect a departure from this notion of self, such as the notion of a transcorporeal self which Strongman elaborates within multiple diasporic spiritual traditions, and these alternative forms of subjectivity are reflected in *Freshwater*'s narrative construction of this white marble space. Emezi employs the white marble room to articulate Ada as a being

---

<sup>8</sup> Russell 61.

composed of multiple elements which are juxtaposed, if not quite integrated, into a dissonant whole. The white marble room is therefore a literal and narrative space that accommodates the inhabitation of multiple subjectivities, multiple deities, inside of one human form. I read the co-habitation of these multiple subjectivities inside of the marble room as *Freshwater*'s key expression of transcorporeality.<sup>9</sup> In this section I examine the way the oḡbanje—Smoke, Shadow, and Asuḡhara—use this transcorporeal space to facilitate Ada's attempts to navigate sexual violence and queer notions of gender.

Ada's mind is first described as a marble room in a moment of crisis. Ada has just learned that Soren, her Somali-Danish boyfriend and a fellow track runner at their small Virginia college, has been sexually assaulting her in her sleep for weeks. Sudden recognition of this violence floods Ada's senses, and she screams. "Somewhere she could hear a building sound, a wind, huge and wide, rushing out of the void, rushing toward her. The walls, the veils in her head, they tore, they ripped, they collapsed. The wind rushed over his empty voice and the Ada thought with a sudden final clarity—*She has come. She has come for me at last*" (Emezi 58). The movement of this passage is seemingly from the external, outside of her body, inwards. As wind rushes from the void towards Ada, both the presumably stable and the flimsy structures inside of her mind are struck down in its wake. As this wind obscures the meaningless language of her intimate attacker, Ada identifies and acknowledges the presence of Asuḡhara as a rescuer.

When Ada calls for Asuḡhara in her moment of crisis, Asuḡhara does not keep Ada safe by removing Soren from her life, or by leading Ada away from sexually violent situations. Instead, Asuḡhara protects Ada by allowing Ada to dissociate during sex; she

---

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the movements, sensations, pleasures, scars, markings, and pains of Ada's body are experienced simultaneously, though very differently, by these multiple subjectivities.

promises to be the ‘self’ that is present when Ada is in a sexual situation. The spatiality of this arrangement is illustrated when, as Soren proclaims his love for Ada during another instance of manipulative and coercive sexual intimacy, Asughara narrates her takeover of the white marble room.

“Except Ada wasn’t there any more. At all, at all. She wasn’t even a small thing curled up in the corner of her marble. There was only me. I expanded against the walls, filling it up and blocking her out completely. She was gone. She might as well have been dead. I was powerful and I was mad, he could not touch me no matter how hard he pushed into her body, he could definitely never touch her. I was here. I was everything. I was everywhere. And so I smiled at him, using only Ada’s mouth and teeth” (Emezi 64).

Asughara’s expansion across the white marble walls of Ada’s room is Asughara’s attempt to protect Ada, by sparing Ada from having to think, feel, and experience her way through what continues to be a violent sexual encounter. Asughara’s defiant assertion that despite his physical penetration of Ada, Soren could never touch her, illustrates Asughara’s perception that the white marble room is the space of the ‘true’ Ada. This perception therefore proposes a distance between the ‘real’ Ada and the forms of corporeal sexual violence she experiences which belies the fact that Ada’s human body continues to experience and be impacted by this violence.

In *Freshwater* the white marble room also serves to manifest the nonbinary gendering of the *ogbanje*. One day some years after Asughara’s initial arrival, she is visited by two sibling gods, the brothersisters, who have arrived to chastise Asughara and the other *ogbanje* for failing to return, along with Ada, back to the spirit realm from whence they were sent by their mother, the god Ala. Brothersister provides a similar gendered indeterminacy as the neutral term sibling (Asughara refers to each brothersister with the neutral and nonhuman pronoun of ‘it’) yet does so as a doubling rather than as

an absence of specification. Through the use of brothersister to name Ada's spiritual companions, Emezi both manipulates Western gendered notions of kinship through intentionally doubling them and asserts that they are insufficient for naming the specificity of *ogbanje* relations. The doubling within the term brothersister parallels their inherent multiplicity: the brothersisters take individual corporeal form in Ada's brain even though their truest existence is as part of the larger entity of their other god siblings. They manifest in the white marble, with human-like corporeal forms, though they do not remain in Ada's mind.

The brothersisters have come to Ada's mind in order to remind Asughara that she and the other *ogbanje* do not belong in Ada's flesh, dwelling indefinitely among humans. They use pain to deliver this reminder, perhaps as an ironic means of forcing Asughara to confront her temporary embodiment. Asughara narrates, "Its touch was like a machete running me through. I wrapped my arms around my stomach, shocked. Pain was not a feeling I was familiar with—that was Ada's thing, not mine. Everything around us slowed down. I could see dust lightly sifting through the air, settling on the marble and the creases of my skin" (Emezi 130). Asughara feels the paradox of embodied pain from within Ada's mental space, even as she is reminded by deities like herself that she is not human. The white marble room is thus a transcorporeal space in which corporeality, embodiment, exceeds the category of humanity. Their presence and weaponizing of Asughara's corporeality makes way for Asughara to recommit to maximizing her capacity to exercise the unique power of being a god inside of a human's body. Asughara describes this "rich and thick power" in deeply sensual embodied terms. "It tasked like if you roasted blood with salt and capped it in a jar, cooked with it, seasoned meat with it,

fed it to your lovers rare, red on trembling fingers” (Emezi 135). For Asughara, being reunited with her capacities as a god within a human is a concentration and thickening of the literal and symbolic flow of life within a human body.

Asughara thus marvels at the power she can exercise through manipulation of the intricate and intimate landscapes of Ada’s body. She says, “To have a body to work with is no joke. I had all this room under Ada’s warm and nervous skin, and not only that, but I had all her bones too, hinged together, down to the marrow. Even there, I had the marrowspace, those little air pockets between the secret flesh, the flesh inside the enamel” (Emezi 135). Though the passage begins with Asughara claiming a kind of possession over this body and its capacities as “hers” to work with, she grammatically attributes this flesh and therefore its powers to Ada. It is Ada’s skin, warmed by blood flow and made sensitive by its millions of nerve endings, mobilized by Ada’s bones and their honeycombed, marrowed interior. Asughara’s power can be enacted through the vehicle of Ada’s body, and within Ada’s body itself, yet this power depends on Ada’s conscious presence as well, even if marginal. This passage helps articulate transcorporeality by giving a detailed illustration of this body as alternatively and simultaneously belonging to Ada and to Asughara and illustrating how easily their coexistence slips in and out of spiritual possession. The white marble room is thus the vehicle anchoring Asughara’s access to Ada’s fleshly body and therefore the site which anchors the novel’s illustration of transcorporeality.

By the end of the novel, Ada has returned, geographically and spiritually, to her home. Newly committed to accepting her hybrid human-ogbanje being, yet unsure of how, practically, to reconcile it, Ada turns to prayer. She says her mother’s name and, “I

felt [Mother/Ala] immediately and the brothersisters lifted off my mind in a hurried cloud. I was cast into a vast, empty space and everything around me was peaceful. It felt like the otherworld—that’s how I knew that I was inside her, suspended and rocked” (Emezi 224). When Ada invokes her mother the white marble room of her mind is cleared of the crowding presence of the *ogbanje*. In this atypical calmness and singularity, Ada finds herself transported to the “vast, empty,” peaceful, and womblike space inside of her mother. Amber Musser argues for thinking about Black and brown mothers, even those who are absent, “as a place, an *elsewhere* that is . . . accessible through the sensual” (Musser 2018, 172). Citing José Muñoz, Musser describes the maternal elsewhere as a horizon, “a longing that propels us onward . . . queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (Musser 2018, 173).

In the novel’s concluding paragraph, we see that the elsewhere place, the horizon, of Ada’s mother Ala is quite literal. “My mother draws closer now. I can see a red road opening before me; the forest is green on either side of it and the sky is blue above it. The sun is hot on the back of my neck. The river is full of my scales. With each step, I am less afraid” (Emezi 226). Ada experiences her reunion with her spiritual mother as a queer horizon in which Ada is moving forward into an unknown future with the confidence of the plural, transcorporeal “I” she inhabits. The speaker of this paragraph and concluding chapter is clearly Ada, and yet it is also her others: the scales filling the river represent her python mother, and as she continues, “I am the brothersister who remained” (Emezi 226). Ada’s transcorporeality continues, though by the end of *Freshwater* Ada is at the helm of her body’s multiple subjectivities, rather than simply a witness or at odds with it.

A prayer which begins with the name of the mother changes the position through which Ada experiences her subjectivity. We might, therefore, understand Ada's reintegration of herself and reconnection with her spiritual mother as the outcome of a practice of prayer. This notion of prayer as practice aligns with M. Jacqui Alexander's reading of practice as the way "through which the Sacred becomes a way of embodying the remembering of self, if you will, a self that is neither habitually individuated nor unwittingly secularized" (Alexander 298). Ada's transcorporeality, the inhabitation of her body by multiple spirits, has been narrated as a negotiation of rememberings; just as Asùghara was prompted by the brothersisters to remember her power and responsibility as an oġbanje, Ada learns to remember that she is a child of the god Ala as well as an oġbanje. This new remembering of her plural and spiritual, "neither habitually individuated nor unwittingly secularized" self is embodied through the new peace Ada has made with her transcorporeality.

*Freshwater* illustrates through the form of an autofictional novel what scholars have identified as Black diasporic spiritualities' queer conceptualizations and practices of gender and sexuality; queer in the sense that they transcend normative and binary understandings of both gender and sexuality. In her book *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley restates the insights of an informant, a vodou practitioner who proposes, "all people have the possibility to be simultaneously man and woman . . . but not because gender is constructed, or performative, or any other queer theoretical word. No, because they're always surrounded by multiple, multiply gendered spirits and may temporarily *become* any of these spirits at any time" (Tinsley 2018, 43). This idea echoes the logic of transcorporeality and reflects, to an extent, Ada's



relationship with the brothersisters. While Smoke, Shadow, and the other brothersisters are not represented as inhabiting a binary gender, Asughara and Saint Vincent are embodied within Ada as manifestations of performative femininity and masculinity. Tinsley's examination of "creative genders and femininities" both refers to the transcorporeal capacity of multiply gendered diasporic deities to inhabit the bodies and minds of practitioners, and to the creative ways that Black people have learned to adapt and embody gendered categories in the context of Black people's exclusion from conceptual and material access to many of the markers of 'traditional' binary gendering.<sup>10</sup> The mirror, as a key metaphor of Tinsley's text, represents the infinite possibilities of Black genders through its reflective capacities. Just as Ezili's mirror allows devotees to see and know themselves in multiples, the reflective capacities of mirrors allow us to think about the multiple expressions of selfhood in the oġbanje subjectivity represented in *Freshwater*.

Black queer studies scholar L.H. Stallings approaches the spiritual dimensions of queer Black experiences of gender and sexuality yet does so through a critique of many of the terms this dissertation examines—identity, subjectivity, skin, and embodiment, among others. Referencing the growing body of scholarship integrating trans studies and psychoanalytic literature she writes, "theorists offer relevant foundations for thinking through gendered embodiment with little to no consideration of how white supremacy influences such embodiment" (Stallings 211). Stallings argues that white supremacist logics are too deeply embedded within Western logics of embodiment and turns, like many other Black studies scholars, to foreground thinking through flesh as the vector of

---

<sup>10</sup> Tinsley 2018, 24.

being and becoming in Black life.<sup>11</sup> My work remains invested in the ways Black feminist authors have deployed the concepts of identity, subjectivity, and embodiment in their writing, and I am simultaneously interested in Stallings' proposals of other ways of conceptualizing Black queer life.

Keeping in this line of scholarship linking Black spiritual practices to queer gender and sexuality, Stallings develops the poet Robert Hayden's phrase "illusive flesh" into a theory of creative gendering. Stallings develops illusive flesh of light, as the full poetic saying goes, as a way of understanding the sensations of Black queer and trans bodies outside of the logics of the skin ego. Illusive flesh can be characterized by "sensory experience derived from interior movements felt on, under, and beyond the skin," serving as a way of understanding the sensual experiences of Black trans bodies without being confined to the dominant, white supremacist logics of gendered embodiment (Stallings 213). Stallings specifically names illusive flesh as a discourse shaping 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Black trans writing where transitioning is paralleled with spiritual journeys.<sup>12</sup>

"Illusive flesh . . . serves as a counterphilosophy to embodiment about what the transaesthetic experience and representation of Otherly human bodies means to forms of life and being that exceed the biological. With black political traditions incapable of challenging the assumed materiality of sex and gender in the West, these discursive practices join Yoruba-influenced spirituality in the United States as black traditions willing to theorize illusive flesh as a form of metaphysical gender, less attached the notion of a unified body" (Stallings 206).

By offering a counterphilosophy to embodiment Stallings is not suggesting a purely discursive disregard for phenomenological experience, but rather insisting that the 'logic'

---

<sup>11</sup> Stallings 212-213.

<sup>12</sup> In a later project I am interested in reading *Freshwater* and Emezi's forthcoming memoir in closer conversation with Stallings' analysis of Black trans autobiographical narratives.

of embodiment is only one way to name and conceive of what we experience through our bodies. Illusive flesh as metaphysical gender detached from “a unified body” bears strong connections to Strongman’s notion of transcorporeality and to Tinsley’s reading of the relationship between spiritual practice and shifting gender identities. Illusive flesh therefore provides another useful framework for understanding Ada’s experiences as an *ogbanje* and as a human.

### **Fluid Flesh, Fluid Gender: Black Feminism, Surgery, and Transcending the Binary**

The *ogbanje* Smoke and Shadow narrate a nonbinary relationship to gender and articulate gender as a fleshy extension of their spiritual liminality. “We were a fine balance, bigger than whatever the namings had made, and we wanted to reflect that, to change the Ada into us. Removing her breasts was only the first step” (Emezi 187). As the novel describes Ada’s top surgery and later hysterectomy, the *ogbanje* describe their pursuit of gender fluidity as a reflection of their spiritual and existential liminality. “To make the vessel look a little more like us—that was the extent of our intent. We have understood what we are, the places we are suspended in, between the inaccurate concepts of male and female, between the us and the brothersisters slaving on the other side” (Emezi 193). The *ogbanje* are liminal both spiritually and in terms of gender. They specify the literal location of this liminality as *ogbanje* space, a space which provides them with refuge: “we could rest in it like the inside curve of a calabash,” (Emezi 193) which recalls Strongman’s comparison of the transcorporeal body as a receptacle like a calabash. The *ogbanje* are specifically invested in removing Ada’s reproductive capacity in order to seek what they call a kind of biological neutrality.<sup>13</sup> Misty Bastian accounts

---

<sup>13</sup> Emezi 187, 190.

that the presence of *ogbanje* are tangibly manifested through a series of children, born to the same mother, dying before reaching maturity (Bastian 59). This definition foregrounds the significance of lineage and heritage to *ogbanje*: while *ogbanje* are manifested in individual (or a series of individual) corporeal forms, their defining characteristics are found in their impact on reproductive and familial legacies. This knowledge shapes Emezi's conviction that "an *ogbanje* never [reproduce]: if it did, it would contribute to the lineage, and when it died, its spirit would join those of the humans, participating in their reincarnation loop" (Emezi, "Transition," emphasis in original).<sup>14</sup>

Emezi published a personal essay titled "Transition" in the digital magazine *The Cut*. "Transition" offers a conceptual articulation of Emezi's rejection of Western gender discourse and narrates two of the gender-affirming surgeries they have undergone. By reading this essay alongside *Freshwater* I don't intend to conflate the creative and narrative work of the novel and the essay, but rather to make use of the interplay of two self-reflective genres of personal essay and autofictional novel. Emezi names two self-realizations as integral to their decision to pursue these surgeries: recognizing their transness and accepting that they are an *ogbanje*. Both *Freshwater* and "Transition" articulate being trans and being an *ogbanje* as identifications linked through a rejection of Western binary gender logics. Emezi characterizes the embrace of these identities, particularly their identification as *ogbanje*, as a politicized refusal to accept the ways colonial gender logics have suppressed various indigenous conceptions of being.

---

<sup>14</sup> Emezi, "Transition." This and all subsequent citations from this essay are without page numbers.

This argument that colonialism has impacted the ways gender is experienced is made forcefully in Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's 1998 book *The Invention of Women*. Oyěwùmí uses a sociological framework, a historical lens, and linguistic analysis to make the argument that pre-colonial Yoruba society did not have a gendered social framework. While Western societies are premised on what Oyěwùmí calls 'bodylogic,' meaning a reliance on visual differences between human bodies in order to organize and categorize them, Yoruba society before colonial contact with the British was organized according to age-based hierarchies and kinship structures. In Oyěwùmí's framing, anatomy is something separate from gender, even as she acknowledges that gender concepts are themselves based on anatomical categories. She therefore develops specific terms to refer to anatomy: anamales/anafemales/anasex, in order to pose a distinction between the anatomical and physiological realities of Yoruba society, and Western gender categories. Oyěwùmí critiques the various ways that white feminists and African feminists trained in North American and European intellectual spaces impose Western assumptions about gendered attributes and inequalities, such as marriage and family practices, without a sufficiently developed understanding of if, how, and when gender is understood to be a factor by Yoruba people.<sup>15</sup>

*The Invention of Women* is a deeply influential and significant text because of its specific examination of Yoruba culture as well as the broader applicability of its insights into colonial practices of mapping sexual and gender differences onto visible bodies.

---

<sup>15</sup> Recall M. Jacqui Alexander's proposal that rather than "presume a priori how gender and sexuality work" within the spaces of Afro-descended spiritualities in the Americas, we should instead "lean on ethnographic work (and my project would add literary knowledge and sensual worldmaking as sources of knowledge) to create the proximate categories that convey a sense of the meanings of these gender transmutations" (Alexander 324).

However, this book does not meaningfully engage the scholarship of Black women in the diaspora who were contemporaneously theorizing at the intersections of race, gender, and feminism. The experiences and theorization of Black women in the diaspora is not directly relevant to the core of Oyěwùmí's critical project, yet Black women writers and Black feminist scholars have insights which productively complicate Oyěwùmí's analysis of the flatness of Western notions of gender. Specifically, Blackness and the racializing processes of the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath render Black people outside of the cultural discourse of gender, as Hortense Spillers argues in her work. This may not have bearing on the fact that precolonial Yoruba society was not a gendered society, but it does present a more textured understanding of the uses of gender as a theoretical and ideological construct within racializing processes. Indeed, gender is simultaneously imposed on Yoruba and other African societies as a technology of colonial domination, and unavailable as a means of fully humanizing Black, African-descended subjects in the Western-dominated slave societies of the diaspora. We can thus understand gender as a multivalent phenomenon: a tool of colonial domination, a means of granting social legibility, and a set of tools for efficiently organizing forms of sexual and intimate violence in the aftermath of slavery and/or the wake of the slave trade.<sup>16</sup>

Along with embracing their existence as an *ogbanje* despite this framework's perceived unintelligibility in Western spaces, Emezi asserts trans identity as the frame of gender which most capaciously accommodates their non-Western, non-human *ogbanje* existence. Misty Bastian writes,

---

<sup>16</sup> The decolonial feminist scholar María Lugones illustrates that gender is an integral part of the modern colonial world system. See Maria Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System" *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 22.1 (2007), 186–219.

“to be an ogbaanje is to be categorized other—and to bring alterity home in a way that transcends the more ordinary, bifurcated ‘otherness’ of gender. We could even speculate that ogbaanje children fall under a third gender category, that of human-looking spirit. This other gender is marked from birth—as male and female statuses are marked—by special behaviors towards and physical adornment of the child.” (Bastian 59)

Bastian’s theorization of ogbaanje as a third gender aligns with Emezi’s analysis of their own existence falling outside of the realm of the binary sex/gendering of female/woman and male/man. Importantly, Bastian’s analysis names the realm of the spirit as a factor influencing the way ogbaanje experience gender.<sup>17</sup>

Emezi’s embrace of transness to accommodate ogbaanje identity through rejecting binary gendering is in conversation with dialogues in Black feminist studies, present elsewhere in this chapter as well, about the racist foundations of discourses of binary gendering, and therefore the possibilities of non-binary gendering for more accurately describing Black experiences of gender. The relationship between transphobia and racism is seen, for example, in Emezi’s encounters with medical institutions in pursuit of their gender affirming surgeries. As Emezi seeks medical care that can help them make their body livable as a nonhuman, nongendered being, they are met with forms of medical racism and transphobia which resonate with broader histories of reproductive and other medical violence against Black women, and the extremely racialized histories of the availability and quality of gender-affirming care which are made available to trans people. Emezi narrates confronting the disciplining, medicalizing confusion of the surgeon who performs their partial breast reduction: he says to them, “Male to female,

---

<sup>17</sup> Roberto Strongman draws attention to a white ethnographer’s equation of the Haitian terms *madevinez* and *masisi* with gay and lesbian. As Strongman writes, “the repertoire of these Western identities does not encompass sleeping with immaterial beings of any kind” (79). In other words, there are both sexual and spiritual dimensions that the terms gay and lesbian fail to capture.

female to male, fine. But this in-between thing?” The ‘in-between thing,’ posed as a derisive question, reflects a re-inscription of the logics of binary gender even in a space seemingly dedicated to its disruption. The doctor’s skepticism and disbelief confirm that as a medical professional and technician of Western gender logics, he finds movements along the spectrum of gendered representation to be troubling unless they are movements from one stable, coherent, binary position to *the*, not *an*, other. Emezi’s narrative allows us to understand how multiple regimes of violence act upon Black queer and trans bodies simultaneously.

I link Emezi’s contemporary articulations of transness to accounts historicizing Black experiences of gender during the period of transatlantic slavery because this period is formative of the modern category of Blackness, and as C. Riley Snorton states, “chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being” (Snorton 57). The period of enslavement and its aftermath is necessary for thinking through modern Blackness, as well as for thinking through modern theorizations of gender, precisely because gendered categories were premised on the exclusion of Black lives. Building on Hortense Spillers’ theoretical focus on the space and time of enslaved Black captivity, Snorton asserts that the condition of Black enslavement disrupts the clean separation between gender and sex: ‘female’ sex does not automatically translate to gendered womanhood across all racialized positions. Snorton focuses on the history of J. Marion Sims’ racist gynecological project in which Sims violently and abusively experimented on enslaved black women, who were themselves illegible as women even as their bodies were used as sites of anti-Black dominant knowledge



production. In other words, “the development of ‘women’s medicine’ was grafted from ungendered flesh” (Snorton 44).

While Emezi narrates U.S. medical spaces as sites of confrontation with the technologies and prescriptions of western gender identities, they specifically cite Nigerian and Nigerian diasporic communities as the source of another form of gendered policing, rooted in Christian religious ideals. “There was an ideal my body was supposed to conform to, and I was deviating from it by having surgery. I was rejecting it as a center and choosing something else: a world where the deviation itself was the ideal” (Transition, np). Emezi thus positions Nigerian gendered ideals, specifically Nigerian womanhood, as taking the shape of an idealized center around which good subjects should orient their bodies. This provides another perspective of the complex position of gender roles in Black communities. Notions of gender which have been imposed through slavery and conquest, as Oyěwùmí illustrates, have both precluded Black people from full participation and incorporation in these discourses and have also served as important forms of self- and communal definition, and have provided ways of seeking respectability.

Despite gender’s provenance as a colonial and anti-Black technology, Black communities have had a range of relationships to ideas about gender, including what Black feminists have theorized as the ‘politics of respectability,’ which involves attempting to perform normative gendering as a way to secure status. Brittney Cooper points to the ways respectability politics in African American communities were simultaneously enforced along lines of race and gender, naming “a kind of racial disciplining that encoded a demand for strict gender conformity. Racial respectability

demanded not only heteronormative gender role performances and sexual relations, but also cisgender identity performances as well” (Cooper 99). What Cooper illustrates in an African American context resonates through other diasporic spaces, as we can see through Emezi’s admission that their rejection of a performance of binary womanhood was especially critiqued in Nigerian and Nigerian diasporic social spaces. In *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* Matt Richardson suggests that normative gendering is a tactic that Black people have used to seek respectability, and more specifically, that intracommunal resistance to Black people’s nonnormative gendered and sexual behaviors stems from a desire to seek respectability and adherence to the nation.<sup>18</sup> In this way Richardson illustrates that normative and repressive Black gendering is in part a response to colonial domination. Relatedly, Treva Carrie Ellison defines “the promise of Black gender” for queer and gender non-conforming Black people as “the promise that Black people can repair the effects of racism by submitting to techno-scientific techniques of governance and regulation,” such as hormone therapies (Ellison 10). While Ellison is writing about efforts directed at disciplining visibly and overtly gender non-conforming Black people, I am interested in this formulation’s insight regarding Black people’s attempts to perform or enact gender as a form of seeking redress and recognition. The narratives Emezi relates in “Transition” offer an approach to body modification that flips the terms of this ‘promise’: rather than submitting to techno-scientific regulations in pursuit of assimilation or legibility, Emezi narrates a pursuit of medical technologies as a mode of evasion or transcendence of gendered norms and legibility.

---

<sup>18</sup> Richardson 4-5.

Sensual worldmaking is present in the way Emezi uses their embodied experience of dysphoria, of the anxiety and depression which manifest their deep dissatisfaction with life as a source of knowledge which leads them to confirm truth about their experience of gender and of Western humanity: “my dysphoria had built a tight knot of a home in my body” (Emezi, “Transition,” np). Emezi asserts that through recognizing and naming themselves as *ogbanje*—a nonhuman, non-Western category, they were validating that they had made a transition, regardless of “whether *ogbanje* are a gender themselves or without gender” (ibid). In any case, Emezi understood their surgeries as “a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned female to assigning myself as *ogbanje*: a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature” (ibid). In *Freshwater*, Ada and the multiple subjectivities which comprise her transcorporeal self treat her flesh as malleable, not deterministic, and treat her flesh as secondary to her subjectivity. The novel’s discourse of transness represents a disruption to gender logics by refusing to force Ada to make sense in the terms of binary gender. In their own embodied life as well as in pages of the novel they create, Emezi refuses any logics of gender which are predicated on biological essentialism, instead locating the logics of gender within the tensions between their body and their spiritual self, visualized in the white marble room.

Emezi closes the essay “Transition” as they opened it, with a close attention to their physical body: “By now, I’ve come to think of mutilation as a shift from wrongness to alignment, and of scars as a form of adornment that celebrates this shift. The keloids on my chest and the small lines spilling out of my navel function as reminders—that even when it meant stepping out of one reality to be swallowed by another, I kept choosing to move towards myself” (Emezi, “Transition,” np). The specific and detailed rendering of

mutilation and its visual markers invite us to revisit, on completely different terms, the theorization of marked flesh which Hortense Spillers undertakes in the essay “Mama’s Baby.” In Emezi’s narrative, we are materially, affectively, and historically removed—though not fully detached—from the context of transatlantic slavery in which the physical violence against Black people’s bodies, visualized by gouging, scarring, and maiming, resulted in a different kind of ungendering and dehumanization.<sup>19</sup> Emezi’s appeal to mutilation and their rejections of gender and of humanity are expressions of self-making in a context irrevocably shaped by violence. Jafari Allen theorizes erotic self-making as “exercises of individual agency toward developing who we are in changing worlds, despite who we are told we are or ought to be,” which has the effect of “moving the individual toward improving her or his own felt/lived experience by critically reading one’s own experiences and objective relations to the world” (Allen 96-97, emphasis in original). I propose that beyond the notion of choice which Emezi narrates, “Transition” also reflects a sense of Emezi being impelled towards their self, a sense that the massive physical and ideological shifts across ontologies are simply necessary to live a life which is not overtaken by the burden of dysphoria.<sup>20</sup>

### **Spiritual Community: Ada and Lęshi’s Queer Intimacy**

While much of *Freshwater* finds Ada navigating her relationship with her body’s multiple subjectivities in relative isolation from deep intimacy with other humans, queer

---

<sup>19</sup> Spillers 67.

<sup>20</sup> Within this reading, I see a narrative engagement with Afropessimism’s insistence on the structural impossibility of Black humanity, but an engagement which moves through this structural reality into the realm of the one, using the generic vehicle of the personal essay for an expression of what Kevin Quashie calls black aliveness. By ‘the one’ I am referring to Hortense Spillers’ suggestion that a psychoanalytics of Black literature and culture would mean a consideration of ‘the one,’ the interiority of Black subjects within literature, rather than the use of Black subjects to stand in for the race as a whole. From her essay “All the Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother.” Quashie theorizes black aliveness in his book *Black Aliveness, Or a Poetics of Being*.

erotic intimacy provides a turning point in her relationship to herself. While visiting Nigeria, Ada meets Lẹshi, a Yoruba priest. Ada and Lẹshi experience an attraction to each other's spiritual energies, and Lẹshi's function in the narrative is to see Ada in a way that facilitates Ada seeing herself. Their brief encounter is not sexual, but is queer, intimate, and erotic. Audre Lorde defines 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" (Lorde 53). The notion of the erotic living within our consciousness, as being a kind of knowledge which is deeply seated and "nonrational" echoes the role of the ọgbanje as aspects of Ada's consciousness which cannot be integrated into the Cartesian model of rational consciousness. For much of the novel *Freshwater* narrates the relationship between Ada and her other selves as a struggle for the power to position Ada's body in the world and in relation to others. For instance, Asụghara wants to use her power to kill Ada's body in order to bring her and the other ọgbanje back to the realm of the gods. Ada wants to be able to quiet the voices in her head. Lorde's description of unarticulated feeling as a source of power aligns with the ways Ada experiences conflicts between the parts of herself as a suppression of some aspect of her power.

Lẹshi is attuned to Ada's possession of power she has not yet been able to fully enact. The narration characterizes his probing: "*Here is the edge of the cliff, do you have the liver to stand there? You should, you stink of power. No, you cannot hold my hand . . . You have to stand alone, none of this works if you do not stand alone*" (Emezi 214-215, emphasis in original). Lẹshi's hotel room is the physical space which holds Ada and Lẹshi's coming together, a "white nest" which mirrors the white marble room of Ada's

mind.<sup>21</sup> Fittingly, Lẹshi is the first character in the novel to speak to all of the spirits within Ada simultaneously. When he does, his words are italicized, as were the words of the brothersisters when they encounter Asughara in the white marble room. While Ada's multiple selves are present in the encounter with Lẹshi, he is uniquely able to speak to all of the selves and yet truly address Ada. The positioning of Lẹshi's prioritization of Ada as the novel's climax reinforces *Freshwater's* argument that while Ada is truly comprised of multiples, she herself would need to be present, engaged, and in full possession of her own power in order for her and ọgbanje to successfully coexist.

Initially, Asughara responds to the tense intimacy and proximity of these two powerful beings, Ada and Lẹshi, by attempting to seduce Lẹshi as she has seduced other humans. "He smiled, immune to her bait, then coaxed and petted her until she gave in and laid her head on his thighs, naked and docile, the Ada's body strewn over his sheets" (213). As illustrated earlier, Asughara arrived in Ada's mind in response to sexual violence, and throughout the novel has functioned as the proxy for Ada in moments of sexual encounter. Functionally, neither Ada nor Asughara have experienced intimate sex: Asughara is not human and is not interested in, or perhaps capable of, emotional intimacy with human beings, and Ada has experienced sex as retraumatizing in the few instances Asughara has not acted as her proxy. In light of this history, the encounter with Lẹshi is striking in that the sexual tension they both feel is transformed into real emotional and spiritual intimacy. The docility of Ada lying on Lẹshi's bed with her head on his thighs is therefore not necessarily a signal of sexual submission, but rather of submitting to intimacy. From this intimacy grows a shared experience of seeing and being seen. And

---

<sup>21</sup> Emezi 212.

yet, even as the novel points to this mutual seeing, it resists narrating all aspects of this encounter to the reader. “We cannot tell you the whole of it, the parts that do not fit into words, the parts that we have already sectioned away for safekeeping . . . Be satisfied with this: Lęshi told the Ada truths” (Emezi 214). This decision recalls Edouard Glissant’s theorization of opacity as a resistance to or rejection of the colonial desire to see and know all.<sup>22</sup> *Freshwater* performs opacity by both illustrating the significance of this encounter for Ada and by refusing to reveal everything to the reader.

Embodiment remains an important part of this spiritually intimate encounter. The oġbanje narrate, “and just like that, in two nights with the moon shifting slowly between phases, he reached inside us, through us, and he pulled the Ada out into the light . . . Lęshi pushed himself into her terrible loneliness, called her by all of our names, then left, because some gates do close” (Emezi 215). Given *Freshwater*’s construction of the white marble room as the space which contains all of Ada’s subjectivities, we can imagine Lęshi reaching into the white marble room as a parallel of how he might have extended his fingers and hands into Ada’s body as a lover. In this instance, the erotic imagery of Lęshi’s hands reaching deep inside of Ada in order to pull her forward into the light is not characterized as providing sexual pleasure, but rather an erotic and spiritual clarity. When Lęshi reaches into Ada’s white marble room, he helps birth the new, integrated Ada. This kind of laboring touch helps Ada become herself, fully: “who we were before Lęshi laid his long hands on us was not who we were afterward” (ibid, 216). Through this intimate and spiritually attuned encounter with Lęshi Ada learns to inhabit her spiritual multiplicity by moving “out of [the oġbanje’s] shadow and into her body” (ibid). As the

---

<sup>22</sup> Glissant 111-120.

relationship which unfolds in Afrekete's room helped birth a new knowledge of Black queer womanhood inside of Audre Lorde, the time that Ada spends in Lęshi's room becomes a physical and emotional site for her transformation.

Lęshi's connection with Ada deeply resonates with Lorde's sense of the erotic's capacity to redefine and elevate our standards for ourselves. Lorde writes,

“The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, one we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.” (Lorde 54)

Throughout *Freshwater* Ada has struggled to navigate the depths of the chaos of the strongest feelings of multiple subjectivities within her. The strength of the oġbanje's presence has often drowned out Ada's singular voice. As a transcorporeal being, her goal need not be to remove the other voices. For Ada, tapping into erotic self-knowledge means becoming intimate and comfortable with the chaos of multiple internal voices. Such an intimate comfort becomes a new standard to which Ada can now hold herself. Note that this is not a recognition given or imposed by an external other. Lęshi is there as witness and aid, yet it is ultimately Ada who accomplishes the work of coming to terms with the space between the surface and the depths of her sense of self. When he leaves Ada after their brief encounter, she is bereft. The brothersisters narrate, “we relived the two nights over and over; we plastered his face all over the marble and wept at the loss of his voice . . . When you have been hiding in a great shadow, it hurts to look at the light, to be awake, to feel” (Emezi 215). And yet Lęshi's gift of erotic intimacy with Ada—truly seeing her, truly hearing her, “sharing deeply [this] pursuit with another person”—aids



her in committing to continue to confront the light, to feel fully, and to be more awake than she has been thus far.<sup>23</sup>

Queerness is also central to the erotic and spiritual intimacy of Ada and Lẹshi's encounter. Lorde's gendered reading of the erotic and its suppression resonates with the ways gender is imagined in *Freshwater*, with the erotic being feminized and located in a "female" plane within each of us.<sup>24</sup> Ada is not fully human and so not strictly a woman, a fact which is reinforced as Ada grows older and pursues surgeries to help her body match her liminality. Still, Ada has been interpreted as a girl and woman in human and gendered terms, both by her family and community in Nigeria and within the United States. For this reason, we can read Ada's interiority as feminized due to the ways she is feminized by the world around her, without needing to ascribe womanhood to her.<sup>25</sup> Lẹshi is read by Ada's human friends as queer because of his feminine aesthetic performance—specifically his dark eyeliner and mascara—yet the ọgbanje recognize the ways he exudes a sense of suprahuman power: "he reeked of power, of in-between-ness, . . . [these marks] told what spaces he lived in, those liminal gutters" (Emezi 212). While we don't know anything about the priest's gender or sexual identity or practices, I read the intimacy he shares with Ada as queer in that it foregrounds the spiritual realms they both exist within.<sup>26</sup> As I have argued, this intimacy is integral for Ada reaching a new level of her spiritual wholeness.

## Conclusion

---

<sup>23</sup> Lorde 56.

<sup>24</sup> Lorde 53.

<sup>25</sup> As I discussed earlier, we can also interpret Ada's interiority as feminized when we understand her and her brothersisters as children of Ala, the mother of all gods. Therefore, the interior space of Ada's mind where she and the ọgbanje reside is framed by their mother's presence.

<sup>26</sup> In a future project I am interested in reading Lẹshi's spiritual work and closeness with Ada as a queer kind of midwifery, as he assists Ada through the physical and emotional labor of delivering herself.

Akwaeke Emezi's writing poses important challenges and propositions in existing conversations about sex, gender, and spirituality in the African diaspora. *Freshwater* thinks through a question which recurs through Black feminist studies and other Black critical scholarship: what does one do when one's body is incompatible with one's subjectivity?<sup>27</sup> In this chapter I have argued that Emezi uses sensual worldmaking in *Freshwater* and the essay "Transition" to narrate a series of phenomena which have allowed them to more closely align their physical body with their reality as a multi-voiced, not-human, yet human embodied, *ogbanje*. This book stages a series of refusals of Western epistemological premises: due to its nonhuman protagonist who currently occupies a human body, the text refuses Western logics of gender and sexuality, Cartesian dualism and subjective coherence, and refuses a definition of Blackness informed by Western humanism. Instead, *Freshwater* marshals the method of sensual worldmaking and the genre of the autofictional novel to narrate a transcorporeal reality, most clearly visualized through the space of the white marble room where these multiple subjectivities reside and encounter one another. Within this text, Emezi rejects the expectation that as a work of fiction, "names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously," and similarly refuses the double-bind of attempting to certify the 'legitimacy' of a non-Western epistemological and ontological structure in Western epistemological terms, as would be necessary in a traditional academic text.<sup>28</sup> By evading the narrative and argumentative expectations of

---

<sup>27</sup> Frantz Fanon's theorizations of the phenomenological 'fact' of Blackness is an often-examined take on this question.

<sup>28</sup> The quoted statement is often found in the front matter of fictional texts published in the United States, along with the additional statement that "Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental."

the ‘purely’ fictional novel and the academic essay, Emezi is able to simultaneously mediate a version of their lived experiences and to theorize the broader context in which they are able to make sense of these experiences.

*Freshwater* details a narrative landscape based in a diasporic Igbo understanding of the world, in which Western humanism is at most an antagonizing or complicating factor, yet not at all at the center of the narrative or the logic which structures it. As an autofictional novel *Freshwater*’s world-construction cannot be interpreted as purely fictional or imaginative, but requires a grappling with the narrative construction as part of the author’s reality. *Freshwater* therefore presents an articulation of Black subjectivity that is not beholden to the anti-Blackness of Western humanism. It offers an example of a text that articulates Black life outside of the terms of western humanism and its ‘onto-epistemology,’ its way of knowing which structures a way of being, or how we know what it means to be (Palmer 33). *Freshwater* is significant because it does not ascribe to Western humanism, but that exclusion from humanism is through participation in another form of worlding, not a negation of humanity. In his critique of affect theory’s failure to meaningfully grapple with race and Blackness, Palmer writes “taking into account the singular position of blackness within the social order and the pervasive anti-black logics that structure the social world troubles notions of the universality of affect as a mode of intersubjective reality” (Palmer 33). I propose that *Freshwater* illustrates alternatives to the unthinkable or unseeability of Black affect through its construction of a world with Black ways of knowing, seeing, and being. Palmer writes, “If one adopts the position that blackness stands as the embodiment of the antisocial within the symbolic order—as the constitutive negation of humanness—how does the fact of blackness impact

intersubjective relationality and affective exchange?” (Palmer 35) Palmer’s question reflects one of the fundamental principles of Afropessimism, namely that blackness is “the constitutive negation of humanness” at a structural and paradigmatic level. Through strategies of sensual worldmaking, Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* creates a literary example of what is possible when we examine Black life within a different, non-Western social order.

## Works Cited

- Akbar, Arifa. "Akwaeke Emezi : 'I'd read everything – even the cereal box.'" *The Guardian*, October 20. 2018.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/20/akwaeke-emezi-interview-freshwater>.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2005.
- Allen, Jafari S. *Venceremos?: The Erotics of Self-Making in Cuba*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2011.
- Bastian, Misty. "Irregular Visitors: Narratives About Ogbaanje (Spirit Children) in Southern Nigerian Popular Writing."
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge. 1990.
- Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: the Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press. 2017.
- Ellison, Treva Carrie. "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender." *The Black Scholar* 49.1 (2019): 6-16.
- Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. New York: Grove Press. 2018.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Gender, Transition, and Ogbanje." in *The Cut*: January 19, 2018.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press. 2008.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1997.
- Lévesque-Jalbert, Émile. "This is not an autofiction': Autoteoría, French Feminism, and Living in Theory." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76.1 (Spring 2020): 65-84.
- Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1984.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. New York and London: New York University Press. 2014.

- . *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2018.
- Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónké. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. 1997.
- Palmer, Tyrone S. “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect.” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3.2 (Fall 2017) 31-56.
- Quashie, Kevin. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2021.
- Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. 2017.
- Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17.2, “Culture and Counteremory: The ‘American’ Connection. (Summer 1987): 64-81.
- Stallings, L.H. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2015.
- Strongman, Roberto. *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Tinsley, Omise’eke Natasha. *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2018.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2014.

## Conclusion

*Afrekete's Room* has closely examined the writing of four Black feminist writers which spans over forty years (1980 – the present) and addresses Black diasporic life in the Caribbean, North America, Africa, and Europe. The analyses presented in this dissertation have emerged from and made contributions to a number of scholarly debates. Foremost, *Afrekete's Room* participates in the Black feminist criticism which Barbara Smith called for in 1978. In centering the lives and writing of Black queer women and trans authors, this project has reinforced the Black feminist political and scholarly commitments to understanding, studying, and celebrating the lives and work of people whose humanity would be negated through racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. *Afrekete's Room* historicizes some aspects of these authors' lives and works, though it is not a primarily historical project. Instead, as a project of literary and theoretical analysis, *Afrekete's Room* has taken up these authors as literary artists and theorists of gender, Blackness, and other forms of social experience. This continues the work done by Black feminist scholars, such as my committee members Abena Busia and Brittney Cooper, of centering Black women's writing as meaningful sources of political, cultural, and artistic knowledge.

This dissertation has identified how Black queer authors narrated and theorized their lived experiences in a range of genres, transforming embodied experience into literary material. These chapters have examined biomythography, poetic and essay memoirs, personal essays, and autofiction, identifying the strategies and characteristics in each which enable sensual worldmaking. Audre Lorde's development of biomythography, for example, facilitated her articulation of the sensuality of her

embodied experiences as ancestrally linked with those of her mother and other women family members. Michelle Cliff's use of mixed forms in *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, in contrast to her literary fiction, enabled self-reflection as a mode of political critique. The sparseness of Cliff's writing in *Claiming* does not lend itself to a transparent sense of knowing or understanding her life, yet it clearly illustrates Cliff's personal connections to the anti-colonial critiques she espouses. Similarly, Dionne Brand's overlapping narratives across essay, fiction, poetry, and nonlinear memoir illustrate an investment in using the strategies of multiple genres to think through significant moments of world and personal history such as the Grenada Revolution. Like Cliff, Brand utilizes autobiographical material for specific politicized purposes, rather than in the interest of self-revelation. For both Cliff and Brand, their encounters with colonial literature are important touchpoints in their recollections of childhood and adolescence. Akwaeke Emezi's use of autofiction allows for the mediation and distancing of fiction as well as a commitment to the truth of one's life as the novel's source material. Significantly, Emezi's use of digital platforms like Instagram and Twitter have allowed them to construct a public persona in which their authorship and their personal life are visibly and intentionally connected.

The primary theoretical contribution of *Afrekete's Room* is the concept of sensual worldmaking, my way of naming these Black queer authors' use of lived experience to generate literary and theoretical knowledge. Sensual worldmaking argues for a way of reading Black feminist literature that takes writers' bodies and their sensuous capacities as the source of insight from which Black feminists create knowledge about the world in their literature. Sensual worldmaking's emphasis on embodied experience as the locus of



narrative and theoretical insight is useful in that it reveals how the broad scales of diaspora, nation, and region are thought, felt, and experienced at a bodily level. This has the effect of illustrating individual, particular experiences of social structures, and these individual experiences can generate insight regarding other individual and collective experiences. Audre Lorde's narration of the experience of reconciling Carriacou as an embodied maternal geography against its invisibility within colonial maps resonates with other experiences of finding one's homeland unrepresented in formal cartographies. Michelle Cliff's discussion of the ways white supremacy has shaped her family's interactions provides possibilities for linking the relationships between Blackness and whiteness in the United States and in Jamaica. The 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada as narrated by Dionne Brand is both a manifestation of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and U.S. militarism, and a series of violent encounters felt within a Black woman's head and hands. Akwaeke Emezi's translation of their nonbinary and spiritually-grounded embodiment generates an autofictional narrative which has the capacity to be read as metaphorical by those inattentive to non-Western spiritual reality, yet simultaneously provides language and imagery for Black queer and trans people who understand themselves as situated beyond binary gender.

Just as the word 'sensual' bears an erotic connotation in comparison to the word 'sensation,' sensual worldmaking is attentive to the different ways that erotics emerge in these literary texts. *Afrekete's Room* has theorized erotics from the foundation given by Audre Lorde in her essay "Uses of the Erotic," which frames the erotic as a kind of power, a capacity for deep connection with oneself and others, and a reclamation of the qualities of femininity and spirituality within our mental and emotional space. The deep

relationship between erotics and sensuality reinforces this project's indebtedness to Audre Lorde's thinking and writing and has allowed me to pay attention to the erotic potential present in the sensual experiences narrated in the literary texts I have studied. Though these authors can be grouped into two broad types of strategies, self-revelatory and self-referential, erotic sensuality can be found within both strategies to different degrees. It is fitting that Audre Lorde and Akwaeke Emezi bookend the dissertation, given the similar level of detail with which they narrate their erotic sexual and spiritual experiences. Michelle Cliff and Dionne Brand, on the other hand, are less self-revelatory in their deployment of embodied experiences yet use these experiences to position themselves in community with other Black, queer, and post-colonial subjects. Further, the emphasis on self-authored embodied experience allows for the Black women and queer subjects' perspectives to be shared without being pathologized, exoticized, or devalued.

*Afrekete's Room* has used Black feminist and queer frameworks to position Black queer women and trans people within the same literary and theoretical traditions. This project is invested in expansive theorizations of Black womanhood and juxtaposing them with other expansive theorizations of Black gender. Each chapter differently engages the notions of womanhood and gender, as well as the interplay of race, sexuality, class, and other factors, in relation to embodiment. Within *Zami* Lorde describes how moments such as pounding spices during her first period are constructive of a self-defined, sensually-oriented definition of queer womanhood. Later, Lorde's relationship with Afrekete is transformative for Lorde's capacity to understand herself as a Black queer woman in relation to other Black queer women. The impact of this intimate relationality is echoed in the brief and significant relationship Ada develops with Leshi, which serves

as a Black queer erotic intimacy which invites Ada to show up more fully for and as herself. The spiritual integration at which Ada is able to arrive in Lęshi's presence is crucial to her self-definition. As chapter four illustrates, Ada's identity positioning in *Freshwater* maps onto that of author Akwaeke Emezi's, with both character and author linking trans nonbinary gendering and being an ọgbanje. For this reason, chapter four presents the most literal illustrations of how Blackness precludes normative relationships to binary gendering. In chapter two, Cliff's identity as a Black woman is positioned as centrally informing the political critiques she offers through her literary texts. Cliff's lesbian identity is less explicitly engaged, though it is illustrated as an identity—like Blackness—which represents Cliff's unwillingness to seek the forms of assimilation into dominant whiteness which much of her family has sought. Dionne Brand's gendered analyses and narratives as discussed in chapter three foreground Blackness as a disorienting factor in relation to gendered narratives as well as embodied experience. Brand locates queerness not only in sexual and romantic practices, but as a position which, like Blackness, prepares one to be misrepresented by dominant narratives. I hope that this project can contribute to how we can understand queerness in relation to Blackness, including in relation to Black experiences and conceptions of presumably binary categories such as womanhood.

As I have researched, written, and revised these chapters, I have identified a number of questions and lines of thought which I am interested in pursuing in future projects, whether in the book manuscript which will emerge from this dissertation or in a standalone article. Moving forward, I am interested in more fully fleshing out the debates about Black experiences and conceptualizations of gender. Due to Emezi's position as the

only author who publicly identifies as nonbinary, and *Freshwater* as the only primary text which details a character's exploration of nonbinary identity, these questions are most clearly discussed in chapter four. A future version of this project could foreground discussions of nonbinary gendering within the overarching framework. As an example, it could be useful to read Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, and Dionne Brand as articulating forms of nonbinary Black gendering within their analyses of Blackness' intersection with other forms of identity. I am not necessarily invested in such a reading of these authors for the sake of making them legible in current terms, though I am interested in positioning them within a trajectory of Black feminist literature and scholarship which enables these critiques.

The second major area for development in a new project is in deepening my engagement with the various traditions of scholarship sensual worldmaking emerges from and departs from. There is further space to articulate, for instance, how sensual worldmaking fits within the traditions of feminist theorizations of the relationship between language, womanhood, embodiment, and writing, as these theorizations have been voiced within white, Black, and other women of color scholarly traditions. I am also interested in how sensual worldmaking can engage the relationship between literatures of phenomenology and affect studies with social identity, including how phenomenology and affect help us theorize whiteness, embodied Black queerness, and self-representative literature. The philosophical approach of phenomenology, which examines consciousness, phenomena, and individual experience, has informed my thinking about sensual worldmaking primarily through my engagement with scholars of queer and racialized phenomenology, such as Sara Ahmed and Amber Musser. My project differs

from the ‘line’ of traditional phenomenology—following Sara Ahmed—primarily through its explicit investment in blackness, queerness, womanhood, and the impact of social structures of marginalization on embodied experience. Other scholars of phenomenology and affect have informed my work—such as Fanon’s writing on the phenomenology of Blackness and Michelle Stephens’ work on skin, Blackness, and gender—though I was not able to fully engage these influences in the dissertation.

Lastly, I am interested in exploring how, if at all, afropessimism may productively influence my future research. I have become more familiar with the discourse of afropessimism within the past year and find some aspects of its structural analysis to be useful, namely, that antiblackness shapes the modern world. However, *Afrekete’s Room* demonstrates a clear departure from the pessimism of afropessimism through its insistence that the literary articulations of Black writers can build new worlds and effect some sorts of change to the structural negation of Blackness. While I am not interested in developing an afropessimist analysis of the texts and authors I have discussed in this dissertation, I am curious to know how afropessimist thinkers who center Black queer people, women, and literary production could give additional insights regarding Black lived experiences within the context of an antiblack world.

This dissertation has been an opportunity to write about the lives, thinking, and literature of Black women and nonbinary authors, both living and dead. I have kept their many differences of era, region, nation, and style in mind as I have committed myself to illustrating what I understand them to share: an investment in writing their lives as simultaneously their own and representative of the larger worlds in which we live.

*Afrekete's Room* is also an homage to these authors and the diasporic Black feminist traditions they write within.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2006.
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage Canada. 2001.
- Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. New York: Grove Press. 2018.
- Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1984.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. New York and London: New York University Press. 2014.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *The Radical Teacher* 7 (March 1978). 20-27.