

SEX-POSITIVE BLACK FEMINISM: A LITERARY TRADITION, 1967-1988

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Traditionally, the history of sex-positive feminism has been traced back to white feminists of the late 1970s and 80s such as Susie Bright, Betty Dodson, Ellen Willis, and Gayle Rubin. The discourse on black women that does exist often locates sex-positive expression in the 1990s and the decades after. *Sex-Positive Black Feminism: A Literary Tradition* explores the long history of sex-positive black feminism through the work of three under explored black feminist writers during the period of 1968-1988—Red Jordan Arobateau, SDiane Bogus, and Ann Allen Shockley. I argue that the work produced by each of these writers has not fit neatly into the black feminist theoretical archive or literary tradition and challenges notions of black literary respectability. To this end, I propose a reading practice that emphasizes effort which, I argue, makes sexual possibility more legible in black feminist literature.

This dissertation also seeks to make a critical intervention in the history of pro-sex feminism in the 1970s and 80s and, to a lesser extent, black feminist engagement with black power ideology. While black women did not have a strong organized presence in the pro-sex (also referred to as sex-positive) movement, I argue that we can locate black women's engagement with the movement in less organized activities and forms of expression such as fiction and poetry. Although there have been critical studies on black female sexual agency and subjectivity in the ar

eas of music, popular culture, and pornography, few have been done on literature. While this project builds on a growing body of scholarship on black women's sexuality, it seeks to expand the types of sources we turn to when we think about black women and sex.

Ultimately, as recovery project this dissertation seeks to amplify a virtually unknown body of literature written by black feminists and also affirm the communities with which it resonated. Through this project, I seek to reframe the ways in which we read black feminist literature and think about black women's pleasure historically.

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Introduction

When I was nine years old, I saw the film *The Color Purple* (1985) for the first time. On a summer afternoon in our small upstate New York house, somehow I had managed to find some unsupervised television time alone from my parents and younger brother. With my eyes glued to the screen, I stood riveted by the various shades of brown faces I saw flash across the screen—Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg, Margaret Avery. I had already developed relationships with many of the black women actresses in the film through their public personas. The actresses with whom I was not familiar, I was able to quickly situate in my imagination through their resemblance to real life people I knew or wanted to know. The scene that has stood out to me most in the film was “the kiss” between Shug and Celie. In the scene, the two women sit side by side, Shug carefully planting kisses on Celie’s face. A blues plays in the background as Celie awakens to the realization of her own sexual pleasure and begins to kiss Shug back.

That same summer, shortly after seeing the film, I found the *Color Purple* (1982) along a wall lined with books in our living room. As I flipped through the pages, relishing sections of the book that I recognized from the film, I remember looking over my shoulder, worried that I might get myself into trouble. I stopped when I reached “the kiss” and lingered. The scene was even more powerful in print. The book also offered a model that I needed as a teen survivor of sexual abuse. It showed me how powerful and healing the bonds of sisterhood could be and that there was a way through trauma.

In Salamishah Tillet’s recent book *In Search of the Color Purple* (2021), she similarly attests to the novel’s significance in her own life and sense of sexual consciousness. Tillet writes,

If Celie is the character in whom I saw myself as a teenager, Shug is who I wanted to be as a young woman. She is African American literature’s most famous bisexual black female character and exudes such fullness and sexual con-

trol that she seemed to me everything I was not. In the days before I was raped, Shug represented sexual fluidity and endless possibility. In the years after, I found myself, like Celie, to be in a state of longing, hoping that by simply reading the novel over and over again, I'd pick up Shug's self-confidence and bodily agency.¹

I begin here as a way not only to locate myself with the work but also to recognize the enormous power that literature has in building sexual consciousness, inspiring my dissertation as well. Specifically, I trace a history of sex-positive black feminism through the work of three non canonical writers of the late 20th century—Ann Allen Shockley, SDiane Bogus, and Red Jordan Arobateau—whose work has lingered in the shadows of the black feminist literary tradition. Although a small handful of scholars have recently written about them, they have often received mere fleeting mentions in the form of a footnote.² I chose to focus on these three writers because of the resonance of their individual work with the theme of this dissertation, their interest in each other, and the potential that their work holds in shifting the way we think about black feminist literature, and literature as whole.

This dissertation is preoccupied with how we approach writing and writers that are not viewed as exceptional or note-worthy by scholars, critics, or the literary establishment. With Shockley, Bogus, and Arobateau in particular, I am interested not only in their work but also their tenacity as writers. Despite being ignored by mainstream and black feminist literary discourse, Shockley, Bogus, and Arobateau strived to create legibility for themselves and each other. Bogus dedicated her entire doctoral dissertation to analysis of Shockley's work and founded a press that published Arobateau and other writers who struggled in the mainstream literary arena. Bogus, Shockley, and Arobateau were acquainted with one another and supported each other's work in various ways. Their professional investments in each other is evidence of their drive to promote sex-positivity in black women's literature.

¹ Salamishah Tillet, *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece* (New York, NY: Abrams, Inc., 2021), 16.

² See the footnotes for Adrienne Rich's foundational essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), as an example. Also, L.H. Stallings, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, are example of scholars who have written about Bogus, Shockley, and Arobateau.

This study is in part a recovery project but it is also an inquiry into the personal and professional risks, pleasures, and challenges that have come with writing sex. I ask: What has the process of writing and theorizing towards sexual expressivity and titillation looked like for black feminist writers? In thinking about this question, I scrutinize the boundaries of the black feminist literary tradition and the reading practices that inform it. I suggest a reading practice that makes legible the effort of black feminist writers to create sexual possibility through literature and that sexual consciousness-building is a necessary aspect of black feminist creative and intellectual work. I argue that by shifting our reading practices in these ways, we create a pathway for appreciating and understanding sex-positivity in black feminist literature.

Over the years as I have worked on this project and shared it with others, I have noticed the assumption by many scholars and friends that I my study would focus on or include Audre Lorde. Usually, I responded to this assumption by explaining that I was particularly interested in black feminist writers who explicitly included sex as part of literary or poetic expression. “Actual sex,” I would say, “orgasms and titillation.”³ Admittedly, while I appreciate and am indebted to Lorde’s work, I entered into this project with the sentiment that when it comes the sources driving literary theorizations of black women’s sexual pleasure, there has been a reliance on her. I am interested in drawing from an archive that reaches beyond and before her work.

My decision not to focus my analyses on writers whose work has been widely recognized within the African American literary canon or the black feminist literary tradition is a way to push the boundaries of what we think we know about black women’s sexual expression and the sources we turn to in order to narrate these histories. As scholar Imani Perry notes, “Legacies and

³ Here, I do not mean to suggest that Lorde’s work was devoid of sexually explicit content or that she did not resist racist or heterosexist assumptions about her erotic writing. I only seek to emphasize that the body of work that exists beyond her writing is also deserving of attention.

traditions are funny matters. They are so often pruning devices.”⁴ While, as Tillet notes, Celie may be “African American literature’s most famous bisexual black female character,” she is certainly not the only one. Almost a decade before *The Color Purple*, Ann Allen Shockley published *Loving Her*, a novel which has been cited as the first interracial lesbian love story, Red Jordan Arobateau self-published *The Bars Across Heaven*, a novel about black queer street life and black sexual consciousness building, and SDiane Bogus wrote and performed erotic and sexually charged poetry.

This dissertation is thus an attempt to expand the body of literary texts that we consider when we talk about black women’s sexual subjectivity and the black feminist literary tradition. As scholars like Hazel Carby and Mary Helen Washington have argued, “the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly white but some black.”⁵ When it comes to the black feminist literary tradition, black women have been some of the strongest keepers of power; it has been wielded in the choice of who to write about, teach, and ultimately, remember. Here, I argue that traditions, in so much as they hold the potential to function as vehicles of memory, survival, and kinship, have productive potential in black feminist cultural and political work. However, we must challenge the urge to shape traditions in ways that are exclusive, narrow, and opaque, to our detriment.

Such detriment is not solely to our knowledge, but also to our practices. I am as much interested in the question of what kinds of texts gain inclusion into the black feminist literary tra-

⁴ Imani Perry, “How the Great Lorraine Hansberry Tried To Make Sense of it All,” published in Literary Hub, September 18, 2018, <https://lithub.com/how-the-great-lorraine-hansberry-tried-to-make-sense-of-it-all/>.

⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism,” *Signs* 32, no. 2 (2007): 483-507. Accessed August 7, 2021. doi:10.1086/508377.

dition as I am with the larger question of *how* we read.⁶ I frame the black feminist literary tradition as a site of constant and continuous revision, as a working body of texts that are open to expansion. I assert that reading black women's literature for effort is in part to embark on a process of revising the tradition and adapting new reading practices. I argue, that a reading practice that emphasizes effort offers new possibilities in terms of what we value in literature. Reading with a keen eye towards effort encourages us to more closely consider the wide range of creative gestures that contribute to black women's literary production. It paves the way for an understanding of tradition that is more rooted in collective labor and less in tokenism. Instead of reading Audre Lorde or Alice Walker, for example, as writers who exist in a vacuum, I ask what other black feminist writers may have given birth to the creative and intellectual sparks that make her work possible in the first place? I argue that these writers, whose effort has gone virtually unrecognized, are a critical part of the tradition.

The 1960s and 70s, as a time rife with political tensions and contradictions, offers a rich backdrop for this study. Black sex was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. The raunchy scenes of blaxploitation cinema, pornography, comedy and popular music tell one story of black sexual expression. At the same time, the voices of black experts, academics, and intellectuals tell another. In mainstream black media of the period, many black writers denied any association between the sexual revolution, free love, or the pro-sex movement and the African American community (particularly the black middle class). In a 1974 *Ebony* article entitled "Has the Sexual Revolution Bypassed Blacks," the scholar Robert Staples asserts that "Despite the public stereotype of black women as being morally loose, they are subject to considerable restraint in their

⁶ For more on reading practices and African American literature, see Aida Levy-Hussen's *How to Read African American Literature Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation* (2016).

sexual activity.”⁷ Staples notes an exception “among the lower economic class of blacks” whom he says have always possessed “a liberated form of sexual expression.”⁸ He ultimately concludes that African Americans were unaffected by the sexual revolution writ large.

In recent decades, the silence if not outright refusal to recognize the myriad dimensions of black women’s sexuality has been addressed by a number of scholars and cultural workers. Hortense Spillers, for instance, described black women as the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb.”⁹ Here, the idea of effort appears again—I am interested in the multitude of sparks that have occurred over time within black feminist theoretical discourse.

To varying degrees, in each chapter of this dissertation I am interested in how the writers write toward titillation and sexual pleasure in their work. I use the term titillate to refer to the writer’s intended or unintended effect of exciting the reader’s sexual imagination or of producing the corporeal experience of sexual pleasure. I explore the ways in which they use language and narrative to craft scenes of sexual pleasure and to articulate ideas about black sexual politics. More broadly, I consider the ways in which titillation is mediated by the racial, gender, and sexual politics that inform the world of the texts. While titillation is not a requisite component of sex-positive black feminist literature, I seek to draw attention to it as an unexplored dimension of black feminist theoretical discourse. I argue that through scenes of sexual titillation, desire, trauma, and awakening, the writers affirm black queer sexual subjectivities.

⁷ Robert Staples, published in *Ebony*, Accessed via Google Books, https://books.google.com/books?id=LN4-DAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA111&lpg=PA111&dq=has+the+sexual+revolution+bypassed+blacks&source=bl&ots=Hna-SCi_Ax_&sig=ACfU3U2WLhNPvZwy9bBC6zAiRqaQQIqOJQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjQ0_LS4LvxAh-WrdN8KHZ4-BkwQ6AEwAHoECAMQAw#v=onepage&q=has%20the%20sexual%20revolution%20bypassed%20blacks&f=false

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984).

Throughout this dissertation I use the terms black feminist, sex-positive, and sex-positive black feminism. Each of these terms is attached to a specific set of histories and politics. My understanding of the term black feminism is indebted to Patricia Hill Collins who describes it as a “critical social theory.” According to Collins, “Black feminist thought’s identity as a ‘critical’ social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups.”¹⁰ I assert that Shockley, Arobateau, and Bogus are black feminists because of their commitment to sexual justice. Each writer challenged racial, gender, and sexual norms in their work and put great effort towards carving out space for black queer and trans to exist as writers.

The term sex-positive first emerged through the pro-sex movement of the 1970s and is often traced to white feminists of the late 1970s and 80s such as Susie Bright, Betty Dodson, Ellen Willis, and Gayle Rubin. The term itself first appeared in print in Betty Dodson’s 1972 essay, “Liberating Masturbation,” in which she writes about her journey towards sexual awakening. More recently, the term sex-positive has entered into conversations on black women’s sexuality. Arielle Loren, in her 2018 *Ebony* article “The Sex-Positive Black Woman,” defines sex-positivity as “a movement that celebrates consensual, safer sex and the multiple facets of human sexuality as natural, empowering experiences.” Likewise, Feminista Jones has described it as “embracing sex and sexuality as positive things for women which increases enjoyment and agency, which in turn removes the power from men by denying them control of our bodies and sex.”¹¹ Recent conversations on the limits of sex-positivity point to an over-emphasis on sexual pleasure. In this study, even though I do not take up asexuality in black feminist literature, I rec-

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1990), 9, accessed August 1, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹¹ Maya Francis, “Feminista Jones Is Kind Of A Big Deal,” published in *The Root*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.theroot.com/feminista-jones-is-kind-of-a-big-deal-1822521936>.

ognize it as a critical and under-theorized dimension of sex-positivity.¹² I understand sex-positive black feminism as an ethos that embraces sexual justice, dignity, and respect for everyone, with a particular investment in sexual freedom for black women, queer, and trans folks. Sex-positive black feminism affirms a range of sexual identities and consensual sexual acts.

As an aesthetic and methodological practice therefore, sex-positive black feminism is invested in naming sexual activity, desire, and its attachment to black bodies. It acknowledges the unique struggles that black women have faced historically with sexual representations that have relied on notions of hypersexualization and sexual deviance. In this study, however, I take into consideration but attempt to resist a reckless engagement with the term sex-positive. Instead, I take into account the conditions that shaped Arobateau, Shockley, and Bogus' sexual consciousness and how, in turn, they depicted a range of sexual feelings and experiences—pleasure, violence, loneliness, and titillation—on the page. While none of the writers in this study identified themselves as sex-positive black feminists outright, I derive my understanding of sex-positivity from their writing and their politics. I argue that through literature, they affirm black queer sex and desire, advocate for sexual consent, and acknowledge the role of race, class, and sexuality in notions of black pleasure and desire.

In my conceptualization of sex-positive black feminism, I also include an analysis of labor. In his 1997 essay, Red Jordan Arobateau writes: “They say I write sex for money, that I’m prostituting myself.” In this statement he calls attention to the ways in which writing sex may be coded as illicit labor. L.H. Stallings writes, “Writing the obscene, the pornographic, and the erotic has been and always will be seen as a form of sex work...” and therefore sex writing “explicates on work society, leisure, antiwork politics, and postwork imagination.” In my conception of

¹² Recent conversations on the limits of sex-positivity point to an over-emphasis on sexual pleasure. (See “The Limits of Sex-Positivity” by Angela Chen published on July 24, 2021 in *The Atlantic*.) In this study, I do not take up asexuality in black feminist literature. With that said, I do view asexuality as a valid and critical dimension sex-positive black feminism as an ethos that embrace a multitude of sexual identities and consensual activities.

sex-positive black feminism in literature, labor is a reoccurring theme that is evident in the characters as they deal with the material conditions of their lives and the oppressive forces of racial capitalism. It is also evident in the writers' efforts to create space for themselves and others as sex-positive black feminist writers. I consider Arobateau, Bogus, and Shockley as part of an intentional and self-constructed network of black feminist writers who creatively engaged with each other and their communities. The three writers are tied through acquaintance and geographic location, but were also mutual supporters of one another.

In chapter one, I reflect on key conversations among black feminist theorists on sexuality as a process of sexual consciousness-building. Here, I consider areas of tension and rupture in the process toward writing and thinking about sex for black feminist scholars, theorists, and critics. Chapter two focuses on Ann Allen Shockley, whose 1974 novel, *Loving Her* (previously mentioned above), is considered "a first and puts black lesbians on the African American literary-historical map."¹³ I outline the kinds of barriers that made it challenging for black feminist theorists and writers to write about sex in explicit and titillating terms. I also argue for a reading practice that emphasizes authorial effort.

Chapter three explores SDiane Bogus' personal path toward sexual consciousness building as well as the ways in which her writing and work as a publisher contributes to a wider body of sex-positive black feminist work. In this chapter, I highlight the ways in which soul music played a role in sexual consciousness building for Bogus—from her days as a black girl from Chicago through her career as a writer, college professor, and founder of a publishing company. Finally, chapter four, explores black feminist sexual consciousness-building in two street lit novels written by Red Jordan Arobateau. Here, I explore black feminist literature's potential to articulate a sex-positive black feminist consciousness and the ways in which writing titillation can

¹³ L. H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 13.

occupy a space of subversion. While I do not focus my attention on reception of this or any of the texts I analyze, I take the act of writing towards titillation as a serious disruption to the sexual scripts contained in many popular texts of the 1970s and 80s.

Throughout, I am interested in the authors' tenacity, as seen through the sheer volume of their work, the span of their careers, and their insistence on being seen and heard despite near consistent rejection from more elite literary and feminist circles. Ultimately, I see this project as black life affirming. It is about the creativity and resourcefulness that these writers efforts put forth to build sexual consciousness, a critical process in paving the way for sex-positive black feminism as we understand it today.

Toward a Sex-Positive Black Feminism in Literature: The Struggle of Articulation & Recognition

“How silences are broken is as important as breaking them.”

- Tricia Rose

In 1985, Deborah Gray White published the groundbreaking book, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. In it, White asserts that “African American women were close to invisible in historical writing” and that this was because “few historians saw them as important contributors to America’s social, economic, or political development, and few publishers identified an audience for books that connected black women’s thoughts and experiences to the history of other Americans.”¹ In the book, White is transparent about her own struggle with getting *Ar'n't I a Woman* published. In an article published in 1983, Nellie McKay outlined the challenges of being a black woman in the academy detailing the heavy workload, tokenization, and feelings of isolation. She notes that until the 1960s “black women were almost totally absent from the academy, except as students preparing to become elementary and secondary school teachers, mainly in the South and for the South.”²

It is impossible to ponder the scholarship and criticism on black women’s sexuality without also taking into account the unique struggles that black women have faced as thinkers both within and outside of the academy. As McKay notes, black women in the academy “constantly [felt] the pressure of a double-edged sword: simultaneously, a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility.”³ While this dissertation focuses more intently on black women’s sexual expression in literature, more broadly; it also identifies the long and complex personal and profes-

¹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York : Norton,1999), 3-4.

² Nellie McKay, “Black Woman Professor—White University,” *Women’s Studies hr. Forum*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (1983): 143-147, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(83\)90004-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(83)90004-3)

³ Ibid.

sional struggles that black feminist theorists and historians have endured as they have reached toward sexual visibility, articulation, and recognition. Hence, in this chapter I trace the scholarship in terms of rupture and resistance.

At the same time, as black women have and to some extent continue to struggle within the academy to be seen as worthy subjects of inquiry, black feminist theorists and critics have grappled with the challenge of articulating the full breadth of black women's sexual lives. Nearly a decade after McKay and White voiced the challenges mentioned above, in the article "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," Evelyn Hammonds argued that there was a silence surrounding black women's sexuality that was "enacted individually and collectively by Black women and by Black feminist theorists writing about Black women."⁴ She wrote: "To date, through the work of Black feminist literary critics, we know more about the elision of sexuality by Black women than we do about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire."⁵ By the time Hammonds had written "Black (W)holes," Arobateau, Shockley, and Bogus had already published several sex-positive texts thus disrupting "the problematic of silence" on black women's sexuality through their writing. The issue was that black feminist critics were writing little if at all about their work and that of writers like them. This tension speaks to the specific challenges that black women have faced tied to doing discursive work around sexual pleasure and sex-positivity in the academy but also a literary tradition that has enforced sexual silence.

Since Hammonds' article was first published in 1994, a robust and continuously growing body of theoretical, historical, and cultural scholarship on black sexuality has emerged. At the same time questions and reservations tied to methodology, the risk involved in doing black sexu-

⁴ Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 308

⁵ Hammonds, 309.

ality studies and the ways in which respectability politics have affected black feminist theoretical engagement with sexual pleasure have remained. One of Hammond's many insights in (W)holes is her explanation on why this silence persisted for so long. She suggests "that Black feminist theorists have not taken up this work in part because of their own status in the academy. Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a *process* that Black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory" (italics my own).⁶

Hammonds' call for black feminists to "[reclaim] the body as well as subjectivity" draws attention to the connection between black sexual politics and the work of black feminist theory and criticism.⁷ She makes plain the ways in which black women's lived experiences affect how they theorize and perform. I understand this "process" that Hammonds suggests "Black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves" as consciousness building. It is the work of deep reckoning with personal and shared experiences. While outside the academy there have been spaces of rich sexual expression and discourse in music, film, and art, within the academy black women have struggled to build a space of intellectual and historical discourse, and hence a tradition, that reflects the fullness of black women's sexual lives.

In this chapter, I am interested in what Mecca Jamilah Sullivan refers to as the "question of the 'beyond' of black female sexuality."⁸ I am less interested in the silence so much as I am in tracing the ways in which black feminists have moved through it. The process of consciousness-

⁶ Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 309

⁷ I am drawing from the definition of black sexual politics offered by Patricia Hill Collins. According to Collins, "Black sexual politics consists of a set of ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame Black men and women's treatment of one another, as well as how African Americans are perceived and treated by others." See *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7.

⁸ Mecca Jamilah Sullivan. "Erotic Labor and the Black Ecstatic 'Beyond,'" *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2017): 131-147, doi:10.1353/aq.2017.0007.

building has involved sharing, challenging and exchanging ideas through writing, conferences, workshops, and in informal discussion. A critical part of this process for black feminist theorists and critics has been the act of speaking through silences, sometimes in contentious and messy ways. Equally important has been the process of coming to terms with the refusal to recognize, both presently and historically, the fullness of black women's sexual identities in public.⁹ In this chapter I trace this process of consciousness-building in black feminist theory as a way to understand the movement toward sex-positive black feminism.

Although the term consciousness-raising is often tied to feminist activity in the late 1960s, the practice itself has a much longer and more expansive history. Cricket Keating notes that the New York Radical Women who named the practice “were inspired by the Chinese communist practice of ‘speaking pain’ and by the freedom schools and other popular education practices of the civil rights movement in the United States.”¹⁰ I propose an untethering of the term consciousness-raising from white feminist activity of the 1960s and 70s. As scholars such as Cricket Keating and Lindsay Kelland have noted, consciousness-raising—as a means of breaking oppressive silence—can take many different forms. Keating uses the term coalitional consciousness-building which more aptly describes the ways in which women of color have engaged in collective consciousness-building efforts. She writes:

By naming the practice "coalitional consciousness-building" instead of "coalitional consciousness-raising," my intention is to echo the usage of the phrase "coalition-building" and to emphasize coalitional consciousness not as an

⁹ My argument in this chapter about black feminist theory as consciousness-building is inspired by what Jennifer C. Nash has referred to as “beautiful writing.” She argues that beautiful writing is “an effort to do justice to loss, and contemporary black feminist theory argues that beautiful writing is the form required to develop cartographies of black women’s losses.” She continues to describe her conception of loss: “I mean loss to signal experiences of invisibility and dispossession, to capture institutional arrangements that render black women unseen and disappeared, to describe persistent feelings of loneliness and alienation that are structurally produced, and to name black feminist theory’s persistent attention to ghosts, to the palpable presence of the past in the present.” In this chapter, consciousness building is the process by which black women make themselves seen and begin to frame their sexual lives as abundant and multi-facted. See Nash’s article, “Writing Black Beauty.”

¹⁰ Cricket Keating. “Building Coalitional Consciousness,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 87. Accessed August 3, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317127>.

entity lying dormant or hidden that needs to be elevated or brought to light but rather as a set of understandings, motivations, and ways of seeing that can be constructed, formed, and fostered together.¹¹

Thinking about dominant black feminist theory as a form of sexual consciousness building—“as a set of understandings, motivations, and ways of seeing that can be constructed, formed, and fostered together”—points to the process or processes that Hammonds suggests black feminists must undergo in order to build a body of intellectual work that reflects black female sexual subjectivities.¹² Following the lead of Katherine McKittrick who in her most recent book, *Dear Science*, writes about citational practices, I am interested in alternative approaches to thinking about knowledge production. McKittrick writes, “Perhaps the function of communication, referencing, citation, is not to master knowing and centralize our knowingness, but to share how we know.”¹³ In this chapter, I ask: How have we come to know what we know about black women, sex-positivity, and pleasure in black women’s literature? And, by extension, what are the dominant texts that have we turned to in order to theorize and historicize black women’s pleasure?

In this chapter I take the “toward” that Barbara Christian and other black feminist theorists have used to frame their thinking about black feminist theory seriously as I trace some of the key conversations that have shaped dominant black feminist theory and literary criticism and have also structured conversation on black female sexuality and pleasure. I assert that these conversations form the basis of black feminist theorists’ lean toward or in the direction of sex-positivism. Rather than approach the scholarship through a lens of deficit that seeks to identify gaps, holes and spaces for intervention, this chapter is an attempt to explore the citational field of sex-positive black feminist literary scholarship. I frame the dominant discourse as part of a long history of sexual consciousness-building among black feminist theorists. Through this process of

¹¹ Keating, 94.

¹² Keating, 94.

¹³ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 17.

moving through "the problematic of silence," a multitude of possibilities have erupted within black sexuality studies and in particular, in the area of black female sexuality.

There are two main disciplinary threads on pleasure that I follow in this chapter: discourse and debates in black feminist theory and criticism tied to and about black women's silence (sexual and otherwise) and the more recent turn away from defensive readings of black female sexuality in historical and cultural analysis. In doing this, I broadly trace the terms of engagement that have informed discourse on black female sexuality in the black feminist literary archive.

Breaking the Silence: Discourse on Invisibility and Representation in the Black Feminist Literary Archive

In Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 trailblazing anthology *The Black Woman*, she states that black women were "turning to each other" through various collective gatherings—"work study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses, consumer education groups, women's workshops on the campuses, women's caucuses within existing organizations, Afro-American women's magazines."¹⁴ The anthology is a record of black women's perspectives on a multitude of issues including abortion, motherhood, intersectionality, misogynoir, and activism. It also formally carved out a space for black feminist consciousness within the field of literature. *The Black Woman* was an extension of the work done in meeting spaces in the late 1960s. Pieces within *The Black Woman* call and respond to each other; they testify, argue, and define various aspects of black women's experiences.

What is perhaps most significant about the anthology is the spark that it lit in the consciousness of many black women and girls who would read the the book in later years. Author

¹⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, Preface, in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New York New American Library, 1970), 9, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035334344>.

Farah Griffin recalled her own consciousness-building experience with the anthology when she came across it for the first time as a young girl. Describing her first encounter with the book, she described the “beautiful brown woman with a large Afro” who represented the possibility of the woman she could become.¹⁵ In the anthology, several writers articulate their gripe with being accused of emasculating black men. Abbey Lincoln describes black women as “Raped and denied the right to cry out in pain, she has been named the culprit and called ‘loose,’ ‘hot-blooded,’ ‘wanton,’ ‘sultry,’ and ‘amoral.’”¹⁶ According to Lincoln, black women have been “used as the white man’s sexual outhouse.”¹⁷ At the same time, in “Woman Poem” Nikki Giovanni evokes Nina Simone as a vessel of black female longing when she writes “i wish I knew how it would feel/ to be free.”¹⁸ The poem’s narrator continues to express all of the constraints that make her feel unfree like “love and no sex if you’re fat”¹⁹ and “it’s having a job/they won’t let you work.”²⁰ Here and throughout, black women articulate a desire to live fuller and more pleasurable lives. *The Black Woman* assertively challenged the notion that black women as writers, artists, activists, and intellectuals did not exist or did not have much to say about their lives and experiences. It laid a critical foundation for black feminist criticism that others would build on.

In “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977), Barbara Smith declared that “All segments of the literary world — whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian — do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian

¹⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, “Re Calling the Black Woman,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005), x.

¹⁶ Abbey Lincoln, “To Whom Will She Cry Rape?”, in *The Black Woman : An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara, (New York: New York New American Library 1970), 98.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nikki Giovanni, “Woman Poem,” in *The Black Woman : An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara, (New York: New York New American Library 1970), 9.

¹⁹ Giovanni, 10.

²⁰ Giovanni, 9.

writers exist.”²¹ Smith intended for the essay to be “a way of breaking our silence and our isolation, of helping us to know each other.”²² The words “silence” and “invisibility” appear multiple times in the essay as if to name and undo a curse. Smith makes the connection between “Black women's lives, what we write about, and our situation as artists.”²³ To make these connections, Smith considers how black women were “viewed by outsiders.” A significant portion of the essay addresses the “mishandling of Black writers by whites.”²⁴ Smith writes:

Black women are still in the position of having to ‘imagine,’ discover, and verify Black lesbian literature because so little has been written from an avowedly lesbian perspective. The near non-existence of Black lesbian literature which other Black lesbians and I so deeply feel has everything to do with the politics of our lives, the total suppression of identity that all Black women, lesbian or not, must face. This literary silence is again intensified by the unavailability of an autonomous Black feminist movement through which we could fight our oppression and also begin to name ourselves.²⁵

While Smith rightly points to the dearth of black lesbian literature in the 1970s, it’s worth noting that the sole example of lesbian literature that she designates for close reading is *Sula* by Toni Morrison. Even as she mentions writers like Ann Allen Shockley who is also one of the subjects of this dissertation and who wrote explicitly lesbian literature, she chose to focus on a writer whose work did not have an explicit connection to black lesbian literature. Smith argues that black lesbian literature has been ignored and mishandled by white critics and potentially lies within the realm of impossibility for black women. She wrote, “Even at this moment I am not convinced that one can write explicitly as a Black lesbian and live to tell about it.”²⁶ Smith writes

²¹ Barbara Smith. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *The Radical Teacher*, no. 7 (1978): 20, accessed August 4, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20709102>.

²² Smith, 26.

²³ Smith, 20.

²⁴ Smith, 21.

²⁵ Barbara Smith. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *The Radical Teacher*, no. 7 (1978): 25, accessed August 4, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20709102>.

²⁶ Smith, 26.

this at a moment when Ann Allen Shockley has already published the first interracial lesbian love story and certainly lived to tell about it.

This tension is both significant and revelatory to our understanding of the deeply engrained fears and anxieties tied to discourse around sexuality and sex-positivity for black feminist theorists. Although she mentions Shockley, whose novel *Loving Her* which had been published three years prior was proof that one could write explicitly about being a black lesbian “and live to tell about it,” Smith chooses to engage only minimally with her work. Instead, Smith spends a significant portion of the essay making a case for the positioning Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as a black lesbian novel. If we read this this tension as well as the essay more broadly as part of a black feminist trajectory of literary sexual consciousness building then it is possible to offer a compassionate reading of this germinal essay that acknowledges the struggle for articulation. This struggle is apparent through Smith’s clear expression of what was at stake for black feminists who dared to write or speak sex—death or, as Smith puts it, “not living to tell about it.” Here, I want to emphasize Smith’s clear assertion on the necropolitical dimensions of articulation for black feminist theorists. It is impossible to ignore the element of risk that Smith expresses as inherent to black feminist vocality.

At the heart of Smith’s statements are issues that feminist philosopher Miranda Frickner refers to as epistemic injustice. Frickner describes two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs where a hearer’s bias interferes with their ability to view a speaker as a credible source. Hermeneutic injustice occurs when “a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences.”²⁷ Hermeneutic injustice can occur when a culture or group “lacks a critical concept” tied to a violent, traumatic, or oppressive experience.²⁸ This ab-

²⁷ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice : Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2007), 1, accessed August 4, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁸ Frickner, 1.

sence of a critical concept is directly linked to the relations of power wherein those in a position of social dominance lack interest in developing critical concepts that illuminate experiences outside of themselves. One way to resist epistemic injustice is through consciousness-building—an ongoing process that includes many voices over time and space—as a way to break political and cultural silence and neglect. Smith’s engagement with sexual consciousness-building in “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” as indicated in its title, exemplifies the struggle of moving both in the direction of and through the oppressive silence that black women have faced as scholars, theorists and critics.

Another voice that can be located in the movement “towards” is Michelle Wallace’s in her essay “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood” (1975). The essay demonstrates the ways in which black feminist consciousness-building involves a continuous process of searching, connecting, building, recognizing and articulating. Wallace describes several consciousness-building moments—seeing a young black woman wearing her hair natural, becoming aware of sexism within the Black Power movement, hearing another black woman voice internalized sexism at the black women’s consciousness-raising group she founded. When Wallace states, “We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world,” she is articulating a dimension of hermeneutic injustice that black feminists have worked to overcome.²⁹ Black feminist consciousness-building is about coalition building but also locating spaces to engage in the messy, disjointed, personal and contradictory labor of political struggle.

²⁹ Michele Wallace, “Anger in Isolation: A Black Woman’s Search for Sisterhood, in *Words of Fire : An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 2011), accessed August 4, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

The intentional reach “towards” and in “search for” is also articulated through the work of Alice Walker in the 1980s. Her essay published in 1972 and her subsequent book of the same title, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, is demonstrative of a mode of black feminist consciousness building in the 1970s and 80s that was rooted in historical recovery. The essay “In Search of Zora” leans toward as it seeks to locate Hurston as “one of the most significant unread authors in America.”³⁰ It also made clear that Hurston had a particular significance in her consciousness. She recalls “the first time she heard Zora’s name” and her journey in Eatonville, Florida where she speaks to those with ties to the writer. The piece also reflects Walkers own personal process of uncovering black women’s literary history as much as it reveals the history itself.

Another aptly titled piece that calls attention to the twists and turns in black feminist consciousness-building is Deborah McDowell’s 1980 article “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism.” McDowell echoes the assertions of Smith, Wallace and others who argued that black women writers had been ignored or misunderstood by white critics. She writes, “The recognition among Black female critics and writers that white women, white men, and Black women’s experiences as deviant has given rise to Black feminist criticism.”³¹ This statement gestures towards the process and material outcome of consciousness-building among black women. In as much as McDowell affirmed the general sense of being ignored and unrecognized that many black women scholars, writers, and critics expressed in the 1980s, she also wrestled with the ways in which some black feminist theorists, Barbara Smith in particular, theorized black feminist literary criticism. McDowell critiques “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” as being essentialist in its formulations of black female lesbian aesthetic.

³⁰ Alice Walker, “Looking for Zora, in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 93.

³¹ Deborah E. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism.” *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 4 (1980): 607, accessed August 4, 2021, doi:10.2307/2904407.

In “The Race for Theory” Barbara Christian articulates the ways in which white literary theory has alienated black critics and imposed an aesthetic framework that renders blackness illegible. She begins: “I have seized this occasion to break silence among those of us, critics, as we are now called, who have been intimidated, devalued by what I call the race for theory.”³² This direct statement of intent is a necessary juncture in consciousness-building. In the article, Christian reveals her own approach to writing and theory in the statement: “I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life....For me, literature is a way of knowing that whatever I feel/know is. I am not hallucinating.”³³ In the essay, Christian centers black female experience as a critical source of knowledge and knowing.

“Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” by Hortense Spillers is an important piece because it demonstrates the ways in which black feminist theorists and critics were engaging with the predominantly white feminist driven discourse on sexuality in the 1980s. She argues that “Black American women in the public/critical discourse of feminist thought have no acknowledged sexuality because they enter the historical stage from quite another angle of entrance from that of Anglo-American women.”³⁴ She criticizes white feminists—Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, Shulamith Firestone—who perpetuate “silence and exclusion” towards black women in feminist discourse. Spillers dedicates a significant portion of the essay to a critique of Firestone’s analysis of black sexual politics in *A Dialectic of Sex*. Spillers argues that Firestone portrays black people as lacking agency in their struggles against racial oppression and that she reinforces stereotypical ideas about the black family as pathological. Spillers writes that Firestone “is not only stridently critical of the Black Nationalist movement (the only place the book “locates”

³² Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 67, accessed August 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/3177999.

³³ Christian, 77.

³⁴ Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Pleasure and Danger : Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 79.

black women) but also incredibly ominous in its pronouncements on black women's past and future."³⁵

Black feminist discourse on sex, race, and gender in the 1980s occurred against the backdrop of (and sometimes alongside) broader conversations among white feminists on sexual politics and sex-positivity. White feminist, Gayle Rubin articulated a pro-sex stance that challenged sex hierarchy. She created a series of diagrams that explained the ways in which certain types of sexual activities were marginalized. "The Sex Hierarchy: The Charmed Circle vs. the Outer Limits" describes "good" normative sex as having qualities such as "procreative," "at home," "free" (of charge), and "bodies only."³⁶ In contrast, "bad" or deviant sex includes that which is "casual," "with manufactured objects," and "for money."³⁷ Rubin was part of a larger moment of white feminist driven sex-positivity of the 1980s that also included work by Susie Bright (who edited *On Our Backs*, the first women-run lesbian erotica magazine in the United States). Some of the magazine's editors—Susie Bright, Marcy Sheiner, Pat Califia, Jewelle Gomez—were also pro-sex and actively solicited and published work by black writers like Red Jordan Arobateau. Political and literary activity among white sex-positive feminists allows for a broader imagining of the potential feelings and experiences of constraint that some black feminists faced during the period. Where white feminists were able to name and demand acceptance of a wider range of sexual activities, many black feminist theorists were entrenched in conversations on visibility and recognition.

While Spillers and Christian call attention to the gaps in white feminist discourse and white literary theory, in "The Quicksand of Representation: Rethinking Black Cultural Politics,"

³⁵ Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Pleasure and Danger : Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 82.

³⁶ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (Boston : Routledge & K. Paul, 1984).

³⁷ Ibid.

Hazel Carby turns her attention to the silences within African American literary criticism. She argues that “Traditional Afro-American literary and cultural criticism has failed to adequately consider the significance of the work of Larsen and Jessie Fauset.” She continues, “Both writers have at times been dismissed as minor figures, mere background to a major event, the Harlem renaissance. In contrast, Zora Neale Hurston has been seen as a distinct literary figure.”³⁸ In noting the neglect of Larsen and Fauset in literary criticism and historical analyses of the Harlem Renaissance, Carby highlights the ways in which traditions can produce silences and erasure. This “rethinking” gestures to a necessary rupture in the movement towards sex-positive black feminism in that it encourages discourse beyond the firmly established authors and texts that make up the African American literary canon and the black feminist literary tradition.

Ultimately, Carby demonstrates that it is through constant agitation and interrogation of traditions that they become useful. She pushes toward new conversations and methods of narrating history and of analyzing sources in black studies. One of the topics that Carby brings forth is black female sexuality. She argues that in the novel *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen represents Helga, the novel’s protagonist “as a sexual being, making Helga the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction.”³⁹ One of the key interventions that this claim makes is its acknowledgement of sexuality and desire in black women’s lives. It is a blatant disruption of the refusal of black feminist theorists to have conversations on sex and sexuality in literature. At the same time Carby is aware of the risk that black women writers and critics engaged in when they write about sex.

In the same year that Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* was published, Gloria Hull published *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (1987) where Hull participates in the movement toward articulation on black women’s experiences as writers and intellectuals. In the book she describes how

³⁸ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990), 166.

³⁹ Carby, 174.

the “broad social factors and patterns of exclusion” have caused black women of the Harlem Renaissance to be erased from literary history.⁴⁰ Hull focused on three writers: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. The book is distinct in its explicit address of the role sexuality and sexual politics played in literary culture of the period and in the poetic writing of the writers. She notes, for example, the ways in which black male writers like Alain Locke, “behaved misogynistically and actively favored men.”⁴¹ As Hull renders black women as visible as she makes incisive argument on their invisibility.

In both Carby’s and Hull’s turn toward literature as a critical site of black feminist consciousness-building, they resist the silence by re-narrating history. We see this in numerous books including but not limited to *After Mecca* (2005) by Cheryl Clarke in which she explores the ways in which “Black women, as participants in the US black consciousness movement of the 1960s, deployed poetry as a means to theorize on the state of ‘the race’ and ‘the revolution’; cleared a larger space for black women writers who would, in the 1970s, do the work of radically expanding and redefining the American literary canon with a multitude of discursive, subversive projects that positioned black women as subjects.”⁴² Here, Clarke calls attention to the ways in which poetry and literature functioned as a major site of black women’s consciousness-building and how this work influenced canon formation.

Darlene Clarke Hine also wrote about and participated in black feminist consciousness-building through her article “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” (1989). In this article, Hine makes several assertions that develop our understanding of sex-positive black feminism and that constitute it as part of a process of sexual consciousness-building

⁴⁰ Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex & Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 7.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Cheryl Clarke, “After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement,” (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2005), 22.

within black feminist studies. In the beginning of the article Hine notes the strongly present “themes of rape and sexual vulnerability” in black women’s literary consciousness of the 1980s but also dating back to antebellum era.⁴³ Here, she is referring to slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and also more recent works by black women writers (*Corrigedora* by Gayl Jones, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, to name a few). She writes, “Virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape.”⁴⁴

In the article Hine describes how within the context of the early 20th century, “in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self.”⁴⁵ She uses the term the culture of dissemblance to describe this “secret, undisclosed persona allowed the individual Black woman to function, to work effectively.”⁴⁶ This article is significant for a number of reasons, one being the way in which it invites theorization on the multiple strategies that black women have employed at different moments in time to preserve their inner (sexual) lives. Hine offers insight into how the condition of invisibility has been both a problem to be transcended and a valuable protective strategy that black women employed in order to maintain their sense of safety and sexual dignity.

Another text that offers a historical approach is Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998). Here, Davis argues that “emancipation radically transformed” slaves’ personal lives and that it allowed for sexuality to “be explored more freely by individuals who could now

⁴³ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912, Accessed August 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hine, 916.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

enter into autonomously chosen personal relationships.”⁴⁷ In many ways, *Blues Legacies* offers an alternative timeline of the sexual revolution in the United States. If we consider emancipation and the emergence of the blues as pivotal points of historical change then we can identify the sexual revolution in waves that honor black experiences. Apart from the book’s historical significance, it also has personal meaning for Davis. In *Blues Legacies* she shares the inspiration behind the book; it was inspired by literary works about fictional blues women by writers like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker that informed her own gender consciousness.

In the 1990s, as hip hop became so pronounced in popular culture that it could not be ignored as a subject of intellectual inquiry, HIV/AIDS became a national concern, and sexual scandal invaded the media airwave, black feminist writers and theorists began to openly discuss sexual politics.⁴⁸ *Blues Legacies* was published just a year before Joan Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999) in which Morgan makes the case for hip hop feminism and the need for “a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays.” Morgan goes on to suggest that the feminism of her foremothers was inadequate in addressing her lived reality as a black woman of the hip hop generation.⁴⁹ Interestingly, both Davis and Morgan are in conversation with one another and have similar ideas on the contradictions that can sometimes be present with black feminism as it emerges in the everyday lives and artistic expressions of black women. Both highlight what it means to be a black feminist and succumb to and or locate sexual pleasure in male patriarchy while also resisting it. Davis describes the ways in which blues women engage with what Morgan refers to as “fuck[ing] with the grays” when they “construct seemingly antagonistic

⁴⁷ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 8.

⁴⁸ See *Black Sexual Politics : African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* by Patricia Hill Collins (New York : Routledge, 2004) and *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* by Cohen, Cathy J. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) for more on black sexual politics in the 1990s.

⁴⁹ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 59.

relationships as noncontradictory oppositions.”⁵⁰ Davis continues, “A female narrator in a women’s blues song who represents herself as entirely subservient to male desire might simultaneously express autonomous desire and a refusal to allow her mistreating lover to drive her psychic despair.”⁵¹ Although Davis and Morgan write about different genres and time periods, both participate in a process of building black feminist sexual consciousness. Morgan states her goal clearly—to help black women “understand who [they] are...and then tell the truth about it.”⁵²

Transcending Defense and Recovery as Interpretive Modes in the Black Feminist Theory

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby calls attention to the ways in which black feminist theory has been informed by and subject to the hierarchical impulses of the academy. She writes, “Black feminist criticism has its source and its primary motivation in academic legitimation, placement within a framework of bourgeois humanistic discourse.”⁵³ To further support this point, she shares a quote from Cornel West who describes the academy as creating and thriving on “anxieties of defensiveness on the part of black intellectuals.” West continues to state that the “need for hierarchical ranking and the deep-seated racism shot through bourgeois humanistic scholarship cannot provide black intellectuals with either the proper ethos or conceptual framework to overcome a defensive posture.”⁵⁴ Carby suggests that it is this defensive posture that has led black feminist theorists to be in a near constant state of “attempting to discover, prove, and

⁵⁰ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 59.

⁵¹ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), xv.

⁵² Morgan, 23.

⁵³ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1987), 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

legitimate the intellectual worthiness of black women so that they may claim their rightful placement and both subjects and creators of the curriculum.”⁵⁵

Numerous scholars have shared iterations of Carby’s point on the “defensive posture” of black feminist theory—Evelyn Hammonds, Jennifer Nash, LH Stallings and David B. Green Jr., to name a few. Collectively, their work constitutes as an emergent body of literature that theorizes sex as a site of black women’s pleasure. Jennifer Nash argues that the black feminist archive has been dedicated to a “practice of visual defense and recovery.” She continues to describe the archive as “not simply a repository of theoretical innovation; it also enacts and enforces a view of visual culture that makes it impossible to theorize black female pleasure from within the confines of the archive.”⁵⁶ According to Nash, black feminism has structured discourse on black women’s sexual lives around injury. Nash intervenes with her own research by narrating a history of “ecstasy.”⁵⁷ Nash links anti-pornography and black feminism in its shared mobilization of the Hottentot Venus as the site of injury. She argues that “while black feminists have labored to document representation’s violence, too often our work has reproduced another kind of violence, effectively rendering black female pleasures invisible and making impossible the conceptualization of black female pleasures from *within* black feminism.”⁵⁸

In the field of porn studies, in particular, scholars like Mireille Miller-Young, Jennifer Nash, and Ariane Cruz have helped to produce ideas and vocabulary that disrupt the black feminist “archive of pain” and that seek to critique and sometimes explain black feminist movement

⁵⁵ Carby, 16.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 31.

⁵⁷ Nash uses the term “ecstasy” to refer to “both to the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy.” *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

⁵⁸ Nash, 149.

toward sex-positive black feminism.⁵⁹ Likewise, Mireille Miller-Young's uses the term erotic sovereignty to describe "part of an ongoing ontological process that uses radicalized sexuality to assert complete subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotypes, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation under the neoliberal state."⁶⁰ Here, in this definition, sexual pleasure and agency gets folded into "the erotic" which, despite being part of discourse in feminist and women's studies, remains a nebulous term. Miller-Young charts a history of black women in pornography that considers black women porn actresses as sexual agents who work within and against racial stereotypes.

Jillian Hernandez, who coined the term "raunch aesthetics," defines it as "an aesthetic, performative, and vernacular practice, an explicit mode of sexual expression that transgresses norms of privacy and respectability. Raunch aesthetics celebrate the movements, looks, sensations, and affects of bodies."⁶¹ For Hernandez, raunch is "evocative shorthand to describe explicit, unromantic, and poor/working class sexualities."⁶² Her theorization of raunch provides a lens for thinking through black feminist writing that does not appear in traditional theories of black feminist criticism (such as Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" or Barbara Christian's "A Race for Theory").

In *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, Matt Richardson sets forth a similar set of concerns as mentioned above. He is "concerned with the disappearance of Black queer subjects for the diasporic memory of resistance."⁶³ In the book, he looks at the writing of black queer writers

⁵⁹ Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 28.

⁶⁰ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 16.

⁶¹ Jillian Hernandez, "Carnal Teachings: Raunch Aesthetics as Queer Feminist Pedagogies in Yo! Majesty's Hip Hop Practice." *Women & Performance* 24, no. 1 (March 2014): 94, doi:10.1080/0740770X.2014.904130.

⁶² Hernandez, 92.

⁶³ Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 19.

Dionne Brand, Jackie Kay, Laurinda D. Brown, and SDiane Bogus. Richardson argues that “these texts work with and against the politics of respectability and normative gender categories to create an irresolute revision of those traditions.”⁶⁴ Richardson’s book is primarily concerned with the ways in which “black queer people find creative ways to remember each other.”⁶⁵

As a tradition unto itself, black queer and trans literature has challenged what we have come to know as the canon and as traditions. In *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, Stallings argues that “nonfiction, fiction, and other creative forms such as pornography are essential to growing black trans activist movements and studies.”⁶⁶ In *Funk the Erotic* Stallings cites memoirs and fiction as an important “element of self-definition to various transgender folk.”⁶⁷ She includes an analysis of Red Jordan Arobateau’s novel *The Big Change* (1974) in which she positions Arobateau as “part of a black queer literary tradition.”⁶⁸ Stallings imagines a black queer tradition that reaches beyond Audre Lorde and Alice Walker as dominant representatives of black queer writers in literature. In order to “make legible the improper texts and bodies in the fiction of Red Jordan Arobateau,” Stallings challenges Lorde’s assertion that “pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.”⁶⁹ Stallings argues that “sensation can be as important as feeling” and that the “valuing of sensation as a unit of experience alongside feeling becomes all the more relevant when we consider subjects who experience the time and space of their bodies differently from the rest of the world.”⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Richardson, 16.

⁶⁵ Richardson, 20.

⁶⁶ LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 208.

⁶⁷ Horton-Stallings, 209.

⁶⁸ Horton-Stallings, 224.

⁶⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), https://search.alexander-street.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4401746.

⁷⁰ LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 223.

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, black women working inside the academy have had distinctly different engagements with sex and pleasure from those outside of it. Even as there has been this silence among black feminist theorists, black women's sexual pleasure has boldly existed in pop culture and in the daily lives of black women. In the book *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy*, Rose breaks the silence on black women's sexual experiences by presenting a series of oral histories. She describes sexual storytelling as falling into two approaches: one in which "author/expert frames bits and pieces of women's sexual stories around around a central thesis" and in the other the author/expert places sexual stories in containers that serve as framing devices.⁷¹ Rose offers examples of "story containers" such as "'rape victim,' 'incest survivor,' 'married woman,' 'single mother,' 'lesbian,' 'virgin,' and 'prostitute.'"⁷² Rose resists the container by allowing black women's voices to be the center piece of the book.

Even as Rose resists placing the black women's voices into story containers, she does structure the book according a set of "central dispositions" that emerged through the women's stories. These dispositions strongly resonate with what I have referred to in this chapter as sexual consciousness building. The first disposition, "'Through the Fire,' emphasizes the difficult, unpredictable, and ongoing process of negotiating sexuality. 'Guarded Heart' expresses a heightened need to remain self-protective in the face of a given challenge."⁷³ The final disposition, "'Always Something Left to Love' is meant to capture the sense of possibility that always remains, despite—or perhaps because of—the pains that have been endured."⁷⁴ Although Rose uses these central dispositions to describe the experiences of her interviewees, they are helpful in

⁷¹ Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 6.

⁷² Rose, 6.

⁷³ Rose, 15.

⁷⁴ Rose, 15.

thinking about the process that black feminist theory and criticism has undergone as it has leaned toward more diverse conversations on black women's sexuality.

In the turn towards a politics of articulation in the 1990s through the present, much of the discourse has been focused on artistic expression within the context of popular culture. Joan Morgan, Treva B. Lindsey, and Shayne Lee have engaged with sexual politics and sex-positivity through analyses of popular culture and are among the first to employ the term sex-positive within the context of black women's experiences. The use of the term marks a shift in sexual discourse as it encompasses sexual activity in more explicit terms. In the article "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom" co-authored by Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, the authors challenge historians of black women's history "to write fully actualized, *erotic*, historical subjects."⁷⁵ Lindsay and Johnson model sex-positive black feminism as methodological practice through their interest in both sexual acts and ideas around black women's sexual agency. They ask us to consider new historical possibilities wherein black women's "orgasms, wetness, and writhing, pulsating, aroused bodies existed."⁷⁶

In her article "Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex-Positivism, and Popular Culture," (2013) Treva B. Lindsey applies the term sex-positive to black women's artistic expression in hip hop. She argues that "sexual stereotypes should not preclude possibilities for African-American female artists to author and participate in sex-positive representations of African-American womanhood."⁷⁷ In the article she examines "emergent pro-sex, black feminist perspectives" by illustrating the ways in which black female popular music artists simultaneously reject stereotypes about black female sexuality and by embracing their right to sexual expressivi-

⁷⁵ Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom," *Meridians* 12, no. 2 (2014): 190, accessed August 4, 2021, doi:10.2979/meridians.12.2.169.

⁷⁶ Lindsey and Johnson, 190.

⁷⁷ Treva B. Lindsey, "Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 6:1 (2013), 58, doi: 10.1080/17528631.2012.739914

ty.⁷⁸ Lindsey is in conversation with Joan Morgan and draws from Morgan’s “fucking with the greys” framework as a way to explicate articulations of sex-positivity in music. Lindsey explores this as the “complicated, and often uncomfortable space of watching gyrating, titillating, scantily clad, and (hyper)sexualized African-American female bodies.”⁷⁹ This article is of particular significance because of the explicit connections that it makes between black women and sex-positivity in the 1990s. By locating black women within discourse on sex-positivism, Lindsey offers a different way to theorize and historicize black female sexuality.

In the article “Cheryl Clarke’s Clit Agency or, An Erotic Reading of Living as a Lesbian,” David B. Green Jr. argues “that Clarke’s erotic aesthetic—her interest in explicit lesbian sex and sexuality—works to critique the historic erasure of the black lesbian body in discourses of African American life.”⁸⁰ Here, in his interest in the sexual explicitness of her poetic writing, Green is one of a small group of scholars who explore “black women’s linguistic economies” of sexual desire.⁸¹ He describes Clarke as a writer who wrote boldly and explicitly about sex in her writing at “a time when many black women poets coded their sexual desires through strident metaphors in exchange for cultural visibility, capital gains, and acceptance within the social economies of expressive arts.”⁸² While Green does not locate Clarke within a larger cohort of black feminist poets and writers who explore black lesbian sexual pleasure, his interest in in Clarke’s work is a significant move toward sex-positive black feminist discourse in literature.

Read through the lens of black feminist consciousness-building, the language contained in the texts of many of the pieces mentioned above point to a process of articulation, recognition

⁷⁸ Lindsey, 55.

⁷⁹ Lindsey, 56.

⁸⁰ David B. Green, in *Black Sexual Economies: Race and Sex in a Culture of Capital*, ed. Davis, Adrienne D., and Adrienne D. BSE Collective (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 218, muse.jhu.edu/book/67145.

⁸¹ Green, 218.

⁸² Green, 219.

and awareness. Be it the language of Carby's "rethinking," Smith's "toward," Wallace's "in search of," or Walker's "looking for," black feminist scholars have been consistently building language, ideas, and forms of recognition by being in conversation with one another. By considering the language of process and movement in these texts we allow more latitude in our understanding of black feminist theory. As Barbara Christian states in "The Race for Theory," writing can be a way to document, testify, as a way of that what one "feel[s]/know[s] *is*."⁸³ Consciousness-building in the late 1970s and 80s laid a critical foundation for both the possibilities of what black feminist literature and criticism could be as well outlined the sentiments and struggles of black feminist theorists and critics.

The following chapters should be read along the continuum of black feminist sexual consciousness-building—as a way of speaking through the silence, disrupting the black feminist literary tradition, and leaning into sex-positivity. This framing serves as a way to recognize the labor that is demanded of black feminist scholars who insist on doing work on black women's sexuality. Turning toward consciousness urges us to reckon with the dual position that many black feminist theorists face as both subject and narrator. This framing draws attention to the internal and collective labor of doing, undoing, connecting, and challenging history that black feminist theorists have and continue to undergo in order to engage in meaningful discourse on black female sexuality. Through this process, I also trace the terms that have emerged to disrupt "the problematic of silence." Nash's black female "ecstasy," Lorde's "erotic," Miller-Young's "erotic sovereignty, and Stallings' "funk" exist along a continuum of the towardness of black feminist theory. This language is can be understood alongside that which speaks to silence—Darlene Clarke's culture of dissemblance, Hammond's "black w/hole," Spillers' "beached whale"

⁸³ Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 78, accessed August 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/3177999.

metaphor. All of these terms and theoretical turns speak to the process of building black female sexual consciousness in black feminist scholarship.

“A Different Kind of Black Lesbian Writer”: Ann Allen Shockley & the Labor of Possibility

In the summer of 1975, Ann Allen Shockley wrote a letter to her editor to express frustration on how she had been represented in a review of her recently published novel, *Loving Her* (1974).

She wrote:

This letter comes to you in the form of a complaint. Karla Jay sent me a copy of her review of my novel...I took issue with her about what I thought were her assumptions of my being ‘black’ and ‘gay.’ She informed me that she had called the publisher...and this was given to her. Would you please inform your publicity department to use only the information that I forwarded...in the vita. There was no indication in the vita whether I was black, green, or red, nor of my sexual (if any) preferences.¹

Loving Her tells the story of Renay, a black woman who escapes an abusive marriage to a black man and enters into an interracial lesbian relationship with a wealthy white woman. Not only is it a novel about love and romance, it is a novel that also foregrounds black lesbian desire. Ostensibly, it was the lesbian centered themes of the novel that led many to assume that Shockley was a lesbian although she had never come out publicly as such. Shockley’s frustrated comments to her editor reflect her strong sense of self-definition and her willingness to speak up when she felt that her publisher had crossed a boundary. Shockley’s rejection of these identity categories (‘black’ and ‘gay’) is also a statement on the knowability of black women. Her refusal to be defined according to the literary establishment’s presumed knowledge about both her and the novel was in fact more than a “complaint,” it was a demand to respect black women’s right to sexual privacy and possibility.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s black women fought to be taken seriously within the literary arena. In the 1979 article “Male Critics/Black Women’s Novels,” Rita B. Dandridge plainly stat-

¹ SDiane Bogus. “Theme and Portraiture in the Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley,” (dissertation, Miami University, 1988), 98.

ed, “Novels written by black American women have not enjoyed the acclaim of critics as have those novels written by black American men.”² In the article, Dandridge outlines the blatant attacks on black women writers like Frances Harper and Ann Petry in criticism and reviews written by men. In a review in *Black World* (previously known as *Negro Digest*), a prominent space for showcasing black culture across the diaspora, critic Frank Lamont Phillips described *Loving Her* as “trash” and stated that Shockley “should know better.”³ Phillips went on to state: “This bullshit should not be encouraged.”⁴ This quote offers some insight into not only what was at stake for black women writers in the 1970s but also the delicate line that Shockley in particular had to carefully navigate as she worked to carve out a space where black female sexuality could be explored while preserving and protecting a sense of freedom and possibility in her personal life. Although I will not be exploring Shockley’s personal life in this chapter, both the frustrated note to her editor and Phillips’ diminishing critique illuminate what was at stake for her as a sex-positive black feminist writer in the 1970s and 80s.

Still, even with the vicious rejection of black male critics like Phillips and her lack of popularity within mainstream literary circles, Shockley’s writing received a notable amount of praise from black feminist writers and critics. In the essay “A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women,” writer Jewelle Gomez described Ann Allen Shockley’s 1974 novel, *Loving Her* novel as “a groundbreaking effort whose mere accomplishment deserves

² Rita B. Dandridge, *Male Critics/Black Women’s Novels* in *CLA Journal*, September, 1979, Vol. 23, No. 1 (September, 1979), pp. 1-11 Published by: College Language Association, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44328750>

³ Rita B. Dandridge, *Ann Allen Shockley: an Annotated Primary And Secondary Bibliography*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) xii.

⁴ SDiane Bogus. “Theme and Portraiture in the Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley.” (dissertation, Miami University, 1988), p. 89.

applause.”⁵ The scholar Alycee Lane has also referred to *Loving Her* as “groundbreaking.” According to Lane, “not only is it the first African American novel written with an explicitly lesbian theme, but it is the first to feature a black lesbian as its protagonist.” Lane goes on to cite a positive review of the novel by Alice Walker who in a 1975 *Ms. Magazine* review alluded to “its exploration of a daring subject boldly shared” and described it as being of “immense value.”⁶

Loving Her was a bold departure from the canon of black women’s literature that had been established leading up to that point. It spoke explicitly to black women’s experiences of sexual pleasure and danger in a way that was yet unseen in black women’s literature as an emerging field in the 1970s and 80s. Gomez’s use of the phrase “groundbreaking effort” emphasizes the labor involved in writing and publishing a novel of this nature at a time when only a small handful of black women writers had successfully entered the literary market and even fewer of these writers wrote explicitly about the sexual lives of black women. Gomez’s language draws our attention to the value that the novel possesses beyond the fraught questions of literary merit. She suggests that the novel’s mere existence was a feat worthy of recognition.

While this emphasis on Shockley’s effort could be interpreted as undermining the novel’s literary value, it could also be interpreted as an alternate approach to reading and appreciating black feminist literature. Instead of focusing in on the novel’s literary merit, Gomez turned her attention to its significance to her as a black lesbian reader. She compared the experience of reading the novel as akin to reading Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian classic *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)

⁵ Jewelle Gomez, “A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women,” in *Home Girls a Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 113.

⁶ Alycee J. Lane, “Forward,” in *Loving Her* by Ann Allen Shockley, (New York: Open Road), Kindle.

“for the first time as teenagers and realizing there were ‘others’ out there.”⁷ This emphasis on “effort” suggests a more radical and expansive reading practice that values the experiences of everyday readers and the power of literature to create community.

In the 1980s Gomez expanded on her analysis of Shockley’s “groundbreaking appeal.” Of Shockley’s second novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), Gomez wrote that it “admirably looks at many issues that are not often acknowledged in mass market fiction: the isolation of the black woman professional in her own community; the racism of the recording industry; racism in the women’s movement; and the complexity of fears of the closeted black lesbian, all of which lend the story to a timely veneer.”⁸ However, these notes of praise were accompanied by sharp criticism of the novel’s narrative development. Gomez described the novel as lacking in nuance in its treatment of “complicated issues,” “[trivializing] black Lesbians and their sexuality,” and as “leaving no lasting literary or human sensation in her wake.”⁹ For Gomez, the novel’s value was distinct from its perceived failure to meet standards of literary mastery and excellence. Gomez pointed out that the novel was valuable because of its timeliness and the way in which it addressed often under-explored themes tied to race, gender, and sexuality but ultimately fell short in its execution.

Both Gomez’s praise and critique of Shockley’s work magnify the tension between two lines of inquiry related to post civil rights African American literature. On the one hand, Gomez emphasized Shockley’s “effort” or labor as a black feminist writer who wrote explicitly about the romantic and sexual dimensions of black and interracial lesbian relationships. On the other hand,

⁷ Gomez, 112.

⁸ Gomez, 113.

⁹ Ibid.

she issued a burning critique of not only the narrative development of the characters in *Say Jesus* but also of their racial and sexual authenticity. This critique offers some insight into why and how sex-positive black feminist fiction was sometimes relegated to a realm outside of the literary. Through Gomez, we see how in the world of literary criticism, a reading practice that emphasizes labor, effort, and possibility may have been at odds with one that values authenticity, respectability, and literary merit.

“Effort” as an analytic lens for interpreting literature demands that readers shift from a more individualistic reading practice to a collective one in which we consider the creative and intellectual possibilities that have been explored by black women writers over time as interrelated. This shift holds the potential for greater access to knowledge and understanding of black feminist thought and black literary history. A shift towards a reading practice that emphasizes labor encourages us to consider black women’s writers whose work exists outside of the literary canon and beyond the echo chamber of mainstream accolades as valuable participants in black literary culture.

In an interview about her book *Half in Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Nellie McKay*, Shanna G. Benjamin emphasized the enormous amount of labor that black women scholars exerted towards the formation of black feminist thought as a field. Benjamin stated: “I move McKay from the shadows into the light to reclaim her story for a generation of scholars that may not appreciate the *effort* that went into moving black literary studies out of a strictly masculinist framework or understand the machinations that made black literature indispensable to American

literary studies.” (italics my own)¹⁰ Benjamin frames Nellie McKay as part of “a coterie of black women literary critics and black feminist thinkers who created the scholarship that informs so much of twenty-first century public-facing African American intellectualism.”

Like Nellie McKay, Ann Allen Shockley was among a group of lesser known black women writers who did this work in the late 20th century. While Shockley remains virtually unknown as a literary critic and fiction writer, her unseen labor was what made possible the groundbreaking work of more widely known writing by black women. Literary critic Bonnie Zimmerman described Shockley's significance when she wrote that "until the 1980s, Shockley was the only prominent and widely-read chronicler of Black lesbian lives (although Red Arobateau had self published a largely forgotten novel, *The Bars Across Heaven*, in 1975 and anthologies had included some short stories by lesbians of color)."¹¹ Almost a decade before Walker's classic novel *The Color Purple* was published, Shockley had already boldly begun to stretch the bounds of sexual possibility for black women writers. In *Loving Her* Shockley wrote not only about a black woman's romantic life, she also wrote explicitly about sexual pleasure and vulnerability.

Although Shockley did not want to be publicly defined according to her race or sexuality, many of those who knew her read her as black and queer. In this chapter I situate Ann Allen Shockley as one among this “coterie of black women literary critics and black feminist thinkers” whose efforts contributed to the development of black feminist thought and criticism. I use the term soul work to describe this methodological approach to reading and researching black

¹⁰ Tyler Parry, “The Life and Legacy of Nellie Y. McKay: An Interview with Shanna G. Benjamin,” published in *Black Perspectives*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-life-and-legacy-of-nellie-y-mckay-an-interview-with-shanna-g-benjamin/>

¹¹ Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women : Lesbian Fiction, 1969-1989* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1990), 179.

women's history based on cumulative effort. As a mode of consuming, producing and analyzing art in conversation with other black women, soul work is grounded in the interconnectedness of black women's labor. I engage with the practice of soul work by drawing from the sources that SDiane Bogus (who will be discussed in a later chapter) gathered in her well researched dissertation on Shockley in order to formulate analyses of her as a writer and sex-positive black feminist. SDiane Bogus and Red Jordan Arobateau, two sex-positive black feminist writers of the 1970s and 80s, make appearances in this chapter as both students of Shockley's work and as subjects of it.

This chapter is organized into two main sections: an overview of her work as a writer, archivist and librarian in the 1970s and 80s and a close reading of her 1974 novel, *Loving Her*. In the first section of this chapter, I establish Shockley as a black feminist who used writing as a way to make the lives of black feminists more legible. In the latter section, I look focus on *Loving Her* and the sex-positive black feminist impulse that drives the novel. By explicitly illustrating scenes of sexual pleasure and trauma in her fiction and by promoting the work of other black feminist writers with similar goals, I argue that Shockley burst open possibilities for an emergent sex-positive black feminism in literature.

Looking for Ann Allen Shockley

For the past two decades, Ann Allen Shockley has lived in obscurity with little to be found about the details of her life or her whereabouts. SDiane Bogus noted that when Shockley's *Loving Her* was released in 1974 "The work seemed to arrive without, history, precedent, or warning. The book jacket revealed the lesbian subject matter; the front matter, an excerpt from a poem

by Fenton Johnson, called it ‘a love so bold,’ but there were no accompanying notes about the author.”¹² No archive holds Shockley’s papers and those documents that do exist as part of the archived papers of other individuals are closed to researchers. Most traces that can be found of her through the internet point to her writing.¹³ According to the internet, Shockley is still alive. But so few details on her life are available, especially in the past three decades, she remains somewhat of a mystery. Over the course of her career, she was particularly and intensely private about her sexual identity and personal life and therefore few biographical details are known about her.¹⁴

SDiane Bogus’ 1988 dissertation indicates that Shockley was born on June 21, 1927 in Louisville, Kentucky to Bessie Lucas and Henry Allen who were both social workers. Ann Allen Shockley began writing for her school newspaper while in middle school. According to the literary scholar Rita B. Dandridge, she was the first black person to write a newspaper column in Federalsburg, Maryland and in Bridgeville, Delaware. She did her undergraduate studies at Fisk University and then went on to earn her degree in library science from Case Western Reserve (then referred to as Western Reserve). Dandridge described Shockley as “among the first to develop essays regarding the care of black library collections; the first to co-author a directory of

¹² SDiane Bogus. “Theme and Portraiture in the Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley.” (dissertation, Miami University, 1988), p. 87

¹³ I have located correspondence between Shockley and lesbian activist Karla Jay from the late 70s. However, these documents are closed at the request of the donor which suggests a possible demand on the part of Shockley to maintain her privacy.

¹⁴ Bogus, 100,102.

living black American authors; and the first black American woman writer to introduce in fiction . . . the black lesbian.”¹⁵

Shockley’s efforts to recover the work of black women activists and intellectuals dates as far back as the early 1960s. Almost two decades before Alice Walker plucked Zora Neale Hurston from literary obscurity, Shockley had begun to write a series of academic articles that shined a spotlight on under-recognized black women writers and intellectuals. Shockley’s recovery work and that of other lesser known black women intellectuals was part of a larger project that paved the way for the field of black women's studies and a more inclusive approach to librarian studies. In the 1980s Shockley became known as one of the preeminent black library scholars in the country and had published numerous essays on the state of African Americans in the field. Shockley was known and respected by prominent black feminists of the 1970s and 80s such as Jewelle Gomez, Nellie McKay, Alice Walker, Barbara Christian and others. Over the course of her nearly fifty year career as a writer, Shockley worked at the intersection of multiple fields—library science, journalism, creative writing, and academic scholarship.

In the 1965 article, “The Negro Woman in Retrospect: Blueprint for the Future,” Shockley painted an insightful and optimistic picture of African American women's history. She described the black women as “nearer to knowing that she can overcome in what she desires in life” and able to “fulfill whatever hopes, desires, or dreams she may have, and in doing so, find her likeness and identification in that of other women.”¹⁶ Shockley focused on figures that were often

¹⁵ Rita B. Dandridge. *Ann Allen Shockley : An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography*, (New York: Greenwood Press), p.x.

¹⁶ Ann Allen Shockley. “The Negro Woman in Retrospect: Blueprint for the Future.” *Negro History Bulletin*, 29(3), 55 (1965). Accessed on August 1, 2020, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/1296732335?accountid=13626>.

framed as “firsts” in black women's history like Mary Church Terrell, Phyllis Wheatley and Dr. Jeanne Noble in order to illuminate the historical lineage of black women's leadership in the U.S. According to Shockley, black women’s emergence as leaders was rooted in necessity. “History has compelled the Negro woman to be sure and solid and determined,” she wrote.¹⁷ Shockley's feelings of optimism towards black women’s ability to realize their desires offer a clue into the creative and political energy that informed her fiction writing in the 1970s and 80s. This sense of possibility led to her to tread unprecedented territory in black women’s literature almost a decade later.

In 1972, Shockley published a piece on black feminist intellectual and prolific writer of the late 19th and early 20th century, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, in which she argued that Hopkins, was "one of the most neglected early black women writers."¹⁸ Shockley wrote about Hopkins as capturing a wide breadth of artistic and intellectual work that included writing and performing in the well-received play, “Underground Railroad” in 1880. While cataloguing Hopkins' successes, Shockley also took note of her artistic “efforts.” Shockley acknowledged a play Hopkins wrote entitled “One Scene from the Drama of Early Days” which received virtually no attention or accolade. Throughout the essay, Shockley uses the language of effort to describe the significance of Hopkins’ work as an editor, stenographer, orator, playwright and award-winning novelist. Shockley's writing on Hopkins was important as a recovery project but was also a critical part of Shockley’s larger project of tracing a tradition of black women's writing that included the full range of Hopkin’s work as a black woman writer and activist.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ann Allen Shockley. 1972. “Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: A Biographical Excursion into Obscurity.” *Phylon* 33 (1): 22–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/273429>.

Shockley's writing in the 1960s and 70s reveals that she was well attuned to the power of writing to affect social change. In the article "Anti-Slavery Literature: An Overview" published in 1974, Shockley asserted that "Anti-slavery literature was a dominant factor in bringing to the minds and hearts of people that slavery was morally wrong and a terrible stigma upon the nation"¹⁹ This article and others reveal both Shockley's intellectual interests and her politics. For her, writing was a site of political power and possibility. Her literary and historical interests were not driven by respectability but rather the individual and collective potential of writers to transform thinking. This transformative process was not confined to analysis of text. The most productive space existed outside of text and in the realm of discourse tied to social change. In other words, Shockley's early writing about African American literature is rarely concerned with the literary aesthetic; but rather she engages with literature as a site of activist struggle. It was a space for her to issue public critique towards perceived injustices and to amplify the experiences of the oppressed.

By the late 1970s, Shockley had ventured into a new creative genre—the novel. In 1974, she published the landmark text, *Loving Her* which foregrounded black women's pleasure as well as their vulnerability to racial and interpersonal violence. The novel was published at a time when black feminists had declared the safety of black women a public concern. The Combahee River Collective formed in 1977 and created public awareness of the growing number of missing black girls in Boston through protests and demonstrations. At the same time, in cities across the country—Chicago, New York, D.C., San Francisco—the first rape crisis centers were established and the first "Take Back the Night" marches happened. Shockley wrote the novel in conversation

¹⁹ Ann Allen Shockley. 1974. "American Anti-Slavery Literature: An Overview~1693-1859." *Negro History Bulletin* 37 (3): 235.

with these widespread acts of feminist resistance. *Loving Her* will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter but it is useful to think of the novel as part of her larger political and creative trajectory.

In 1977 Shockley compiled and edited the *Handbook of Black Librarianship* with E.J. Josey. Shockley's writing on black literary studies was closely tied to her interests as a librarian. In line with her interest in the preservation and dissemination of black historical knowledge, as a librarian Shockley was committed to providing "reference information on the relationship of Afro-Americans to various aspects of librarianship and libraries."²⁰ The book includes a "list of the branch libraries of the public library systems that serve predominantly black communities."²¹ One reviewer cited the book as "[bringing] together for the first time a wide scope of historical and current information relative to black Americans and libraries and librarianship."²²

In the handbook Shockley and Josey present black librarians as dynamic and multi-faceted, offering a bridge between Shockley's librarian work and her fiction writing. The chapter "Black Librarians As Creative Writers" lists short biographies on black writers who have also done library work. The chapter includes widely recognized writers such as Arna Bontemps, Audre Lorde, and Dudley Randall as well as lesser known writers like Anne Spencer and Margaret Perry. Each of the short biographies detailing the writer's educational training and notable publications were written by Shockley except for the section on her which was written by Josey. The

²⁰ E. J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship* (Littleton: Libraries Unlimited, 1977), 11.

²¹ Josey and Shockley, 12.

²² Virginia Lacy Jones, "Reviewed Work(s): Handbook of Black Librarianship by E. J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley," in *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Jan., 1979) 103-104.

inclusion of this chapter demonstrates Shockley's desire to capture the multiple interventions that she and others strove to make in the literary world.

Throughout her professional life, Shockley was particularly invested in elevating the work of black writers whose work existed outside of the African American literary canon. This can be seen in her writing on Pauline Hopkins but also through her nonfiction writing on women working in her own era: the New York City based queer women of color feminist collective, Salsa Soul Sisters, and (on) the underground black trans writer, Red Jordan Arobateau. In 1979 she profiled Salsa Soul Sisters in an issue of *Off Our Backs* a widely circulated lesbian publication that was founded in 1970.²³ In the article she briefly covered the groups's origin and membership, topics discussed during Salsa Soul Sister meetings, and activities such as the literary publication, the Gay-zette. Shockley's article on the Salsa Soul Sisters served as a way to create more visibility for the group which had received less recognition than larger feminist organizations of the 1970s like the National Organization for Women (NOW) and The National Black Feminist Organization.

Over the course of her career, Shockley read and wrote about the experiences of marginal characters and communities in black literature. In the 1982 article published in *Sinister Wisdom* entitled "Red Jordan Arobateau: A Different Kind of black Lesbian Writer," Shockley focused on the virtually unknown street lit writer, Red Jordan Arobateau.²⁴ Consistent with her interest in black feminist literary "effort," she was less interested in arguing for the aesthetic value of Arobateau's work and more interested in it for its ability to carve out space for new possibilities for

²³ Ann Allen Shockley. "The Salsa Soul Sisters." *Off Our Backs* 9 (Nov. 1979), 13.

²⁴ Ann Allen Shockley. "Red Jordan Arobateau: A Different Kind of black Lesbian Writer," *Sinister Wisdom*, 21 (1982), 35, Accessed August 4, 2021, <http://www.sinisterwisdom.org/archive>.

black queer and trans writers. She described the kinds of characters portrayed in Arobateau's work:

This type of black female character, lesbian or heterosexual, has been largely ignored or glossed over in the whole of Afro-American literature by black female writers. Various reasons can be surmised for the neglect. Many Afro-American women who write, exist in an academic environment. Here, they are riveted in the isolated, lofty tower of scholarship, research, and pedagogy. The literary black female writers usually focus on allegorical symbolisms, women in search of a quest, or the ennobling of black women. Other writers are involved in political rhetoric, or self-serving pursuits.

Red Jordan Arobateau's Suzie Q brought a new protagonist to black lesbian fiction, springing to life the black lesbian street woman in all her hard glaring reality. The story, too, places the black prostitute in the personalized role of being human, rather than portrayed as a piece of meat to be exploited in pornography, or in such as the Iceberg Slim pimp stories.²⁵

In the article, Shockley refers to Arobateau as "a different kind of black lesbian writer." Arobateau was "different" because of his focus on working poor black queer characters who often engaged in the underground economy. However, by considering Shockley's body of writing about other black feminist writers and activists, we see that not only was Arobateau "different" but Shockley was too. The essay offers insight into not only the topics that were meaningful to Shockley but also how she oriented herself within the black feminist literary community. As seen through her writing on Arobateau, Shockley understood writing as both art form and as a way of recording experience. Her primary investment was in literature's ability to capture a vast expanse of African American experience that included lesbians, the working poor, mothers, preachers, artists and others. This is not to say that Shockley did not have an appreciation for literary prowess in her own work and in that of others. I only seek to emphasize that this was not the primary lens through which she viewed African American literary production.

In 1979, Shockley also published the article "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview." In this essay, which reads as an addendum to *Loving Her*, she builds a cogent argu-

²⁵ Ann Allen Shockley. "Red Jordan Arobateau: A Different Kind of black Lesbian Writer," *Sinister Wisdom*, 21 (1982), 35, Accessed August 4, 2021, <http://www.sinisterwisdom.org/archive>.

ment around many of themes addressed in the novel—patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and misogynoir in the literary world. Instead of turning to a set of exceptional black lesbian writers in the essay, Shockley shaped her analysis around effort. Shockley acknowledged that prior to the 1960s there had been “black female writers who attempted to write about lesbian themes.” She continued to state, “Then, as now, these women who did not surface, women who might have had something to say, but did not put forth any effort to write, did not have the time, inclination, or ability, even if they had wanted to.” That Shockley’s interest was not only those writers who were published but also those who attempted to publish work reveals the value that she placed on effort as a mode of reading and analyzing literary production. Shockley expresses interest in both the attempts that black women made and didn’t to publish black lesbian literature. She attributed the dearth of writing by and about black lesbians to stereotypes, homophobia, and the fear of being categorized as a black lesbian merely because of the presence of lesbian themes in one’s writing. Shockley wrote that “no conscious efforts were made by knowledgeable individuals who could have documented truths over myths to help others become cognizant of the black lesbian as a person and not a thing.”

After establishing the challenges for black women writers and black lesbian writers in getting work published in the essay “The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview,” Shockley turned the focus to those black women writers who were successful in having work published that recognized black lesbians. Shockley reviewed work by Maya Angelou, Pat Parker, SDiane Bogus, Rosa Guy, Gayl Jones, Anita Cornwell, Pat Suncircle and others. In the closing paragraphs of the essay Shockley states: “It is a pity that so few black women, heterosexual or lesbian, have read or even heard of these writers, with the exception of Audre Lorde.” Here, we

see again Shockley's interest a practice of looking beyond grand master narratives that serve to tokenize black lesbian writers. In this statement and in the essay more broadly, Shockley subverts the inherent erasure of black lesbians in literature and criticism by offering her own creative and intellectual interventions.

Alongside Shockley's focused interest in expanding the black feminist literary tradition to include black lesbians, she worked to trouble the canon in *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933: An Anthology and a Critical Guide* (1988), which offered a comprehensive history of black women writers that included the writings of over thirty black women writers, many of whom "have been either disregarded or lost to black literature."²⁶ Although anthologies of black women's writing are common and perhaps even ubiquitous in some circles, publishing an anthology on black women writers in the late 1980s was bold and politicized intervention. Shockley clarified her goal as a writer and librarian in the book's introduction when she wrote: "Because the work of so few Afro American women writers was published in the past, it is important that those who did publish be located, identified, and resurrected to take their rightful places as foremothers of the black feminist literary tradition."²⁷ She went on to clarify the stakes of this work even more when she stated that "only a handful of black women writers have recognized or entered into the canon."²⁸ Shockley's work as scholar, librarian and archivist was thoughtfully crafted around building a black feminist literary tradition that not only focused on "great" black women figures. Her writing on black feminist writers analysis rooted in effort which allowed

²⁶ Ann Allen Shockley, *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933 : An Anthology and Critical Guide* (New York: New American Library, 1990).

²⁷ Ann Allen Shockley, *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933 : An Anthology and Critical Guide* (New York: New American Library, 1990), xiii.

²⁸ Shockley, xx.

writers like Red Jordan Arobateau to exist in time, space, and community with better known writers of the 1970s and 80s like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker. Ultimately, it was her keen understanding of privilege and erasure that drove the deeply intersectional critique of racism, sexism and homophobia in her fiction.

Sex-Positive Black Feminism & *Loving Her* (1974)

Loving Her opens at the site of trauma. As the protagonist, Renay, lies in bed, she wonders if it is safe for her to get out of bed. The first signal towards the violence and precarity of her situation is conveyed through the metaphor of weather. The rain is described as “insistent” and “like an angry intruder.” As Renay lays in bed carefully assessing her situation, she notes that her daughter is still asleep in the next room and that her husband, Jerome is gone. Literary scholar Christina Sharpe has used weather as a metaphor to describe the atmosphere that surrounds blackness. She writes, “In what I am calling the weather, anti-blackness is pervasive *as* climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place.”²⁹ In *Loving Her*, we see both anti-blackness *and* misogyny as the “atmospheric condition of time and place.” This opening scene introduces Renay as a survivor of domestic violence and follows her as she flees her home with her daughter.

Through a series of flashbacks of the moments leading up to Renay’s escape, the narrator details the pressure of “compulsory heterosexuality” and the expectation that black women respond favorably to black male desire.³⁰ The novel demonstrates how women can be willing partici-

²⁹ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 106.

³⁰ See “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” by Adrienne Riche. Also see “On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism, Feminist Media” by Moya Bailey & Trudy (2018) *Studies*, 18:4, 762-768, doi: [10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395)

pants in hetero-patriarchy when Marissa, Renay's college roommate, pressures Renay to date Jerome. The narrator explains this dynamic: "To rid herself of Marissa's probing, which was becoming increasingly persistent, she relented and went with Jerome." (loc 477). The pressure of heterosexual coupling and homophobia in the black community are present in some of Lorraine Hansberry's writing in the 1950s. Shockley's inspiration for *Loving Her* may have been spurred by the play "The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window" (1964) that touched on similar issues. "The Sign in Sidney" and the short story "The Anticipation of Eve" (1958).³¹ As Imani Perry points out in her work on Lorraine Hansberry, black queer writers like Baldwin and Hansberry chose to center white characters in queer narratives.

If Shockley portrays the pervasiveness of black women's corporeal vulnerability through the weather, then through her characterization of Renay's husband, Jerome, and her Renay's friend, Fran, she critiques a series of ideas that promulgate sexism, homophobia, and misogynoir.³² She writes:

"Most men hated and feared Lesbians. Besides, to them, what could a woman do without a penis that a man couldn't do better with one? Women became Lesbians because of disappointment in a man. All they needed was a good man to put them right on track again. Most men didn't realize that some women had proclivities for their own sex. To the male sexual ego, it was a serious blow when women chose their own kind."³³

Throughout the novel, Shockley engages with some of the wider discussions on the nascent pro-sex movement of the 1970s. In this quote, Shockley echoed Anne Koedt who in the article "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (published four years prior to *Loving Her*) argued that women were "defined sexually in terms of what pleases men." As Trimika C. Melancon has ar-

³¹ See the chapter "Sappho's Poetry" in the book *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (2018) by Imani Perry.

³² On misogynoir, see Moya Bailey & Trudy (2018) On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism, *Feminist Media Studies*, 18:4, 762-768, doi: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395

³³ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 4, Kindle.

gued, Terry and Renay's "sexual intimacy disrupts heterosexist sensibilities surrounding sexuality and the privileging of male desire and pleasure in heterosexual intercourse."³⁴ Shockley may have chosen the genre of fiction to create more public conversation around black women's engagement with and sex-positivity as a way to shield her from critique and professional. In *Loving Her*, the voice of the narrator sometimes takes on a role that reads as social commentary and cultural analysis. Shockley may have used fiction to say what she did not feel was permissible in non fiction and in academic writing and that more broadly, challenged the leading black man narrative promoted through social movements of the time.

Loving Her was published a few years after the trial and conviction of Maulauna (Ron) Karenga in 1971 for the brutal beating of two black women in his organization. Although the sexism and misogynoir embedded in the Black Power and civil rights movements has been documented through the testimonies of black women activists and freedom fighters like Elaine Brown, and Gwendolyn "Gwen" Robinson (now Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons), these histories are often cast in the background. Instances like these and others of intrarracial violence are examples of the atmospheric weather that black women navigated and through which the novel emerged. Racism, sexism and misogynoir inform both the weather of the novel and that of Shockley's world as black woman writer in the 1970s. Although Shockley had no known explicit connection to Black Power, *Loving Her* certainly demonstrates a critical engagement with the movement. Through the novel, she asserted not only that pleasure was an aspect of black women's livelihood but also that intraracial violence in the black community was an issue of serious public concern.

³⁴ Trimiko C. Melancon, "Towards an Aesthetic of Transgression: Ann Allen Shockley's 'Loving Her' and the Politics of Same-Gender Loving." *African American Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3/4 (Fall - Winter, 2008), 650.

In Renay's escape scene, through the voice of the narrator, Shockley reveals more about the circumstances that led her protagonist to flee. The narrator describes Renay's knowledge on marriage: "Marital was more deadly than impersonal group battles. Two people piercing the armor of emotional frailty, crippling the spirit, wounding the heart, making each less human in the other's sight."³⁵ As the scene unfolds, Renay's daughter, Denise, asks her about the swelling on her face. Renay does not admit to her daughter that she's been beaten by her father. Yet, the narrator shares with the reader knowledge that extends beyond the scope of both Denise and the novel. "The back of a large black hand striking out in angry rebuttal against her and all the other black women before and after her."³⁶ In this line, Shockley conjures the weight of black women's history. The omniscient narrative voice in the novel sweeps this history from under the oppressive rug of silence and calls attention to the necropolitical dimensions of black women's experience. It is a voice that refuses to be contained and at times speaks as the inner voice of Renay while at other instances it takes on a tone that knowingly speaks for and about the experiences of black women.

The articulation of antiblackness through the metaphor of weather in *Loving Her* was not new to black women's writing. Although many scholars and critics have drawn comparisons between *Loving Her* and *The Well of Loneliness*, a British novel by Radclyffe Hall published in 1928, it is more likely that Shockley was engaging with the black feminist politics embedded in Ann Petry's 1946 novel, *The Street*. In *The Street*, Petry conveys the precarity that black women faced in everyday life through vivid descriptions of violent weather. The novel opens with a description of the weather: the wind "drove most of the people off the street in the block between

³⁵ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road), chap. 1, Kindle.

³⁶ Ibid.

Seventh and Eighth Avenues except for a few hurried pedestrians who bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault.”³⁷ In *The Street*, the protagonist, Lutie, is a single black mother who seeks reprieve from the structural conditions that make inner city life harsh and untenable for working poor people—capitalist exploitation, racism sexism, and misogyny.

It is likely that Shockley read Petry and was intentionally riffing off of some of the same themes and literary devices found in *The Street*. Although Lutie is not a black lesbian, clear lines can be drawn linking her struggles and Renay’s. At the end of the novel, Lutie fights to escape sexual assault by a man whom she reaches out to for financial help. Similarly, in a scene in *Loving Her*, we learn of the rape and sexual violence that Renay experienced early in her relationship with Jerome. Both women also find a sense of freedom through music. For Renay, it is her piano playing that creates a reason to leave her home, it is the means through which she earns money and ultimately meets Terry. Lutie too finds escape through music in a scene at a club in which she becomes entranced in the music. “She hummed as she listened to it, not only really aware that she was humming or why, knowing only that she felt free here where there was so much space.”³⁸ *Loving Her* is part of a continued conversation on the themes of black women’s pleasure and precarity, and an under-explored tradition of sex-positive black feminist discourse and writing.

In *Loving Her* the weather functions as a metaphor that explains the everywhere-ness of structural inequality and the flow of Renay’s emotional inner world. The weather shifts when Renay

³⁷ Ann Petry. *The Street*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 1.

³⁸ Petry, 146.

reaches Terry's apartment with Denise, where Terry fixes Renay "coffee laced with brandy because Terry thought she needed it."³⁹ As the two women drink together, there is a distinct shift in Renay's emotional landscape. "Even the rain seemed cheerful now." This "cheerful weather" is briefly interrupted by Renay's daughter, Denise, when she asks Terry the question, "Is Mommy going to be your maid?" Denise then decides that she likes Terry and states, "You're not mean and evil like Daddy says white people are." Denise's comments foreshadow the racial tension that emerges later in the novel while also calling attention to the structural dimensions of racism that confined many black women to domestic work, and also acknowledging the safety and allyship offered by individual white women to black people.

Loving Her also explores the ways in which black women and girls produce knowledge about sex. Renay received information on black womanhood during her young adult years from her piano teacher and also her college roommate. As a girl, Renay studies piano with a single black woman named Miss Sims and develops a small crush on her. During a lesson, Miss Sims tells Renay:

Nurture your talent, Renay. Don't let a man turn your head and fill you of babies and worry. Women can have lives of their own. Talents of their own. There's a lot more to life than simply displaying that you have a man. Too many women of our race think that a man is all that matters. And they bitterly resent those who have independent lives in which there are no men. (loc 420)⁴⁰

Through Miss Sims, Renay receives an alternative version of black womanhood based on autonomy, reproductive freedom, and economic self-determination. That Shockley positions

³⁹ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁴⁰ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 2, Kindle.

Miss Sims as an object of intrigue and desire is another aspect of Shockley's effort to construct black female characters who stretch the boundaries of possibility. Miss Sims imparts this wisdom to Renay in a moment of melancholy that readers are left to come to their own conclusions about why Miss Sims is upset. Is it because of society's disdain for independent black women? Because she is lonely or heartbroken? As the reader reckons with these possibilities, what Shockley does make clear is that Miss Sims wishes for Renay to live a life beyond the strictures that society imposes on young black women and girls. Music, then offers Renay a momentary sense of what Christina Sharpe refers to as "breathing space"—a retreat from the oppressive weight of racism and sexism.⁴¹ "For herself, the piano was the only thing (thing) that make her life less lonely in the small, dingy four-room apartment," that she lived in with her husband, Jerome.⁴² Shockley gestures towards the long history of black sexual freedom, agency, and mobility found through music. Through her piano playing, she meets Terry and thus gains the opportunity to flee her abusive relationship with Jerome. For Renay, playing the piano allows her to have a reason to leave the domestic space, to make money, and to connect with people outside of the home.

In the first love scene between Terry and Renay, Renay experiences an "electric" and "delicate storm" of pleasure. "Her fingers probed tenderly, touching, causing Renay to moan slightly in anticipation. Her hips moved gently urging the perceiving hands, while her own hands smoothed the ivory back above her."⁴³ In this scene, black lesbian sexual pleasure is conveyed through flowery albeit titillating language that affirms black queer desire. The sex scene alluded

⁴¹ See *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* by Christina Sharpe (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 109.

⁴² Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 2, Kindle.

⁴³ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 1, Kindle.

to above, stands in contrast to Renay's interactions with Jerome. "It had never been like that with him," the narrator states.⁴⁴ Part of Renay's reclamation of her livelihood is enacted through sexual pleasure.

The unison of love: the rhythm like a slow mounting blues that grew and grew into a crescendo that left her weak, but still strong enough to make music and the feeling better. The indefinable pain lifted her to the point where her arms and legs clasped the back that was making the music heighten until the blues ended in a cry of ecstasy—the pain so sweet and yet so sharp that it hurt before subsiding in a low tremor.⁴⁵

Renay's experience of sexual "ecstasy" carries with it with her experiences of physical and emotional trauma—an "indefinable pain." In this love scene, the metaphor of the blues is evoked in order to describe sexual pleasure as a means for Renay to transform trauma into a "pain so sweet and yet so sharp that it hurt." As Angela Davis has noted, the blues captured aspects of "love relationships that were not compatible with the dominant, etherealized ideology of love—such as extramarital relationships, domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships."⁴⁶ Here, the blues becomes a metaphor to capture the ways in which love and love-making are tied to Renay's specific reality as a black lesbian.

The novel continues to explore the ways in which Renay's experiences of pleasure are entangled with racism, sexism and structural inequality. Although with both Jerome and Terry, Renay is relegated to traditionally female activities like cooking and child care, with Terry the dynamics of these activities shift dramatically. Cooking becomes an erotic and pleasurable activity. While shopping at an upscale supermarket in Terry's neighborhood, Renay notices the abundance of

⁴⁴ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 3.

food options. Renay “lingered over the choice meats with their bright red colors temptingly encased in cellophane wrappings” and “found herself humming along with the soft music siphoned in from nowhere.” In this scene, Renay experiences a newfound sense of economic stability and physical safety. The narrator describes her shopping experiences as “careless pleasure” and “fun for a change.”⁴⁷ This experience stands in sharp contrast to her memories of her previous shopping experiences where “the floors were cracked and dirty, littered with cigarette butts and decaying scraps of produce; the meats were tinged with brown, as were the wilted vegetables marketed with exorbitant prices.”⁴⁸

The second phase of Renay's education came while she was studying music at the college where she also met Jerome. There, she learned about gendered expectations of her as a young woman in college from her roommate, Marissa, who upon learning of Jerome's interest in Renay, pressures her to go on a date with him. The narrator describes Renay's first experience kissing Jerome using words like “mashing,” “prying,” and “jarring.” After the kiss, Renay washes and scrubs her face and mouth in an effort to rid herself of any lasting physical residue of the experience. Renay continues to date Jerome because of social pressure. She “learned how to accommodate his goodnight kisses, which seemed to be a social adjunct to dating.”⁴⁹ “She was only superficially acting out the woman's role she thought she was expected to play in the context of their relationship.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 2, Kindle.

⁴⁸ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 2, Kindle.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

One night, after attending a dance, Jerome pulls Renay into the bushes and rapes her. Renay becomes pregnant as a result of the rape and ends up leaving college. She eventually marries Jerome out of shame and fear of what others will think of her as an unwed black mother. Here, Shockley illustrates one of the ways in which respectability politics can force black women into situations of emotional and physical danger instead of protecting them. Renay's marriage to Jerome is violent and oppressive, as she is under the constant threat of being the object of his rage.

While pleasure is an important aspect of the novel's sex-positive dimensions, consent plays an equally important role as well. Racism and misogyny function as obstacles to Renay's quest for liberation. They offer readers a way of imagining sexual pleasure that is consensual, safe, and mutually gratifying. Terry states:

I'm wealthy. I'm used to getting what I want, even if it means buying it. You've probably guessed what I am by now, or else you're terribly naive. I'm one of those women who prefers her own sex and I want you. However, as trite as it may sound, I want you for real. But I won't bother you if you don't want me to. I'll be happy just to have you as a friend, knowing you and enjoying your talent. But if you ever need me—come. I'll be waiting.⁵¹

In the novel, Shockley challenges accepted notions of how young women across the lines of race could experience sex. Terry's relationship with Renay is built on transparency and consent. Terry meets Renay in a bar where Renay works as the house pianist. Although Terry's assertive expression of desire for Renay is complicated by her privilege as a wealthy white woman, Terry shows a sense of respect for Renay's physical and emotional boundaries. After having expressed

⁵¹ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 2, Kindle.

her desire for Renay, she apologizes and says, “I didn't mean to frighten you. Forgive me. I won't pressure you.”⁵²

Terry's approach to courting is the antithesis of Renay's experience dating Jerome. The narrator describes Terry as someone Renay wants “to see and be with” and as “nice and comfortable to be with.”⁵³ With Terry, Renay experiences a sexual awakening. Renay experiences her first orgasm in flowery but explicit sex scene:

Terry's hands spoke a language all their own, touching her legs to insinuate a wider path. She was conscious of lips on her breasts, of the tip of a tongue encircling her taut nipples. The Terry was above her, moving, and just as she had known and wanted this all her life, she matched the love movements of body against body—movements which increased to such an intensity that Renay cried out, startling even herself.

“Terry—oh, Terry—it's good. It's so good—“ The cries were there as a curtain of blackness struck and she sang out in pleasure.

Cradled later in Terry's arms, she said: “It was the first time I've ever had an orgasm.”⁵⁴

After years of experiencing sex within the context of violence, Renay finds sexual gratification in a sexual relationship based on consent. After sex with Terry, Renay states, “I didn't know it *could* be like that.” Sex then becomes more than a site of trauma for Renay, it becomes an experience that allows her to learn about her body and its vast sexual possibilities.

Within a larger historical context, the relationship between Terry and Renay represents aspects of racial alliances between white and black women during the 1970s around anti-rape and sexual violence work. *Loving Her* was published at a moment when black and white feminists were working both together and separately to address violence against women as a larger systemic issue in American culture. In addition to the Combahee River Collective, organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization, The National Alliance of black Feminists, and Third

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 2, Kindle.

World Women's Alliance had made a clear set of demands.⁵⁵ Rape crisis centers were emerging across the country in cities like New York, Berkeley, Detroit and Washington D.C. Hovering over these conversations around sexual violence and consent was women's right to sexual pleasure and autonomy.⁵⁶ Although this was not the central focus of the activism, especially for black women, discourse around sexual violence was indirectly about women's rights to experience sex in a context free of violence. Terry's role as an aid to Renay's escape from her abusive husband, as a respectful and generous sexual partner, and later as a source of racial tension draws from the complicated experiences of interracial cooperation between white and black women in the 1970s.

However, *Loving Her* does not leave readers with a neat narrative of interracial or intraracial relationships. The novel is a study in the interlocking nature of oppression that black women face based on race, gender, and sexuality. As the narrative unfolds, we see that Terry and Renay's relationship is challenged by Terry's obliviousness to racial and class privilege as well as intraracial violence and homophobia. Renay also faces the homophobia and heterosexism from other black women. Renay fears that one of her black girlfriends, Fran, will be critical of her relationship with Terry. Again, Shockley uses the narrator's voice to speak to broader social issues that faced black lesbians.

Black women were the most vehement about women loving each other. This kind of love was worse to them than acts of adultery or incest, for it was homophile. It was worse than being inflicted with an incurable disease. Black women could be sympathetic about illegitimacy, raising the children of others, having affairs with married men—but not towards Lesbianism, which many blamed on white women.

The women of her race loved their men, urged strength in them. And hadn't they for centuries been accused of castrating them? Besides, black women had been made masculine all their lives by forced patriarchy—a role thrust upon them by a racist society. Conversely, she thought, this should soften their outlook on the Lesbian woman, or make more black women Lesbians.

⁵⁵ See *Living for the Revolution black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (2005) by Kimberley Springer.

⁵⁶ See *Radical Sisters : Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C* (2008) by Anne M. Valk.

But most black women feared and abhorred Lesbians more than rape—perhaps because of the fear bred from their deep inward potentiality for Lesbianism. For her to be in love with a woman who was white and a Lesbian—Fran would never understand.⁵⁷

The way in which Shockley approached the themes of pleasure and trauma in her work emerged out of black feminist post civil rights discourse in the 1970s. Work by writers like Frances M. Beal and Fran Sanders who argued that black women faced the dual oppression of race and gender are examples of intersectional discourse among black women. In the essay “Dear Black Man” Sanders states, “black women are taken for granted a great deal in the manner in which they are dealt with by the black man.”⁵⁸ She continues to describe a “hostile” encounter that she had with a black man on the street one day in which the man threatens to shoot her and demeans her criticizing her hair.⁵⁹ These themes of black women’s vulnerability are echoed throughout *Loving Her*. The narrator states,

His sexual narcissism was wounded—the steel armor of black men, the one and only form of manhood the white man had given them in slavery—the myth of their sexual prowess which black males had come to believe and somehow had made women believe. The black man was the superstud. The bed was his kingdom, the womb his domain, and the penis his mojo hung with black magic.”⁶⁰

Loving Her engages with the black feminist discourse that was already in motion in the 1970s wherein black women were having open conversations about intraracial violence and sexism. However, Shockley extended this conversation to explore sexual pleasure as part of the larger project of black women’s liberation. Through multiple explicitly rendered sex scenes, the novel offers a vision of what sexual freedom could look like for black women in the context of a romantic relationship.

⁵⁷ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 3, Kindle.

⁵⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman : An Anthology* (New York: New York New American Library 1970), 75

⁵⁹ Bambara, 76.

⁶⁰ Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (New York: Open Road, 1974), chap. 4, Kindle.

By the 1980s, *Loving Her* had gone out of print and Shockley had quietly fallen below the radar in both mainstream and black feminist literary circles. Yet black feminists like Rita Dandridge and SDiane Bogus made forceful attempts to rescue her from obscurity and to establish her position in the black feminist literary tradition. In 1987, Dandridge published an annotated bibliography of Shockley's work. She also wrote reviews of Shockley's writing during this time as well. In "Shockley, The Iconoclast," published in 1984, Dandridge reviewed her short story collection *Say Jesus and Come to Me*. In the review, Dandridge concludes that the novel is "entertainingly iconoclastic and courageously candid novel about Christianity and lesbianism, perhaps indigestible by many."⁶¹ This description of Shockley as an iconoclast provides an even wider lens for understanding the nature of her work as a writer. While Dandridge noted that the collection is not without faults, she carefully read it for the effort that it put forward in exposing racism, sexism, and patriarchy in the black community. Shockley articulates her specific goals in "Say Jesus" in the quote below:

I wanted to bring out the homophobic hypocrisy of the black church, which is filled to the pulpit with closet gays and lesbians from all walks of life. ... I wanted to expose the conservatism and snobbishness of the black middle class and academicians which I see all the time; black male oppression of women; the superior attitudes and opportunism of some white women towards black women in the women's liberation movement; and even touch on our local country music scene.⁶²

In the 1980s, SDiane Bogus also began writing about Shockley. In her doctoral dissertation, Bogus noted that Shockley discouraged her from focusing her research on her. She wrote, "Shockley recommended in the letter of 18 March 1986: 'You would finish your work faster if

⁶¹ Rita B. Dandridge, "Shockley, The Iconoclast," *Callaloo*, no. 22 (1984): 160-64, accessed July 7, 2020, doi:10.2307/2930483.

⁶² Ibid.

you forgot any heterosexual fiction and just concentrated on the lesbian themes.’ She added, ‘I still contend that you should have done Audre [Lorde]. You would have had a better response, plus it would have been simpler.’”⁶³ This quote reveals a keen awareness of her position in the black feminist literary canon as well as the hierarchical nature of the academy. Perhaps jaded from decades of invisibility, Shockley understood well who the chosen black feminist lesbian writers were and the power gained by positioning ones work adjacent to more popular writers like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker.

If Shockley was “different” as a writer, it was certainly because she wanted to be. In a letter to Rita B. Dandridge she wrote: “In writing, I am interested in conveying themes....I am not into symbolism, allegory, folklore, imagery as such. Unfortunate, for these are the things that reviewers love to tackle in books. Particularly the academician to prove how erudite he or she is.”⁶⁴

(xiii) Shockley’s primary interest in “conveying themes” offers instruction on how she intended her work to be read. She was interested in articulating messages and ideas on black politics, heterosexism, religion, sexuality, and pleasure through in a direct and sometimes didactic manner. For Shockley’s explicitness was a mode of literary expression that extended well beyond the sexual. The narrator in the novel functions as an authoritative voice with a clear mission of illuminating Renay’s inner thoughts and feelings as a black woman and also calling out the complex workings of inter- and intraracial oppression.

⁶³ SDiane Bogus. “Theme and Portraiture in the Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley.” (dissertation, Miami University, 1988), 107.

⁶⁴ Rita B. Dandridge. *Ann Allen Shockley : An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), xiii.

What makes Shockley “different” as black feminist writer and scholar is not only the themes that she wrote about but also the way in which she moved through the world. She refused to be contained or singularly defined; her work transverses genre. There exists no neat or singular path towards understanding Shockley or her work, just as there exists no one way of engaging with sex-positive black feminism. While her peers hailed her privately as a black lesbian, in public she preferred to keep her identity out of reach. Black lesbian poet and scholar-activist, Cheryl Clarke described Shockley as “definitely black” and suggested that she was a closeted lesbian.⁶⁵ The point here is not to further push Shockley into identity categories but to highlight how different she was from other black feminist writers of the 1970s in terms of how she presented herself to the world. She was a writer who wrote explicitly about sex between black women in her fiction, who wrote about other writers who wrote about sex explicitly but yet refused to publicize her own sexual identity in any way.

When I refer to Shockley as a sex-positive black feminist writer, I am calling upon her legacy—one that centers the political, social, and sexual dimensions of black lesbians' experiences—more than I am making an assumption about her personal identifications. The body of Shockley’s work represents a brazen challenge to racism and heteropatriarchy, a challenge that is rooted in black feminist politics. Shockley’s writing was an effort to disrupt the normative patterns of the literary world. While some black writers like Frank Lamont Phillips dismissed Shockley’s writing for being structurally unsound, denigrating to black men and generally lacking in literary merit, and others in the literary establishment ignored her presence as an author, a small but loyal handful of writers that include SDiane Bogus, Rita B.Dandridge, Trimika C. Melancon, and Kai

⁶⁵ Private conversation with Naomi Extra, 2020.

M. Green have been serious proponents of Shockley's work and have labored to bring her visibility and recognition. Shockley's "difference" as a writer cleared a pathway for more mainstream black feminist writers like Alice Walker and decades later, Terri McMillan who depicted black women's sexual pleasure decades later.

In this chapter I emphasize the power of Shockley as a writer who entered into the literary arena and asserted that the experiences of black lesbians were valuable and worthy of literary attention. In many ways, Shockley's work is best understood in terms of what Robin D.G. Kelly has referred to as "freedom dreams" which, in essence, demands that we think about liberation struggles not only in terms of how successful they are but based on "the merits or power of the vision themselves."⁶⁶ In other words, to see Shockley's work as a sex-positive black feminist and as a black woman writer more broadly, calls for a radical shift in literary criticism from a reading practice rooted in literary mastery to one based on creative vision, effort, and the forging of new possibilities.

⁶⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), ix.

SDiane Bogus: Soul Music, Sexual Awakening, & Black Feminist Literary Community-Making

In 1973, when SDiane Bogus was twenty-seven years old, she attentively listened as Aretha Franklin belted out the sensual lyrics to the song, “Master of Eyes (The Deepness of Your Eyes):” “the look in your eyes baby just turns me on, so inviting to me you know I feel that they’re my home.”¹ A long-time fan of the Queen of Soul, Bogus had developed a relationship with Franklin that reached beyond the realm of entertainment into the spiritual bond of sisterhood. The singer’s voice had been with her through some of her most challenging periods—the death of her mother in 1960 and in the immediate aftermath of the sexual abuse she endured as a child. When Bogus heard Franklin sing the lyrics of “Master of Eyes,” she felt she knew the singer intimately enough to know not just what she was singing about but also who she was singing to. “I think she has a woman lover,” she wrote in her journal. “She does something to my soul when she sings it.”² She noted an indescribable “something” rooted in the realm of spirit and affect. This “something” of her experience allowed her to make meaning of the singer’s intimate life (“I think she has a woman lover”) that connected Bogus to her in ways that were necessary for her survival as a black girl and later as a woman.³

Literary scholar, Emily Lordi has described the dynamic interplay between writers and music artists in her analysis of the relationship between singer Aretha Franklin and poet Nikki Giovanni. Lordi described Nikki Giovanni’s connection to Aretha Franklin in the 1970s as one based on mutual support and connection. Lordi wrote, “Giovanni does not so much frame Frank-

¹ SDiane Bogus, personal diary, 1973, Box 34, SDiane Bogus Papers, The Schomburg Center, New York, New York.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

lin as a muse or model for her poetry as she backs Franklin up by underscoring the nuance and force of her music.”⁴ Lordi places Franklin within “a *tradition* of women singing to other women that stretches back to the advice songs of Bessie Smith.”⁵ While Bogus came nowhere near the scale of Giovanni’s popularity and success as a poet in the 1970s, what Lordi notes as a mutual backing up between Franklin and Giovanni speaks to much broader implications of the affective power of black women and soul.

In chapter two I introduced soul work as a methodological approach to reading and researching black women’s history based on cumulative effort. As a mode of consuming, producing and analyzing art in conversation with other black women, soul work is grounded in the interconnectedness of black women’s labor. In this chapter, I extend the thread of soul work to think about the the “something” that Aretha Franklin’s music did to SDiane Bogus’ soul, how she transformed this “something” into sexual knowledge as a girl and during the early stages of her writing career and then used this knowledge to forge her own career and to support the careers of other black feminist writers like Red Jordan Arobateau and Ann Allen Shockley.

The first part of this chapter focuses on Bogus’ childhood sexual awakening and education through soul music which, I argue, sets the stage for her later work. Then, I turn to her writing in the 1970s to explore the ways in which soul music and to a lesser extent blues, becomes a way for her to engage with black sexual politics, black power, and civil rights. The final section of the chapter focuses on Bogus’ s work in the 1980s as a scholar and fiction writer. Throughout the span of her career covered in this chapter, Bogus’ consciousness developed through soul mu-

⁴ Emily Lordi. *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 174.

⁵ Lordi, 207.

sic drives her work and the types of connections that she forges with other black women and queer writers.

Like the other two writers I focus on in this dissertation, Ann Allen Shockley and Red Jordan Arobateau, Bogus struggled to be recognized by readers and members of the literary establishment. Born in Chicago in 1946, Bogus spent much of her professional life straddling the line of scholar, creative writer, and spiritual coach. Educational opportunities brought her to different locations in the United States like Alabama for undergraduate studies, New York for her masters degree, Ohio for her doctoral studies, and California for her work as a college professor. The politics of the 1960s and 70s—the quest for civil rights, gay liberation, and women’s rights—shaped her deeply as a writer and thinker. At the same time, soul music was a touchstone that she would return to throughout her childhood into her adult years; it played a critical role in her sexual and political consciousness. Bogus documented her personal experiences through a number of methods—journaling, newsletter writing, academic scholarship, poetry, and essays—and took care to make sure that this writing was preserved in the historical archive. As a teen, she drafted poems on her life in notebooks and in her diary, she kept meticulous notes on sexual experiences, desires, music, and her professional dreams.

Recent scholarship in black girlhood studies urges readers to look to black girls as a way to understand freedom, black politics, and black world-making. Aimee Cox’s work, for example, is concerned with the movement of black girls “outside of normatively scripted models of self-improvement and social mobility.”⁶ She suggests that we can arrive at a deeper understanding of black girl world-making by paying attention to “the ways young black women move through and

⁶ Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 31.

write their own words.”⁷ Likewise, in the book *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, historian Lakeisha Simmons draws from the words of black women and girls from Louisiana in oral history interviews in order to show the simultaneous sense of agency and constriction that black girls navigated in Jim Crow New Orleans.⁸ Marcia Chatelain also centers the experiences of black girls in her book *Southside Girls* where she shows how the stories of black girls in Chicago in the early twentieth century offer insight into major shifts in black politics, culture and economics.⁹

Ruth Nicole Brown points out that “[envisioning] Black girlhood critically among and with Black girls” is a methodological practice.¹⁰ Brown is not only interested in the stories of black girls but also the ways in which they create spaces of possibility for one another. To root one’s methodological practice in listening to and between the words of black girls is to assume that black girls are credible knowers. In this chapter, I listen attentively to both Bogus and to those that she listened to. A significant portion of this chapter is spent on conveying the sonic and sexual landscape that Bogus encountered as a black girl in order to engage ways of thinking about sex-positive black feminism beyond the category of woman. I consider the histories of and ways of thinking about black girlhood that scholars like Simmons, Brown, Chatelain, Cox, and others have introduced as an invitation to think expansively about sex-positive black feminism as a consciousness that can germinate in childhood. Often, in scholarship on gendered experiences,

⁷ Cox, 30.

⁸ LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁹ Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 1 .

childhood and adulthood are theorized separately. Here, I consider black womanhood and girlhood as categories that shape and inform one another.

I integrate biographical elements of Bogus' life—as a black girl and woman—as a way to not only understand the what of her work as a sex-positive black feminist writer but also the *how* and to some degree, the *why*. Considering the details of Bogus' life, alongside her work as a writer and the various contexts that she lived through offers the potential to more deeply grasp the conditions through which sex-positive black feminism emerged in the 1970s. I use the term “soul work” to refer to the combined sense of care and connection that informed Bogus' creative and intellectual work but also as a consumer of soul music, and as the founder of the woman centered literary press, *Woman in the Moon*. In this chapter, I am interested in how multiple dimensions of Bogus' being—as a black girl growing up in Chicago and Birmingham, a consumer of soul music in the 1960s and 70s, and as the survivor of childhood sexual abuse—informed her as a poet, writer and sex-positive black feminist. The inclusion of details about Bogus' life allows for deeper insight into the ways in which black women and girls engaged with sex and sex-positivity.

As poet and scholar, Kevin Young, has noted: “Soul music insists on community, one filled with calls that you could respond to.”¹¹ In this chapter, I explore the ways in which black women and girls shared and produced sexual knowledge through listening and responding to each other through art. Aretha Franklin is not a central character in this chapter, however, at several junctures I tend closely to the forceful spirit she, as well as other black women singers, had in informing Bogus' work as a sex-positive black feminist. I argue that SDiane Bogus' writing

¹¹ Kevin A. Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012).

and work as a publisher exists among multiple strategies that black feminists used to assert sexual agency. While black and white women in the 1970s fiercely advocated for their right to bodily control, the voices of singers like Aretha Franklin offered a different kind of sexual possibility. For Bogus, specifically, Franklin offered a pathway toward transcending trauma and regaining a sense of sexual dignity. Bogus' encounters with soul music as a young woman laid a critical foundation for the practice of care or having each other's backs that is inherent in her sex-positive black feminist writing.

Soul Music & the Sonic-Sexual Geographies of Black Girlhood

In 1962 when Bogus was sixteen and living in Birmingham, Alabama, she joked about a quibble between her two friends, Anthony and Dot who were intimately involved with each other. She wrote, "Dear Diary, Anthony and Dot made up, besides, she let him have some. (Heh! Heh! You know) Boy! When she told me about it, I cracked up..."¹² This short passage animates the spirit of sisterhood, excitement and black girl joy involved in the exchange of sexual information. In the diary entry, Bogus swiftly transitions from writing about the sexual experience of two friends to casual concerns over her own sexual life and the potential consequences of having cheated on her boyfriend, Booker. "You know, diary if I'm pregnant and have to leave school Booker will be so hurt and let down. I've been thinking about telling him what I've done."¹³ Here, the tone changes drastically from pleasure to concern. Her next thoughts were of wanting to leave the south and the presence of a new popular dance, "The Twist." "The Twist," popularized in the late 1950s by R&B singer Chubby Checker, involved the sexually suggestive gesture

¹² SDiane Bogus, personal diary, 1973, Box 34, SDiane Bogus Papers, The Schomburg Center.

¹³ Bogus, box 34.

of moving, twisting or gyrating one's hips. The dance was exciting for many girls like Bogus because it created an opportunity for shared and safe sexual expression.

While Bogus was gaining information about sex through her interactions with other girls, the topic of female sexual behaviour had reached a national stage. In the 1950s and 60s, across the the country, young white women and girls were openly talking to researchers and sex professionals about their feelings toward and their behaviors related to sex.¹⁴ “It was practically impossible to live in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s without having some kind of reaction to the publication of Kinsey’s notorious reports,” notes historian Amanda Littauer.¹⁵ Sexologist, Alfred Kinsey published two reports during this time, one focused on the sexual behaviors of men in 1948 and another on women in 1956. At the same time, in certain parts of the country, girls were beginning to learn about sex at school. In the 1960s, more assertive attempts were made to teach young people about not only sex as biology but also about family planning. Sex education curricula at this time often sought to reinforce gender norms and heterosexuality. Educators “wanted to strengthen nuclear families and channel young people’s sexual thoughts and energies into the institution of marriage.”¹⁶

Black women and girls, in particular, were left out of larger mainstream conversations on sex. In Kinsey’s 1953 report on female sexuality, he excluded black women from his data and findings. In the 1960s and the decades to follow, mainstream conversations in the African American community on sex were dominated by black male experts like Robert B. Staples and Calvin

¹⁴ Amanda H. Littauer, *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Littauer, 87.

¹⁶ Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 101, muse.jhu.edu/book/18522.

Hernton who consistently argued that the sexual revolution had "bypassed blacks" and that homosexuality was significantly more prevalent among whites than blacks. These sexual narratives stood alongside the vibrant conversations on sex that black girls were having among each other, and the wide range of sexual messaging in black popular culture.¹⁷ Black girls learned to develop alternative spaces beyond the purview of male experts, parents, and teachers where they could exchange sexual knowledge.

Alongside detailing snapshots of her social life, Bogus' diary was a space where she processed the world. Across the lined pages, Bogus' created a handwritten inventory of dozens of songs released in the early 1960s. This list which included songs like "Lipstick Traces" by the O'Jays, "Turn On Your Love Light" by Bobby Blue Bland, and "Playboy" by the Marvelettes, offers a soundtrack to accompany her creative writing produced during and about the 1960s. These lists of pop songs alongside her inner rumination help us to understand the way in which Bogus and other black girls may have been able to, as Bobo states, "create meaning from a mainstream text and use the reconstructed meaning to empower themselves and their social group."¹⁸ Music was a critical aspect of her world-making and sexual consciousness-building experience.

Bogus' writing was influenced by and in conversation with a plethora of black soul singers of the 1970s. The buzz of black sexual transgressiveness in music television, radio and in film was contagious. In 1962, when Bogus was nineteen years old, she wrote in her diary about black transgender soul singer Jackie Shane who beamed through radio air waves and en-

¹⁷ Still, public silence on black girls and sex did not prevent black girls from seeking knowledge on the topic. Kim Gallon notes that in the 1920s and 30s, black girls turned to newspaper for advice on romance and sexual intimacy.

¹⁸ "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers" in *The Black Studies Reader*, edited by Jacqueline Bobo, et al., Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, 179, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=198588>.

livened her sense of possibility.¹⁹ In the song “Any Other Way,” Shane sang proudly and defiantly about the joy that comes from loving who you are: “Tell her that I’m happy. Tell her that I’m gay. Tell her that I wouldn’t have it any other way.”²⁰ SDiane Bogus transitioned into young adulthood at a time when Shane reigned openly and uncompromisingly as a black trans woman. Shane’s music was part of Bogus’ sonic landscape of support and sexual knowledge exchange.

Beyond the sheer content of the song’s message, “Any Other Way” delivers a message of possibility of *another* way of being in the world. Read within the context of the racial and sexual oppression of the 1960s that included the targeting of LGBTQ and black communities by police, the song was undeniably subversive. Enforcement of the three-article rule (which required that queer and gender non conforming people wear at least three articles of clothing aligned with their gender assigned at birth), sodomy laws and street harassment were among the ways in which queer bodies were vulnerable to violence and aggressive policing. At the same time, in the early 1960s African American’s struggle for civil rights continued and was made legible through sit-ins and other acts of resistance across the country. Jackie Shane’s song “Any Other Way” can be read as inviting a sense of solidarity and support to other black queer folks who desired a more sexually liberated existence. Throughout the 1960s, Shane was a model for young black queer kids like Bogus who lived or aspired to live outside of dominant gender norms.

In addition to the music of Jackie Shane, Bogus bounced along to the beats of Martha and the Vandellas as they sang “Heatwave” in 1963. Wearing a slightly above the knee form fitting

¹⁹ SDiane Bogus, personal diary, 1962, Box 34, SDiane Bogus Papers, Schomburg Center.

²⁰ Documents detailing when this song was originally recorded and release are challenging to trace. From what I have been able to gather, Jackie Shane released the single “Any Other Way” (written by her) in 1963. It was later re-released in 1967 on the album *Jack Shane Live* (Caravan, vinyl). There have been several reissues of her work that include the song since its original release, including the 2017 album titled *Any Other Way*.

pencil shaped dresses, they sang: “Whenever I’m with him/**Something inside/Starts to burning/ And I’m filled with desire/Could it be a devil in me/Or is this the way love’s supposed to be?”**²¹ The all girl R&B group embodied a kind of everyday black girl pleasure and sexual desire that resonated with young women across the nation. As a black girl growing up in Chicago in the 1950s, the music spoke to her feelings of sexual and romantic experiences and longings. Literary scholar Lindon Barrett has noted that “The cultural site of the singing voice provides the ground for intimate acts of self-definition and for forging of reasoned relations to the world.”²² **In the case of Bogus, it was not through the act of singing but that of listening to black women singer that she forged “reasoned relations with the world”²³ and [subverted] symbolic, legal, material, and imaginative economies to which we are most usually denied access.”**²⁴

Bogus’ world also included sisterly advice from The Marvelettes whose music spoke relatably to teen girls in desire of romantic and sexual attention. For example, in the song “I Think I Can Change You” (1962) lead singer Gladys Horton narrates feelings about a love interest who was “mean and evil” and has broken the hearts of several girls but whom she believes she can change despite the advice of her friends.²⁵ The song carries multiple and sometimes contrasting layers of meaning. In its opening it establishes black girls as producers of knowledge through lines like “My friends tell me through their experiences/I oughta learn.”²⁶ These lines position

²¹ “Heatwave” was originally released in 1963 by Martha and the Vandellas on Motown. Since the original release, there have been multiple reissues.

²² Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59

²³ Barrett, 59.

²⁴ Barrett, 57.

²⁵ The Marvelettes, “I Think I Can Change You” by William Robinson Jr. (Smokey Robinson), released in 1962, track A5 on *Playboy*, Motown, vinyl.

²⁶ Ibid.

black girls as both carriers and disseminators of sexual and romantic knowledge. The “You” is a collective you that refers to young black men and boys and calls out their transgressions. Horton sings, “You took Mary and you broke her heart” followed by “You don’t get along with none of your girls/You always fuss and fight.”²⁷ Despite these flaws, the narrator repeats the refrain, “I think I can change you,” a striking challenge to the common sense of the song’s message. Toward the end of the song, she sings “I may not be so wise/But still there’s something you can learn from me.”²⁸ This line punctuates the song’s larger message on the immature nature of teenage desire while also demanding that the thoughts and experiences of black girls be taken seriously.

The Marvelettes also warned girls to “Watch out!” for boys who would take advantage of them in the song “Playboy” (1962) on the album of the same title.²⁹ In “Playboy,” the two backup singers become more than vehicles of call and response that drive the song forward, they function as a squad or crew of black women who firmly reinforce lead singer, Gladys Horton’s, protective messaging. The song builds as the backup singers drive home the need for girls to exercise caution when dating. Horton’s voice strikes a tone of guttural assertiveness about three quarters of the way into the tune when she directly addresses male playboys. She sings, “Well, you ain’t saying nothing in my book/‘Cause this is one fish you’ll never ever hook/You left the others standing with their hearts in pain/And now you’re coming ‘round tryin’ to do me the

²⁷ The Marvelettes, “I Think I Can Change You” by William Robinson Jr. (Smokey Robinson), released in 1962, track A5 on *Playboy*, Motown, vinyl.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The Marvelettes, “Playboy” by John Holland, Gladys Horton, Robert Bateman, William Stevenson released in 1962, track A1 on *Playboy*, Motown, vinyl.

same.”³⁰ These lines reveal a knowledgeable speaker who has experience with “playboys” and can offer not only sisterly advice to black girl listeners but also models a way in which black girls can call out playboys for the harm they cause.

Soul music provided Bogus with access to varied perspectives on love, romance and sexual intimacy. Throughout the late 1950s into the 60s, she listened as thousands of young Americans swiveled their hips to Chubby Checker’s hit song “Do the Twist.” Bogus bore witness to the careening voice of heartthrob, Paul Anka as he sang lines like “kiss me warm and tender dear” and “take my lips, take my arms, they belong to you” in his 1962 song, “Love Me Warm and Tender.” While the lyrics of many of these songs were centered on romantic love, the timbre of their voices communicated feelings of sexual titillation and desire. Male singers whimpered lyrics about being broken hearted or their inconsolable longing for love. They also articulated a distinctly patriarchal sense of sexual relations that was centered on male pleasure. These kinds of songs that advised black women and girls to be cautious in how they navigated their romantic lives or that familiarized them with the experience of being in love sat alongside the many soul hits sung by men in the early 1960s.

The Marvelettes’ staunch call for young girls to “watch out” for young men and boys who could take advantage of them occupied the same musical landscape and was in conversation with the music of male soul singers who transmitted their own sexual messaging through song. Male singers like Ray Charles, for example, sang lyrics like “when she gives you her kiss, Her heart, and soul, are pining” followed by the responsive hum and moan of black women back up singers,

³⁰ Ibid.

black teen girls like Bogus negotiated the politics of sexual exchange.³¹ The sisterly wisdom of black women soul singers allowed young black women like Bogus a means to access the pleasure of erotic interaction while also accounting for the possibility of danger.

This warning to watch out for male predators was echoed through the voice of Bogus' mother. In the first thirteen years of her life Bogus moved between cities in the south and mid-west where she lived with various family members. This was likely a strategic move orchestrated by Bogus' mother in order to protect her from the sexually predatory behavior of her father. Sending girls away was a way for families to quietly deal with sexual abuse or violence in the home. Between 1953 and 1955, Bogus lived in Birmingham with her grandmother and aunt. In 1959, shortly before her mother's death and around the time that Bogus pressed charges against her father, Bogus lived in Cleveland, Ohio. All the while, Bogus kept a steady record of her feelings, events in her life, and music she listened to in her diary. She also began to experiment with form; some of her diary entries began to take the shape of poems. At the age of ten Bogus wrote her first poems and also began to explore feelings of lesbian desire.

In an unpublished essay written in the late 1980s Bogus looked back on her childhood and the silence around sex in her home. "[My mother] hardly spoke to me about sex except to say, "watch what you do with those boys, you're a woman now and "Baby, don't never let no nigger beat on you, when he raise a hand to you, them's your walking papers."³² Bogus' mother's instruction to "watch what you do with those boys" was an obscure message about sex.³³ What

³¹ Ray Charles, "Jack, She's On the Ball," released in 1961, track B1 on *The Original Ray Charles*, Hollywood Records, vinyl.

³² S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 28 (folder 4), "To Die on the Fourth of July: My Mother's Death as Metaphor for My Life." Schomburg Center.

³³ Ibid.

kinds of sexual activities and situations were permissible and what kinds was she to avoid? The statement "you're a woman now" suggests that what Bogus' mother was concerned about was not sexual purity but pregnancy. While these comments may not have helped Bogus to build a strong foundation of sexual knowledge, they demonstrate a desire to teach Bogus how to protect herself from physical and sexual violence while not completely discouraging her from seeking out the pleasures of sexual intimacy and romance. Bogus' life trajectory, from black girl to black woman, must be read within this framework of sexual pleasure and danger that Bogus' mother articulates.

As a young girl, Bogus was simultaneously sexually curious about and vulnerable to the unwanted touches of men. In addition to the sexual trauma that she faced at home, in her social life she was exposed to a culture of rape and sexual violence. In one diary entry she casually glossed over rumors of girlfriends who had been raped and personal testimony of experiences of sexual assault and harassment. While racialized sexual violence and sexual scandal garnered the attention of black newspapers and organizations like the NAACP in the 1950s and 60s, less seen and discussed was the sexual danger that black women and girls faced from men within their own families and communities.³⁴ As historian Danielle McGuire has noted, organizations like the NAACP largely organized around consensus issues in the African American community—intraracial violence in the 1950s was not one of these issues.³⁵ The very existence of this testimony describing sexual violence among peers in Bogus' diary suggests that these events

³⁴ See Kim Gallon's *Pleasure in the News: African American Readership and Sexuality in the Black Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020) for more on scandal in black newspapers.

³⁵ See Danielle L. McGuire's book *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

were impactful and that early on she desired to process and document acts of sexual violence and injustice even if those acts were not fully understood.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Bogus fell between the dark cracks of cultural silence around rape and sexual violence to which black girls were especially vulnerable. Throughout her childhood and adult years, Bogus held quietly onto the trauma of long-term childhood sexual abuse with few avenues of recourse for the physical and emotional violence that was inflicted upon her. For many years, Bogus' mother tried to protect her from her father's advances but was unsuccessful at putting an end to the abuse. Finally, when Bogus was twelve or thirteen, her mother supported her in pressing criminal charges against her father. However, at some point in the legal process, Bogus' mother convinced her to revoke all accusations of abuse against her father leaving him free to return to their home. Several years later, when Bogus' mother passed away from cancer in 1960, she requested that Bogus be sent to Birmingham where she would be far beyond her father's reach. She ended up living with her aunt and uncle in Alabama for ten years.³⁶ It was there that she came of age as a young black queer woman and, through soul music, began to orient as a sex-positive black feminist.

In the South, Bogus got an intimate glimpse of traditional heterosexual marriage relationships and was introduced to a strict code of respectable female behavior. In her diary, she wrote: "Before I'd been there a month, I'd learned that I wasn't to going to be allowed to hang out after the street lights came on; I was going to church every Sunday; I would not be allowed to see boys or entertain them, and I was expected to do a number of significant chores, attend school

³⁶ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 28 (folder 4), "To Die on the Fourth of July: My Mother's Death as Metaphor for My Life." Schomburg Center.

and excel. I was given few choices.”³⁷ For Bogus, protection came at a cost. While she had managed to escape the abuse of her father, she found herself under the tightly watchful eye of her aunt and uncle. Bogus challenged the thick veneer of respectability imposed on her by relatives and through cultural messaging by maintaining a lively private life of leisure and dating. Like many teenagers, for SDiane Bogus, friendship was the center of her universe and so was pleasure and sexual exploration. Bogus and her small crew of girlfriends dated boys and also experimented with same-sex romantic relationships.

Bogus was particularly touched by the music of Aretha Franklin, through Franklin’s voice she could imagine a world in which women’s rights, civil rights and gay rights shared equally prominent space in the struggle for black liberation. The breadth of emotional and sonic registers in Franklin’s music forged a space of possibility and self-making for a young SDiane Bogus. Daphne Brooks writes that Franklin taught black girls “about the preciousness of our emotions, our inner worlds and desires. She dared to voice and make public the nuanced, emotionally heterogeneous interiority of black womanhood, becoming a conduit for articulating the beauty and sensuousness, the rage and the despair, the sadness as well as the joy of black life transduced through African American female musicianship.”³⁸

Between the notes of the lamentful gospel infused ballad “Dark End of the Street” (1970), there was room to imagine the pain of forbidden lesbian love. “At the dark end of the street, that’s where we always meet. Hiding in shadows where we don’t belong, living in darkness

³⁷ Personal diary of Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers,” Schomburg Center.

³⁸ Daphne Brooks, “Drenched in glory: how Aretha gave voice to embattled black women – and transformed a nation,” *The Guardian*, Published August 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/aug/17/drenched-in-glory-how-aretha-gave-voice-to-embattled-black-women-and-transformed-a-nation>.

to hide our wrong.”³⁹ On that same album entitled *This Girl's in Love with You*, Franklin conveyed feelings of loneliness and despair. In the tune “It Ain’t Fair,” the absence of a specified “it” that Franklin acknowledged as “aint fair” allowed listeners like SDiane Bogus to draw from both the intimate details of their personal lives and the rich sensual timbre of Franklin’s voice in order to construct a narrative that made sense to the world around them.

In another unpublished essay written in the 1990s entitled “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Bogus reflected on the impact of Franklin’s music over the course of her life. She wrote,

[Franklin’s] vocals from ‘It Won’t Be Long’ to ‘Spirit in the Dark,’ carried me through the roughest and finest times in my life. From the childhood agony of my mother’s death through the pain of alienation from my Northern family and friends in 1960, to the graduation party from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a backwater city in the perverse South, Aretha’s now famous music found me, and turned the inner chaos of my longing and sadness, my hopes and dreams into a spiraling whirlpool where every emotion swirled in a bearable continuum from song to song, line to line without interruption.⁴⁰

Bogus’ affection for Aretha Franklin, in particular, may have also stemmed from the overlap in their lives. Both women had strong roots in the black church and were, like many girls, sexually curious as teenagers. Both women also lost their mothers at a young age. Bogus’s mother passed away when she was fourteen from cancer. Franklin’s mother moved far from her, to Buffalo, when Franklin was six years old and then passed away in 1952, when she was ten. Reportedly, Franklin had two children while still a teenager and was rumored to have experienced sexual abuse as a young girl.⁴¹ Bogus connected deeply with the soulful lyrics and energy of Aretha

³⁹ Aretha Franklin, “Jack, Dark End of the Street,” released in 1970, *This Girl's in Love with You*, vinyl.

⁴⁰ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 32 (folder 10), “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Schomburg Center.

⁴¹ The age at which Franklin was when she had her two children has been reported by several media sources but not confirmed by Franklin herself.

Franklin who she referred to in the essay as an “African American spiritual sister,” “a soul sister,” and as a “soulmate.”⁴²

In “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Bogus cites Franklin as critical in her spiritual development. Franklin released the songs “It Won’t Be Long” and “Spirit in the Dark” in 1961 and 1970, respectively. In the essay Bogus recalls hearing Franklin sing “It Won’t Be Long” when she was fourteen. Bogus wrote, “I knew that in her she had a soulmate, a distant but potent medium for the feelings I had.”⁴³ “It Won’t Be Long,” with its foot stomping church shouts and song lyrics peppered with sexual innuendo, expresses the excitement of a young woman in anticipation of being reunited with her lover. The bends, twists, and vocal gyrations of Franklin’s voice in the song also captures the spirit of sexual longing. When Franklin sang “Mmm, and I’m so excited/My knees are shaking, yeah/Mr. Engineer/Don’t you keep me waiting,” she locates a sense of longing and desire in the body. She follows these lines with a climactic flurry of the directive “hurry!” repeated over and over again before returning to the melody.

E. Patrick Johnson has argued that in the song “Spirit in the Dark,” Franklin “uses the sacred notion of ‘spirit’ as a metaphor for sexual fantasy.”⁴⁴ For Johnson, in uniting the sacred with the secular, the song allows for the body and soul to occupy shared space. The song opens with Franklin’s testimony of her own corporeal sensation, she sings, “I’m getting the spirit/in the

⁴² S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 32 (folder 10), “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Schomburg Center.

⁴³ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 32 (folder 10), “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Schomburg Center.

⁴⁴ E. Patrick Johnson, “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 399-416. Accessed January 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3299441.

dark.”⁴⁵ She is accompanied by black women background singers who respond to her testimony with a series of affirmative *Mmhmmms*. Franklin then sends an invitation to her listeners to join in expressing their experiences of corporeal and spiritual sensation. She sings, “Tell me sister, how do you feel/Tell me my brother, how do you feel.”⁴⁶ Like “It Won’t Be Long,” the song is imbued with layers of sexual meaning and invites listeners to draw from multiple texts—gospel, black religiosity, rituals of black girl play, the secular sound of soul music. The sacred gospel sounds of the church are offset by Franklin’s multiple sonic gestures towards corporeal pleasure and sexual titillation.

Johnson points to Franklin’s insertion of the nursery rhyme character, Sally Walker whom she encourages to “ride” the spirit in the dark as an example of the ways in which Franklin embedded sexual innuendo into her music. Franklin’s lines referencing Sally Walker hail the agential and energetic bodies of black girls playing hand games or double dutch beyond the purview of male or adult control. Kyra Gaunt uses the term “kinetic orality” to describe the coordinated word and movement play in which black girls creatively engage.⁴⁷ She describes it as “the social training ground upon which girls create a background of relatedness to one another; performances of race, ethnicity, and gender are embodied through song, chant, and percussive movement.”⁴⁸ Franklin’s riff on the lyrical and structural dynamics of black girls’ play invited black

⁴⁵ Aretha Franklin, “Spirit in the Dark,” released in 1970, B side, on *Spirit in the Dark*, Columbia, vinyl.

⁴⁶ Aretha Franklin, “Spirit in the Dark,” released in 1970, B side, on *Spirit in the Dark*, Columbia, vinyl.

⁴⁷ Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 3, muse.jhu.edu/book/7808.

⁴⁸ Gaunt, 3.

girls like Bogus to locate themselves within the song. It was also a way for Franklin to position herself as part of a community of black women and girls.

Bogus wrote, “I only knew that whatever I considered heaven to be, Aretha’s voice took me there; there was something in it that was also in me.”⁴⁹ In Bogus’ essay “Spirit in the Dark,” she described the essay itself as an exercise akin to soul work—a process of connecting or “bridging” personal knowledge and experience with the needs of one’s community. Bogus’ relationship with Aretha Franklin offers a way of understanding soul beyond the heteronormative readings of the genre’s aesthetic. Through the music of Aretha Franklin “black bodies in motion conjure and inspire not only a ‘holy’ spirit, but a sensual and sexual one as well.”⁵⁰ Soul music offered teen Bogus information, lessons, a sense self-possession and safer access to more mature experiences.

Over the course of several decades, Bogus maintained a relationship with the singer based on spiritual healing and a sense of mutual survivorship.⁵¹ As Bogus put it, Franklin’s music transformed personal struggle into a “bearable continuum.”⁵² While it is clear from Bogus’ diaries and other writings that Aretha Franklin had a strong impact on her sense of self as a girl, the

⁴⁹ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 32 (folder 10), “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Schomburg Center.

⁵⁰ E. Patrick Johnson, “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998), 402, accessed January 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3299441.

⁵¹ Emily Lordi offers an apt analysis of the performances of black women soul singers in which she offers an explanation to how black consumers, especially women and girls may have internalized singers like Aretha Franklin and Nina Simone. Lordi argues that Franklin, Simone and Lorde “enact the soul narrative...of turning struggle into stylized survivorship.” (57)

⁵² S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 32 (folder 10), “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Schomburg Center.

essay “Spirit in the Dark” also reflects the ways in which Bogus’ attachment to Franklin was rooted in nostalgia.⁵³ Her connection to the singer traverses time and and place.

With respect to the musical performances of Aretha Franklin, Emily Lordi has noted that soul music created a space in which black women and girls could experience sexual desire together. The music was also a likely intermediary for Bogus that stood between the rigidity of her religious upbringing, her history of sexual trauma, the loss of her mother at a young age, and her desire to experiment with love and intimacy as a young woman. During these moments of pain and trauma, the voices and lyrics of black women soul singers and soul music more broadly, offered her the opportunity to imagine the boundaries of her emotional and sexual landscape on her own terms.

Listening to and watching singers like Aretha Franklin, Jackie Shane, Sam Cooke, and Chubby Checker undoubtedly shaped Bogus’ consciousness as a budding writer and helped her to navigate the religious conservatism of her life in the South. She wrote, “Even before the death of my mother, in the early Chicago days of my youth, my soul longed for a touch of Spirit. I knew this because at nine or ten, I often found myself standing in the evenings before a statue of the Virgin Mary.”⁵⁴ Bogus continued, “There before the raised altar and stair to the inner sanctum, her statue stood hands outstretched to me and me alone in the empty sanctuary of St Clair Catholic Church where I stood sereptitiously lighting candles for I-don’t-know-who.”⁵⁵ Soul mu-

⁵³ Badia Ahad-Legardy describes afro-nostalgia as “a critical site of black memory.” She “[puts] forth afro-nostalgia as a framework in which to analyze the seeming dissonant concepts of historical memory, blackness, affect, joy, and thriving.” See *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture*. 1 ed., (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 4.

⁵⁴ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 32 (folder 10), “Spirit in the Dark: Aretha As Spirit Guide,” Schomburg Center.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

sic, with one foot in the church and another in the speakeasy, allowed black girls like Bogus to reconcile the sounds of black religiosity with sensuality and titillation. It was a way for black women and girls to be a part of an imaginary community that could be embodied through collective listening, feeling, dancing, and singing along to lyrics.

Bogus' early poetic writings reflected her formation as a soul worker. During her late teens years while living in the south with her grandparents, she wrote poems in her diary of love, loss, and longing. In one poem she described feelings of romantic desire for a former school teacher. She wrote, "I like the way you walk by,/The way you held your head up high,/Letting your hair toss and fly/While I look on and quietly sigh."⁵⁶ In another poem, she confessed to succumbing to "sin" and temptation and pleaded for forgiveness. "Long has my life been wasted by sin, needless sin. I want it no more. Never have I been as meek as I am now. Hear me oh Lord, my heart is changed."⁵⁷ Various diary entries of this nature document not only a desire to reconcile the spiritual with the sexual in lived experience but also on the page. Through writing, Bogus found a way to locate herself amid the sexually transgressive messaging of soul music and the religious ideology of the black church.

Soul Work as Black Feminist Literary Practice

In the late 1960s, Bogus wrote a series of poems that would make up her first two poetry collections and reflected the the range of her political life. *I'm Off to See the Goddamn Wizard, Alright!* (1971) and *Woman in the Moon* (1975) explore the intersection of black respectability

⁵⁶ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, box 29 (folders 3-4), 1961-64, Schomburg Center.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

politics, black power, sexual pleasure, and black feminism. In *I'm Off to See Bogus* joined black nationalist discourse that sought to unleash a fierce critique of culture as a site of white supremacy. The title of the collection likely references the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, featuring Judy Garland who serves as a vessel for messaging on gender roles and white femininity. For Bogus, the wizard also represents the ways in which racist ideology exceeds the logic of time and space. She wrote, "The wizard, who kept me from loving myself and my people, did so by filling my head, from childhood, with fantasies."⁵⁸ The book is an attempt to reconstruct and reclaim memory, history, and black culture. It is also indicative of her early investments in and desire to engage with black power and the Black Arts Movement on her own terms.

Like the work of black female contemporaries like Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni, Bogus wrote to incite black pride and, as Giovanni phrases it in the title of her 1968 poetry collection, to center "black feeling, black talk."⁵⁹ Giovanni's collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, provides useful context. In the poem, "Seduction," for example, Giovanni deviates from the militant tone that appears in some of her other poems and centers black female pleasure. In the poem, she describes a sensual encounter that involves the narrator licking, undressing, and seducing his or her narrator's lover. Like Giovanni, Bogus articulates an alternative engagement with black power that rests on intimacy. In Bogus' poem "Poeting and Things OR (Why Revolution is Necessary)" the narrator expresses an alternate form of revolutionary engagement. She writes, "I try to include my poetings poetthings/(that will warm my sisters hearts/soothe their hurtings)."⁶⁰ The

⁵⁸ See the preface of *I'm off to see the goddamn wizard, alright! : a collection of first poems for black people, and those whom it may concern* by S. Diane Bogus, (1971).

⁵⁹ Nikki Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement*, (New York: W. Morrow, 1970), 38.

⁶⁰ S. Diane Bogus, *I'm Off to See the Goddamn Wizard, Alright! : A Collection of First Poems for Black People, and Those Whom it May Concern* by S. Diane Bogus, (1971), 61.

poem makes a shift to broader political goals in lines where the narrator expresses a desire to “[soothe, love, and strengthen] the Black Nation, awaken those who are sleeping and keep those who are awake vigilant.”⁶¹ These lines reveal the call that black women writers, artists and activists faced to simultaneously express solidarity with “the Black Nation” and their “sisters” in their work.⁶²

In a 1977 essay that Bogus wrote on the soul group The Stylistics, she described soul music as an affective balm to the tumultuousness of the 1960s. She wrote: “There could be no doubt that we were entitled to go to our respective corners and listen to music. After all, we had just suffered through sit-ins, lay-downs, boycotts, and bus rides.”⁶³ In her writing published in the 1960s and 70s, Bogus explored Franklin’s music as a critical framework for understanding her social and political landscape. In the poem “Franklin on U.S. History,” Bogus revealed the impact that Aretha Franklin had in shaping her worldview through the use of samples from Franklin’s songs in order to articulate the shaky political landscape of the 1960s.

Franklin on U.S. History

Aretha churchlessly womanned a Columbia ship

And sang to her mate “Love

Is the only thing

That matters at all...”

And an echo of herself reverberated—

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ S.Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Round 2: The Stylistics,” published in AIM, 1977.

“It Ain’t

Necessarily So”

While poli-ticked, payola proved, po-leased

And Kennedy relieved Ike/all this

Before Panther hate, and Malcolm late...

From sea to shining sea

Reet looked for America singling “I wonder

Where you are tonight”...

I’m Laughing

And an echo of herself reverbated—

On the Outside

While Johnson got ready to cover for Kennedy,

And later Johnson covered for Johnson/all this

Before Kings death and cigarettes’ danger to

health

At the New York Continent of Atlantic, Reet

Donned debutant gray album said: *Aretha*

Arrives but we cried “Ninety-six

Tears”

For what was there to reverberate?

Then King was killed

And Kennedy-2 was stilled/all this

Before we decided to kill/spill,

really feel

So, Aretha encouraged us as we were

“Going Down Slow.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript,” box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

Building on the work of Lindon Barrett, in the article "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality," Farah Griffin argues that "the black woman's voice can be called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one."⁶⁵ She continues to state that "For black Americans, black women's singing has articulated our most heartfelt political, social, spiritual, and romantic longings and in so doing has given us a sense of ourselves as a people beyond the confines of our oppression."⁶⁶ The title of the poem, "Franklin on U.S. History" positions the black woman singer as a knowledgeable and authoritative voice who uses her music in order to relay ideas about politics and history. The poem opens with the evocative line "Aretha churchlessly womanned a Columbia ship." Her use of the metaphor of boarding a ship in order to describe Franklin signing on to Columbia Records in 1961 where she released her first album, *Aretha*, ties the singer into a history of enslavement and racial oppression. However, instead of being exploited by the ship, Bogus describes Franklin as having "womanned" it. Through the transformation of the word "woman" from noun to verb, Bogus portrays Franklin as an artistic agent who made intentional professional choices and moved listeners.

Bogus ends the poem with "Going Down Slow," a line from a tune sung by Franklin on the 1967 album *Aretha Arrives*. While the song's instrumentals are typical of soul infused blues tunes that Franklin became known for in the 1960s and 70s, the song's lyrics shock as they capture the narrator's feelings of imminent death. They detail the wishes of a physically ill narrator

⁶⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality." In *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by O'Meally Robert G., Edwards Brent Hayes, and Griffin Farah Jasmine, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 104, accessed August 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/omeal2350.8>.

⁶⁶ Griffin, 120.

who feels she has reached the end of her life. Throughout the song she requests that someone call her father and inform him of his daughter's condition. Read together, these last two lines of the poems allude to Aretha Franklin as soul worker. Bogus frames American political life ("Aretha encouraged us as we were") as America was "Going down slow" in face of political crisis.

In "Poem for Aretha" (1971), Nikki Giovanni notes Franklin's position as soul worker and herself, engages with soul work. She opens with a slow and dramatic gospel organ introduction of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."⁶⁷ This initial placement of narrative within narrative firmly locates Franklin within the gospel tradition. Giovanni enters with the affirmative: "Cause nobody deals with Aretha, a mother with four children having to hit the road."⁶⁸ As Giovanni continues to recite the poem, she exposes the danger of Franklin's iconicity in rendering her in a position beyond human need and desire. She asks listeners to consider Franklin's state of physical and emotional feeling as she travels on the road for many weeks at a time performing in front of audiences who ravenously consume her artistic output.

"Poem for Aretha" and "Aretha Franklin on U.S. History" are examples of care and recognition among black women. Giovanni peels through the layers of celebrity glamour to address or "deal with" the daily strains of Aretha as *sista*.⁶⁹ This impulse to "deal with Aretha" was one that was shared by Bogus and led her to not only deal with Franklin but also her community and herself. In "Aretha Franklin on U.S. History," Bogus highlighted the emotional labor that permeated her music in the form of "encouragement," support, or healing. As Daphne Brooks

⁶⁷ Nikki Giovanni, "Poem for Aretha, released in 1971, on *The Truth Is On Its Way*, Nikki Giovanni and the New York Community Choir, Right-On Records.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Nikki Giovanni, "Poem for Aretha, released in 1971, on *The Truth Is On Its Way*, Nikki Giovanni and the New York Community Choir, Right-On Records.

has noted, Franklin “called on listeners to respond to her immanent humanity and to, in turn, discover their own.”⁷⁰ Bogus was a part of this chain of call and response, as a listener and then later as producer of her own soul affirming art.

Bogus’ 1969 poem “A Poem For Martin Luther King” called upon the erotic as a critical dimension of black liberation. “i try/i feel/Like I want to/Make gentle love to the world,” the narrator declared in the poem’s opening.⁷¹ The poem functions more as a bridge, connecting seemingly disparate aspects of black life—sexual desire and political longing. When Bogus wrote: I try/i feel/Like I am growing hot to/Move in/revolutionary Coitus with the World/(orgy if possible),” she urged her readers to consider black political work as embodied, intimate, and cooperative—as soul work.⁷²

Kevin Young argues that the “dominant mode of the soul era is metonymy, a word or phrase standing in for something else.”⁷³ He continues: “In the case of soul, from Mayfield to Franklin, sexual and romantic freedom stands in for a broader one; relationships and situations, while seemingly those of love, are actually bigger.”⁷⁴ While metonymy is certainly present in Bogus’ work, sexual desire can be read as more than merely a stand in for black political desire. In the poem, Bogus reminds us of the primacy of sexual desire and intimate touch in the black freedom struggle. The poem was a brave and radical move at a time when black liberation was

⁷⁰ Daphne Brooks, “Drenched in glory: how Aretha gave voice to embattled black women – and transformed a nation,” *The Guardian*, Published August 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/aug/17/drenched-in-glory-how-aretha-gave-voice-to-embattled-black-women-and-transformed-a-nation>.

⁷¹ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript,” box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012), 253

⁷⁴ Young, 253.

envisioned through the predominantly masculinist and heterosexist lens of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She writes,

I try/i feel

Like I am growing hot to

Move in revolutionary Coitus with the World

(orgy if possible)

But

“They’ are

o/so/moral/frigid/pure (even)

demi virgins

I try/i feel

Like humping in sensual militance with the World

But

“they’ fear

Impregnation. The contraceptive

Is integration

a never to be Love-Child⁷⁵

⁷⁵ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript,” box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

In “A Poem for Martin Luther King,” Bogus turned to the erotics of communal desire. The poem evokes the corporeality of the political march as one that requires individuals to consent to entering their bodies into both space and motion with one another. The erotics of community stresses the necessity of bodies and collective desire in revolution. Bogus uses the metaphor of the “orgy” in order to describe the political body as one that is intimately and complexly entangled. In contrast to the “orgy,” she uses the notion of frigidity, a term that connotes corporeal unresponsiveness and the absence of desire, to articulate how the “they” of the poem (which she instructs us to read as white people in the preface of the book) resists social change.

The poem envisions the black freedom struggle as more than a fight for rights and recognition, it also foregrounds a social and structural crisis of intimacy that was in need of address. Throughout the 1960s, anti-miscegenation laws remained in place, policing the intimate lives of Americans. It was not until the *Loving vs Virginia* case in 1967 that these laws were struck down. Even then, it was a slow movement towards progress. Interracial dating and marriage remained taboo and those who engaged in it were subject to possible violence and ridicule. As Angela Davis has noted, dating back to slavery, sexual sovereignty has been a major site of political struggle for black Americans.⁷⁶ At the same time, the 1960s was a decade of intensified black resistance—sit-ins, various uprisings, the rise and fall of black male leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the founding of social justice groups like SNCC and the Black Panther Party and the passage of civil rights legislation. Bogus’ decision to address the social and sexual dimensions of racial oppression as intertwined informs another layer of soul work present

⁷⁶ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript,” box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

in “A Poem for Martin Luther King.” Although she did not use the term, through her work Bogus was declaring that the personal was political to black people as well.⁷⁷

Bogus was aware of the risk she faced by producing art that challenged the status quo of black political resistance at the time by introducing intimacy and sexual desire as a major site of black struggle. She later wrote that “A Poem for Martin Luther King” “scandalized the good Negroes and short circuited [her] career as ‘appropriate Negro poetess.’”⁷⁸ Bogus pushed the boundaries of appropriateness by articulating a tension between intimate desire and social control. She suggested that white fear of interracial intimacy (social or sexual) was a barrier to social justice and that integration was an ineffective solution to the problem. In the poem, Bogus drew insights on the ways in which the nation’s racial anxieties were tied to sex.

In the early 1970s, Bogus moved back to her hometown of Chicago after having completed a masters degree in English at Syracuse University and having spent some time in Alabama teaching at the private historically black, Miles College. Bogus’ return to Chicago came out of necessity. While teaching at the college, Bogus had developed a romantic relationship with one of her students. While it was not uncommon or unheard of for male faculty to date or even marry their female students and this was often done without the threat of disciplinary action, for Bogus the consequences were severe. As a black woman involved in a same sex romantic relationship with a student, Bogus faced immediate dismissal. She returned to her hometown of Chicago with her lover and former student, Ruth, and began teaching at a public school.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

When she arrived, the city was bubbling with political activity—in addition to women’s liberation, black liberation, gay liberation movement and anti war protest groups had all emerged. In particular, the University of Chicago had become a breeding ground for social justice activism. Renown black lesbian activist, E. Kitch Childs had recently completed a doctorate at the University of Chicago in 1969 and became a founding member of the university’s Gay Liberation Movement. Childs along with black lesbian activist, Vernita Gray, were active and instrumental in the formation of the Chicago Lesbian Liberation (CLL). The CLL had gone through several incarnations since its inception in 1969. The group emerged as an outgrowth of Chicago’s first direct action gay liberation group, Chicago's Gay Liberation Front (CGL), founded by Michelle Brody and Henry Weimhoff in 1969. The GLF had an active alliance with several groups including the Black Panthers.⁷⁹ The group created spaces of interracial mingling, activism, and pleasure. Using university space, the GFL organized a dance in 1970 that brought together hundreds of young gays and lesbians.⁸⁰

In 1970, the Women’s Caucus of the CGL formed in order to address issues of race and gender that many felt were being ignored within the larger group. Eventually, the Women’s Caucus became its own entity which was referred to as “Monday Night Meetings.” At the close of the 1960s, “Monday Night Meetings” emerged as a regular space for lesbian community building. The meetings would often begin in someone’s home and then would move to a bar where women would dance and socialize. In the early 1970s, the CLL was one of the first spaces where Bogus came into consciousness as a black feminist poet, writer and activist.

⁷⁹ See Timothy Stewart-Winter's *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), accessed August 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19705rc>.

⁸⁰ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript,” box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

In 1970, Bogus stood before an interracial group of radical lesbians at a CLL meeting where she performed one of her earliest political poems entitled “Ruth Rev.” Named after her lover, the poem spoke to some of the cross-cutting issues tied to African Americans engagement with black power. In the poem, the speaker mocks what he/she perceives as shallow black posturing. Bogus writes: “Since it has become fashionable/To wear a caducei/(sickle cell-sick equals blackness known).” Bogus described the poem as an attempt to “capture the spirit of the revolutionary sixties in the posture of a black lesbian militant” and as a “statement” to her “lesbian partner at the time who was a zealot and not a lover.”⁸¹ Bogus’ description of the poem also captures the danger of a black liberation project that does not actively seek to dismantle sexism, patriarchy, homophobia and misogyny. Bogus disrupted any notion that blackness can be made legible solely through a single unifying series of acts and visual markers (speech, fashion, visual culture etc).

The lines “You must get yourself a plaster cast:/It’ll keep your fist permanently raised” suggests a performative and disingenuous engagement with black power. Here, Bogus refers to the signifying black fist as a symbol that has the potential to make black politics accessible to the larger community and she also argues against the calcification of blackness into a series of ornaments and gestures. The narrator continues to address Ruth by saying: “And R.R., in time of disgust,/Disillusionment, and depression,/Please find the nearest weakling/To subdue with your awareness arrogance.”⁸² Bogus challenged the accepted tactics used to disseminate black power ideology to the masses by highlighting its aggressive and violently reductive aspects.

⁸¹ Letter written by S. Diane Bogus in 2000, Diane Bogus Papers, Schomburg Center.

⁸² S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, “Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript,” box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

Bogus' relationship with Ruth and other women lovers was part of a process of sexual and emotional self-discovery that ran parallel and intersected with her growing consciousness as a black feminist poet and writer in the 1970s. Her poetry and other writings reflected an intense desire to move through the world as a sexual agent and transcend the sexual trauma of her youth and the larger scale sexual oppression of women. While Bogus did not formally position herself as a sex-positive or pro-sex feminist, her work as a poet and writer suggests an alternative way that black feminists participated in the struggle for sexual freedom in the 1970s.

Ed Pavlic has described "soul in music" as an aesthetic that "often subtly, connects different registers of experience in ways held separate by modern/contemporary expectations." He writes, "soul music allowed people to explore and express the full spectrum of their relationships to each other in the language of personal devotion as part of a righteous collective."⁸³ The poem "Mayree" published in 1976, is another example of how Bogus positioned sex and pleasure as part of the black freedom struggle. In it, she called upon the repetition and forward impulse of the blues form in order to articulate the individual and collective registers of black experience. She uses blues as a grounding aesthetic that allows for the exchange between an "our" and a "her" in the poem. At the center of the poem is Mayree who represents a liberated black female sexuality. Mayree is "Silk-stockings, T-strap, spiked-heeled" and "Doing exactly what she please to feel."⁸⁴ Despite the poem's assertion of Mayree as a force of both self and community design

⁸³ Ed Pavlic, "Aretha Franklin's Soul," published in the Boston Review, last modified April 19, 2019, <http://boston-review.net/literature-culture/ed-pavlic-aretha-franklin-amazing-grace>

⁸⁴ S. Diane Bogus, S. Diane Bogus Papers, "Bogus Greatest Hits Manuscript," box 27 (folder 11), Schomburg Center.

(“It took years to make our stout, blues Mama, Mayree) who explodes space with her “switching, bitching, belly booty-bumping.”⁸⁵

The poem begins and ends with the admission that Mayree has disappeared. The narrator asks: “Have you seen her?”⁸⁶ The repetition of this refrain throughout the poem urges the reader to consider the absence of black female sexual power. In addition to her robust sexuality and her position of power and visibility as “the biggest woman in the crowd,” Mayree is also “soul-saving.”⁸⁷ She is a valuable and needed part of the black community that the poem’s narrator seeks to locate and resurrect.

Women in the Moon Press: Building Space for Writers on the Margins

As a budding young writer, Bogus navigated a landscape of regionally formed black literary cliques, cohorts, and collectives. She longed for access to more elite literary spaces and to the writers she admired. In a letter to Gwendolyn Brooks dated 1971, she candidly wrote: “I have no judge of my work. I have no one whom I can turn to as a critic.”⁸⁸ Throughout much of her career, Bogus yearned for and actively sought out community. She wrote to writers like Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, James Baldwin, and Alex Haley to request mentorship, advice, and critique of her work but was unable to find the kind of sustained support that she desired.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Letter from S. Diane Bogus to Gwendolyn Brooks, 1971, S. Diane Bogus Papers, Schomburg Center.

In the 1960s, cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Newark were major leading scenes of black artistic and political activity. In Bogus' hometown of Chicago, Third World Press and the Organization for Black American Culture (OBAC) formed in 1967. Just a few years earlier, Broadside Press emerged in Detroit. In New York City Umbra was founded by Tom Dent, On Guard for Freedom was formed Calvin Hicks, and the Harlem Writers Guild formed in the early 1960s. While many of these groups and collectives were rich spaces of interdisciplinary and interracial artistic collaboration, they also grew out of a deliberate effort to counter the absence and exclusion of black voices in mainstream publishing. Reflecting back on a conversation with white writer Seymour Krim on the challenges faced by black writers, Umbra collective member Tom Dent wrote:

The Krim discussion and the little we knew of the publishing scene made us, either consciously or subconsciously, aware of the reality that if we wanted to publish, we had to publish ourselves. The surfacing of one black writer at a time in the white literary world, like a long chain of single black voices, was not an acceptable situation.⁸⁹

The black arts and civil rights movements were important backdrops that not only informed Bogus' work but also the opportunities available to her as a writer. Literary critics such as Carmen Phelps and Cherisse Pollard note that black women poets are not central figures in many of the most popular anthologies produced by black men of the black arts movement (BAM). About the widely referenced anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*

⁸⁹ Tom Dent, "Umbra Days," *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 3 (1980): 105-08, accessed May 4, 2021, doi:10.2307/3041660.

(1968) edited by LeRoi Jones' and Larry Neal, Pollard writes, "Under the control of black male editors, black women's poetry is over- shadowed by black manhood in this anthology."⁹⁰

Black women were also rarely reflected in the BAM leadership and have been neglected in its history. Phelps writes, "Despite the participation of some of the most prolific women writers, artists, and activists of this period, including Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Mari Evans, Audre Lorde, and June Jordan (some of whom did not define themselves as 'black artists'), male artists and intellectuals are given credit for shaping and codifying the aesthetic and political ideologies of the BAM."⁹¹ Histories of the black literary and artistic collectives of the early 1960s are often told from the voices and perspectives of the black men who led and participated in these groups. Writers like Naomi Madgett Long, for example, who created the Boone House group in Detroit, a space where black poets could commune, remains largely overshadowed by the contributions of her black male counterparts.

In A Black Arts Poetry Machine: Amiri Baraka and the Umbra Poets, David Grundy lists a set of mainly black male writers as exemplary of the period. Black women writers are nebulously identified as a parenthetical. At the end of the list he adds "(This list is by no means exhaustive)" which reads as the means through which Grundy attempts to absolve himself of any potential erasure.⁹² In addition to the scholarship that narrowly defines participants of BAM, black male writers who belonged to the movement—Tom Dent, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Ishmael

⁹⁰ Cherise A. Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

⁹¹ Carmen Phelps, "Mirrors of Deception: Visualizing Blackness in the Poetry of Chicago Black Artist Johari Amini," *African American Review*, 44.4 (Winter 2011): 687-692.

⁹² David Grundy, *A Black Arts Poetry Machine: Amiri Baraka and the Umbra Poets* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5649580>. Created from nyulibrary-ebooks on 2021-04-10 14:17:47.

Reed, Amiri Baraka, and others—have left an authoritative imprint on the period. They have done this in part through their published writing about the BAM but also through their work as editors and curators. Scholars have challenged the erasure and marginalization of black women writers in histories of the black arts movement by paying special attention to those beyond the purview of mainstream accolade.

In the 1960s and 70s, Bogus not only stood against the sexism that was inherent in many black literary spaces, she also faced the challenge of her relative outsider status as a non member of any existing collective or circle of black writers. Bogus was not only on the social margins, she was geographically as well. While, as mentioned, there were indeed robust black literary communities, groups, and collectives in cities across the country, New York was often perceived as the major literary center in the 1960s. Of the most noted black literary spaces that formed in the early 60s—Umbra, On Guard for Freedom, In/Formation, The Black Arts Repertory Theatre—The Harlem Writers Guild was a space in which many black women writers in particular flourished.⁹³ Maya Angelou, for example, moved to New York City in the 1960s and joined the Guild. Other Members included writers like Louise Meriweather, Rosa Guy, Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, Sarah Wright, Alice Childress and Audre Lorde. In a PBS interview Louise Meriweather stated: “People ask what was going on. We were just writing, trying to get our work written and published. Then you come to the group, and what you want is the criticism and the

⁹³ There has been an emphasis in the historical scholarship on literary collectives led by and mostly comprised of black men. Collectives like the Jemima Writers Collective and later Salsa Soul Sisters, both of which were based in New York City were active in the 1970s as well.

criticism is always constructive."⁹⁴ As a writer based outside of New York City based writer, the kind of literary community that Meriweather described was scarcely available to Bogus.

Regardless of spaces like Umbra which were more inclusive of Black women poets and writers, many still struggled to get their work published through mainstream presses and in anthologies and publications associated with the BAM. Alexis Pauline Gumbs has noted some of the challenges that Audre Lorde faced while working to get her manuscript published in the early 1970s. Gumbs writes:

When Audre Lorde first tried to publish "Love Poem" in her 1973 collection *From a Land Where Other People Live*, her editor Dudley Randall said there was something wrong with the pronouns. "When I entered *her*?" He didn't know what to do with that. According to biographer Alexis DeVeaux, his editorial feedback was that the feminine pronouns might confuse the reader. Hmm. Was it the pronouns, or the "lance of tongues on the tips of her breasts..." that made Randall suggest a complete revision?

Sometimes it comes down to the pronouns, but this was not one of those times.

In reality the poem was too clear, too brave, too lesbian and too queer for the context that sought to constrain it.⁹⁵

Nikki Giovanni ended up self-publishing much of her early work and in 1970 she founded her own press, Nik Tom, Ltd, so that she could have a clear and uncompromising pathway towards sharing her work with the world. "No one was much interested in a Black girl writing what was called "militant" poetry.⁹⁶ I thought of it as good poetry but we all have our own ideas. Since no

⁹⁴ "Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise, Harlem Writers Guild," PBS Learning Media, accessed on August 6, 2021, <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ang17.ela.harlem-writers-guild/maya-angelou-and-still-i-rise-harlem-writers-guild/>.

⁹⁵ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Love Poem Legacies: Activating Collective Erotic Power in the Name of the Lorde" published in *The Feminist Wire*, February 21, 2014, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/02/love-poem-legacies-activating-collective-erotic-power-in-the-name-of-the-lorde/>.

⁹⁶ Author website, Nikki Giovanni, accessed on August 6, 2021, <https://nikki-giovanni.com/biography/#mainContent:~:text=No%20one%20was%20much%20interested%20in,company%20and%20published%20myself.%20%20That>

one wanted to publish me I formed a company and published myself,” she wrote.⁹⁷ It was through Giovanni’s dedication to amplifying the work of other black women poets during this period that Bogus achieved one of her earliest major publication opportunities. In 1970, Bogus was included in Giovanni’s privately published anthology *Night Comes Softly: An Anthology of Black Female Voices*. In addition to Nikki Giovanni’s Nik Tom Ltd, Sonia Sanchez also had a stint running her own press in the early 1970s as well.

By the late 1970s, both Sanchez’s and Giovanni’s presses had dissolved and they gained in literary celebrity. Bogus, however, continued to struggle to attract the attention of mainstream presses and publications. In 1979, Bogus founded the literary press Woman in the Moon (WIM) where she published a wide range of texts written by her and other writers and included a robust collection of erotic literature. Red Jordan Arobateau and Ann Allen Shockley were part of a network of sex-positive black feminists that Bogus worked to promote in the 1980s and 1990s through WIM. Broadly, she sought to publish the work of “those who have been oppressed in this culture — gay people, women, prisoners, and African Americans.”⁹⁸

In an article by Noreen C. Barnes published in the Bay Area Reporter, Barnes wrote: “Bogus refers to this publication and promotion of the work of other poets as an ‘extension of my own poetics — they speak for me, too.’”⁹⁹ Barnes continues to assert that “Central to Bogus’ publication of poets is not only furthering the career of established poets but also encouraging

⁹⁷ Author website, Nikki Giovanni, accessed on August 6, 2021, <https://nikki-giovanni.com/biography/#mainContent:~:text=No%20one%20was%20much%20interested%20in,company%20and%20published%20myself.%20%20That.>

⁹⁸ S. Diane Bogus Papers, Schomburg Center.

⁹⁹ Article written by Noreen C. Barnes, published in the Bay Area Reporter Arts and Entertainment, Volume XXII No. 25, June 25, 1992, S. Diane Bogus Papers, Schomburg, Center.

new poets.” Barnes cites Bogus’ *The Poet’s Workbook*, which was “full of advice and exercises” aimed at “those who have a serious interest in getting their work out,” as an example of one of the ways in which Bogus used the press to support other writers.¹⁰⁰ Through her small team, Bogus often offered extensive feedback to writers who submitted work for publication detailing the reasons why a piece may or may not have been a good fit for the press.

What made WIM distinct from other women’s presses formed in the 1970s and early 80s like Sinister Wisdom, Conditions, and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was its commitment to not only writers from marginalized backgrounds but also to cultivating space for marginalized writing. Bogus described the press “as a vehicle for people who find it hard to place their work. We are here for them.”¹⁰¹ This can be seen through WIM’s practice of offering lengthy feedback to writers on their submitted work as part of the rejection process but also in terms of who they actively sought to publish. Kitchen Table Press, founded a year after WIM, defined itself as “both an activist and a literary publisher; we are committed to producing work of high artistic quality that simultaneously contributes to the liberation of women of color and of all people.”¹⁰² In contrast, on behalf of WIM, Bogus stated: “We accept work from any artist who is not biased toward gays or blacks.”¹⁰³ The press took a more inclusive approach to publishing that deviated from most presses of the time. With an understanding of the essential role that reviews play in the life of a book, WIM “guaranteed” reviews to writers for a \$20 reading fee. The decision to offer re-

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ S. Diane Bogus, *The Spirit of Woman in the Moon*, Fall 1993, S. Diane Bogus Papers, Schomburg Center.

¹⁰² Barbara Smith, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10, no. 3 (1989): 12, accessed August 6, 2021, doi:10.2307/3346433.

¹⁰³ S. Diane Bogus Papers, Schomburg Center.

views for a fee offered Bogus an avenue for accruing funds to support her press and also gave authors the opportunity to have their work engaged with in a meaningful way.

Coterminously, in the 1980s Bogus also pursued doctoral studies in the English department at Miami University in Ohio. Her dissertation focused on the work of Shockley from 1945 to 1982. She describes Shockley as “an author not yet well known enough for her contribution to the literature of this century.”¹⁰⁴ By offering close readings of several of Shockley’s fictive works including *Loving Her*, Bogus names the heterosexist workings of the literary world. As one of few long form academic sources that are available on Shockley, Bogus’ dissertation is an effort to carve space for Shockley and her black lesbian centered work within literary discourse. Without Bogus’ dissertation, much of the information in this chapter would be missing. Bogus’ decision to write a dissertation on Shockley, especially one that integrates personal interviews, indicates a desire not only to highlight Shockley’s literary contributions but also to connect with her personally. This, I argue, is evidence of the ways in which soul work as ethos was interwoven throughout Bogus’ life. While seemingly disparate activities, her engagement with soul music a teen and young adult, poetic writing, doctoral dissertation on Shockley, and her work as publisher encompass a black feminist sexual consciousness-building effort rooted in community.

¹⁰⁴ SDiane Bogus. “Theme and Portraiture in the Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley.” (dissertation, Miami University, 1988).

Red Jordan Arobateau: Sex-Positive Black Feminism & Raunch Aesthetics in Street Lit

To a large extent, therefore, what are constituted as black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by and within poor and working class communities, where women historically have not had the means or access to publish such written texts.

- Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Women*

History books tell us a lot about the lives of upper-class women such as Gertie Stein and Alice B. but very little of the underprivileged lesbian factory workers, queer servants, and tranny seamstresses. There's a whole group of dikes to whom these characters, these books appeal. Some of these dikes are sex workers. Some are street dikes are outlaws; they have never been spoken to in literature, and the lack of self-esteem which goes along with being ignored causes some to end up in prisons, mental institutions, and other places they don't want to be because they feel like nobody—like shit.

- Red Jordan Arobateau in *Lesbian Review of Books* Spring 1996

Needless to say, I am vindicated by sex-positive activism. Nothing I have written is so heavy-duty that someone else hasn't said it even more heavily. I've finally, found my time and place through all the heartaches. As it says in the Bible, "If you have light, don't hide it under a bushel—let it shine!" I'm glad for having put my foot through that doorway back in 1975!

- Red Jordan Arobateau in "They Say I Write Sex for Money" (1996)

In the summer of 1967 Red Jordan Arobateau, a twenty-four year old butch lesbian packed two suitcases, a guitar, and an unfinished manuscript and headed west, to San Francisco. Arobateau arrived in San Francisco with little money in his pocket and virtually no friends or family in the city.¹ For several years leading up to the move, he had been traveling between his hometown of Chicago and New York. In the late 1950s and 60s, Chicago was not a city where he could fully be free.² Queer Chicagoans lived precarious lives under the repressive anti gay and anti black policing of Mayor Daly who was notorious for using bar raids and street harassment as tactics to control the gay community. Because of this, Arobateau made frequent trips to New

¹ Red Jordan Arobateau (writer) in discussion with Naomi Extra, June 2018.

² Ibid.

York City where he could pursue female lovers and queer connection under a lower climate of surveillance.

Like many of the young people who fled to San Francisco in 67', Arobateau was driven by a sense of possibility. When the movement for free love began in 1967, San Francisco developed a reputation as a haven for queer and gender non conforming people. Arobateau quickly packed his bags and got on a plane. That summer, when thousands of young people from across the United States flooded San Francisco in search of sexual freedom, he became part of a youth migration into the city. San Francisco promised to be a place where Arobateau could find freedom as an artist and as a queer person of color.

Shortly after arriving in San Francisco, Arobateau met a woman who invited her to a feminist consciousness-raising group meeting in Berkeley.³ At these meetings he sat and ate while he listened to mainly middle and upper class women as they talked about issues on their mind. Some women talked about the gender pay gap, others complained about their male spouses' inability to satisfy them sexually or spoke about their sexuality.⁴ These spaces, a source of intellectual stimulation and intrigue, contributed to Arobateau's creativity. In his first and perhaps best known book, *The Bars Across Heaven* (1975), Arobateau's main protagonist, Flip, regularly attends feminist consciousness raising meetings in Berkeley. At the same time, Flip also has a lively connection to street life which mirrors aspects of Arobateau's life. In the late 1960s, at the same time as Arobateau entered into feminist consciousness raising spaces, he also spent time on the streets socializing and sometimes being intimately involved with sex workers.⁵ The feminist

³ Red Jordan Arobateau (writer) in discussion with Naomi Extra, June 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

movement of the late 1960s and 70s deeply informed his consciousness as a writer but his work was also shaped by a proto sex-positive black feminist consciousness that grew from his attraction to street life.

Red Jordan Arobateau was born in 1943 on the southside of Chicago, Illinois to Theodore Wilfred Robateau and Jane Ella Wilkerson. Arobateau's mother and maternal grandparents were educated and upwardly mobile African Americans. Elmer Wilkerson, Arobateau's grandfather, studied engineering at Tuskegee University and worked at a steel mill. His mother was a light-skinned black woman who was college educated and worked as a school teacher for a period of time. Arobateau struggled to make sense of his mother's internalized colorism and his light-skinned complexion. When he was seven, Arobateau's mother began to exhibit signs of schizophrenia leading to a turbulent home life and to difficulty in school. Despite living a relatively economically stable black middle class life, in his teen years he began living on the streets and dressing publicly in more masculine attire. At the age of thirteen, he ran away from home and immersed himself in beat culture in Chicago. He began writing poems, painting and frequenting gay bars and eventually dropped out of high school. At some point, ostensibly in his teens or early twenties, he adopted the name Red, likely a reference to his light-skinned complexion.

Arobateau's early life experiences greatly shaped the trajectory of his literary career and became part of the narrative he shared about himself publicly. He struggled with feelings of outsidership because of his light complexion which at times made him racially ambiguous. In his work, there were striking resonances between his novels and his life. Some of his characters were biracial and, too, struggled with feelings of racial non belonging. Arobateau used the technique of mixing fact and fiction termed as biomythography by black feminist poet and activist,

Audre Lorde in 1982. Rosamund Marie Lewis describes biomythography as “a black feminist literary practice that deliberately refutes canonical notions of a ‘purity of form’ and objectivity in order to instead reaffirm a radical tradition of black and / or lesbian feminist women’s writing.”⁶ She considers it as part of an “intertextual and collectivist movement.”⁷ In the tradition of early urban fiction writers, Arobateau began his career as a novelist by writing about the raw details of his life. In *Ho Stroll* and *The Bars*, he mixes autobiographical and fictive elements—a literary technique that in the 1980s, nearly a decade later, Audre Lorde would term biomythography. These novels animated the material reality of queer and trans folks living on the streets. They were also a means to make his desires legible within a cultural landscape that rendered him invisible. For these reasons, careful consideration of his life lends itself to greater understanding of his politics and his formation as writer.

The 1970s was a period of intense social and cultural change that touched almost all corners of American life. In 1966 and 1970, Masters and Johnson introduced studies that revealed American men and women’s sexual desires to be more fluid than imagined. White feminists like Betty Dodson encouraged women to take control of their pleasure in her seminal essay “Liberating Masturbation” (1972). In black culture, singers like Betty Davis and groups like Labelle sang about female sexual agency and the need for social change. The black power movement had also permeated through American culture and was reflected in dress, style, politics, and music.⁸ By the 1960s and 70s crime fiction and blaxploitation cinema had also forcefully entered into main-

⁶ Rosamund Marie Lewis, “Biomythographical Tradition and Resistant Subjectivities in Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*” (dissertation, Durham University, 2016), 4, accessed on July 26, 2021, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11737/1/RML_Amend_July_16-Zami_Edited_Final_V6_RML_final_edit_.pdf?DDD11+

⁷ Lewis, 4.

⁸ See *Liberated Threads : Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (2015) by Tanisha C. Ford.

stream culture. Cultural historian, Donald Bogle wrote, “No other period in black movie history, however, has been quite so energetic or important as the 1970s.”⁹

Black crime fiction, while immensely popular in the 1970s, was contested within the black community. The genre deviated from the imagery of racial uplift and respectability that had shaped the civil rights era. It was sexually explicit, often centered violence and crime and retribution for racial injustice and inequality. It was amidst this explosion in cultural and political activity that Arobateau attempted to carve a space to flourish as a black lesbian street lit writer. In San Francisco, Arobateau constructed a network of queer and trans writers, artists, feminists, and friends who not only became his support system but were also integral in the publication and circulation of sex-positive writing by women and queer folks of color. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, Arobateau became known in underground queer and feminist circles for writing sexually explicit queer and working class centered novels and short stories.

Arobateau’s writing in the 1970s emerged from this landscape and is what we today refer to as street lit or urban fiction, a genre characterized by its attention to black urban life, blatant disregard for the conventions of western literary aesthetic and mainstream modes of distribution. Street lit, at its core, is a genre based on the rejection of literary convention and traditional modes of distribution. It discards notions of respectability by testifying on the page without concern for grammatical correctness. Street lit has and continues to live in battered notebooks, car trunks, and on street corners. As a black lesbian street lit writer, Arobateau did not fit into black feminist literary and social circles. He was also unable to find a place in the heterosexist black male dominated art produced through the Black Arts Movement, street lit, and blaxploitation film.

⁹ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films 4th ed.* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 232

Dominant histories of street lit trace its roots back to the early twentieth century with black male crime fiction writers like Rudolph Fisher, Charles R. Saunders, and Chester Himes. The commonly told master narrative describes writers like Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines as the genres founding fathers alongside the concurrent birth of street lit's sonic form--hip hop. In these histories, black women are cast as supporting actors. In this chapter, I position Arobateau as a pro-sex queer black feminist writer who challenged masculinist and heterosexist narratives in black politics and popular culture of the 1970s. Like SDiane Bogus, Arobateau's sexual consciousness was shaped by soul music. To this point, I consider the ways in which soul music, black power and black feminism are riffed on, sampled, and challenged through Arobateau's novels, *The Bars Across Heaven* and *Ho Stroll* published in 1975.

I argue, that by sampling the work of black women singers, he carved out a more expansive definition of black power and black feminist writing. He employed what today might be referred to as a proto hip hop feminist sensibility in his writing by reformatting/remixing black popular culture in terms that center black women's sexual pleasure and amplify working class black queer sexual subjectivity. In this chapter, I read these two novels as the product of a kind of intertextual sampling that draw from multiple genres, aesthetics, political movements and mediums as a way to center working class black queer sexual subjectivity. I also use sampling as a method that allows for the stitching together of seemingly disconnected or tangential strands of intellectual inquiry—biography, historical and literary analysis in order to produce meaning.

Writing Black Queer Comfort

In the late 1950s Arobateau embraced beatnik culture. He had an eclectic crew of artistic

friends with whom he discuss art and literature with and frequented gay bars in Chicago. During this time Arobateau fell in love with writing and began to attend school less. He wrote about this period in *The Big Change*, a novel that was written in 1962 and set in 1950s and 60s in Chicago follows a young white transgender woman as she works to survive street life. In the novel, the bath tub appears as a symbol of comfort and care.

The textual and thematic overlap between Arobateau's written and visual work is evident in the painting "Ho's Bath" (1969). It is a warmly colored abstract painting of a black/person of color in a white bath tub. The leisureness of the subject whose legs are extended, appears to be running a hand through his/her hair with one hand and with the other to be holding a glass of wine. The bath tub signifies a sense of domestic comfort, corporeal pleasure, and luxury. In the painting the subject's gaze is piercing and unapologetic—this same energy colors Arobateau's poetry and prose. In Arobateau's novel *The Big Change* (1976), extends the bath tub metaphor. The protagonist, Sandy-Paul, states: How I longed to rise out of a tub, rose scented! Lilac petals amidst a whirl of oils, colors, and fragrance!"¹⁰ In *The Big Change*, Arobateau riffs on "Ho's Bath," the "whirl of oils, colors" that is captured visually in his 1969 painting becomes a meaningful detail in the novel. In his novels, there is a disregard for the boundaries of genre, the conventions of language and literary respectability that is consistent throughout the body of his work. Both the painting and much of his literary work are emblematic of his consciousness as a sex-positive black feminist possibility that can be further understood by looking to his literary work.

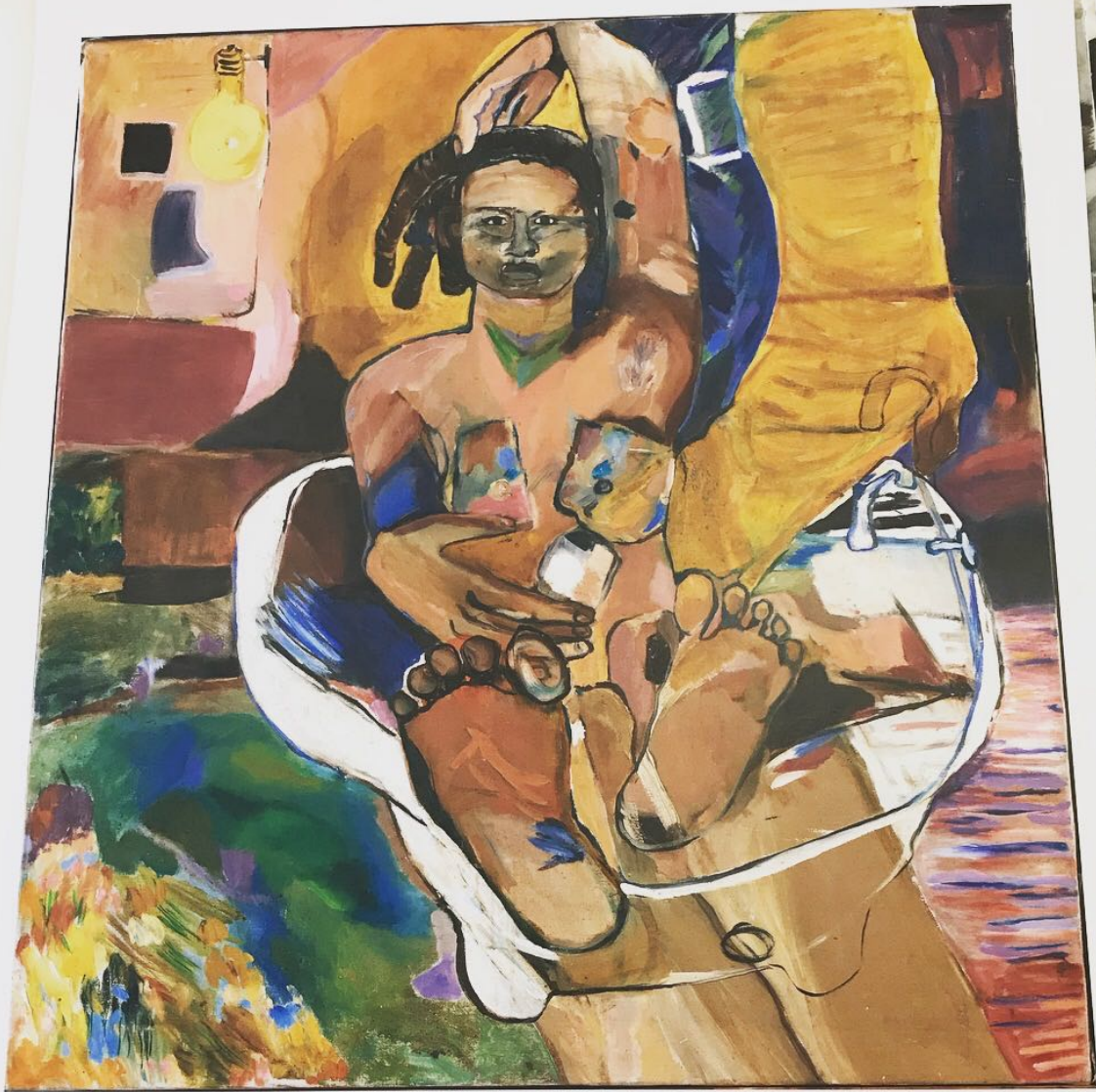
The desire for comfort in his paintings and written work articulate a sex-positive black

¹⁰ Red Jordan Arobateau, *The Big Change* (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1976), 11.

feminist consciousness that is rooted justice whereby sexual freedom is tied to material struggle. Both in his painting and in the novel, the bath tub as comfort represents a space of sexual freedom and luxury where queer and trans folks can access safety. This In *Age of Om: The Collected Poems of Red Jordan Arobateau (1957-1978)*, the poems “Scratch Out the Choice” (1967) and “Dynamites Love Lament,” Arobateau wrote about the absence of comfort as alienation and sexual longing. In “Dynamites Love Lament” he wrote,

All I want now is just a little bit of confort.
 My own apartment, bills paid,
 Some fun with the gang.
 Stay there safe, until I get sick and die.
 And get older, and older.
 But what is confort without people?¹¹

¹¹ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Age of Om: The Collected Poems of Red Jordan Arobateau (1957-1978)* (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1996), 82.



HO'S BATH
RED JORDAN AROBATEAU American (1943-)
Hoís Bath circa 1969 Oil on Canvas 36" x 24"
Artists Collection, San Francisco

His early poetry and paintings produced in the 1960s were part of a street aesthetic that emerged in the mid and early twentieth century most often noted the work of Chester Himes, Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. In street lit novels comfort is often out of the protagonist's reach. Many of the stories resolve with characters whose lives end tragically or decide to abandon street life in favor of traditional comforts (like marriage, safety and stable employment). Even when characters do not seek to escape the violence and desperation of their circumstances, comfort lingers as a state to be desired. Comfort, therefore, functions as a lens through which to understand and interpret sex-positive black feminism in Arobateau's work.

Arobateau's 1975 novel, *The Bars Across Heaven*, sets its opening scene in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood in 1967 during San Francisco's summer of love. It reads,

1967. Flowerchildren. Haight-Ashbury was in the news and San Francisco was hit by a fleet of glamorous butches. Butches who hadn't paid their dues.

Slender as reeds, they walked avenues looking for their counterparts—fems. White sneakers on their small feet. Switchblade knives in hip pockets. These homosexuals. Tough aces. Females who don't play the masculine role.

They'd come from all parts of the United States, hunted free love they'd read about. Lounged in gay bars, decked in their fine rags. Hunted fems like prey and smelled pussy in their dreams.¹²

Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Flip struggles with feelings of alienation and invisibility that she refers to in multiple ways-- as "the blues," "the pig," and as loneliness. The narrator describes her as "dying" "under her hard mask." She writes, "All I do is walk around and cry."¹³ The tragedy of Flip's emotional life in the novel is informed by both her biracial and queer identity. "Flip's appearance was a combination of images. Masculine; a woman free from traditional bonds. But some inner part was also projected. Her spirit shrank back from the roles—both femininity, or hard masculinity, like a snake."¹⁴ San Francisco's highly raced and sexed

¹² Red Jordan Arobateau, *The Bars Across Heaven*, (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), 2.

¹³ Arobateau, 5.

¹⁴ Arobateau, 4.

socio-geographical terrain is critical in defining her identity as a working class biracial lesbian as well as her chances to achieve physical and emotional intimacy. The novel's opening with the summer of love as a historical landmark, places it in conversation with and in the context of the budding sex-positivism of white hippie counterculture of the 1970s. This opening can be read as an initial intervention that works to remap the social and political spaces where black queer's women's engagement with sexual freedom occurred that period.

After this opening scene, Flip meets her friend Cleo and the two head to Berkeley where Cleo plans to sell marijuana. Arobateau describes Flip and Cleo as “butches who had no money. Who hustled other women and existed on charity.”¹⁵ Because Flip's access to wealth and resources are limited, she uses her skill as a “hustler” to construct a life that transcends survival as a mode of black life. “Her welfare income came to \$210 a month. Her rent was \$60. Eating out of breadlines and free churches, she sold her food stamps for cash. She ripped off things: clocks, coats, TV's. Money for her more expensive tastes—gasoline for her truck, women, fancy clothes and the bars.”¹⁶ The characters' reappropriation of state resources or “hustling” is a mode of resistance, an attempt to transcend the condition of survival by seeking alternative means of gaining capital. Flip declares: ‘I'm going to live like a king, even if I die! Even if I die next week, I'm going to live like a motherfucking king!’¹⁷

The defiant claim to “comfort” (referenced in the poem “Dynamites Love Lament”) or what we might today call black joy also included the fulfillment emotional and sexual intimacy. In *The Bars*, Flip resents the struggle he must endure against homophobia and sexism in society

¹⁵ Red Jordan Arobateau, *The Bars Across Heaven*, (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), 11.

¹⁶ Arobateau, 7.

¹⁷ Arobateau, 10.

in order to pursue a rich and satisfying sexual life. In one scene, Flip finds herself at a pool room in Oakland, the predominantly black neighborhood where she resides, intent on meeting a woman. Her romantic plans are shrouded by fear over her safety. “She felt she couldn’t advance, this was straight people’s territory. And in this poolroom, she was the only visible gay she saw. Fear. Fear stopped her.”¹⁸ Later in the scene, a black man approaches Flip and asks “Say, is you a man or a lady?”¹⁹ The scene ends with Flip expressing frustration and anger towards the social constraints that make it challenging for her to initiate romantic encounters as a butch lesbian.

In a later scene at a gay bar, Arobateau describes Flip’s desire for sexual intimacy with another woman using explicit language. By explicit, I am referring to the use of non obscuring language to describe sexual acts or desire. He wrote, “Deep within her chest, under her khaki shirt, lust built like a sob. Urgency was in her body. --Hot, sitting on the edge of her chair, under her green corduroy pants, in her sex, need was becoming a reality, creaming wet.”²⁰ Eventually, Flip seeks sexual gratification from Ruby, a sex worker. Arobateau describes the sexual encounter with explicit detail in a lengthy scene. He writes,

Flip moved to one side to lie next to her. Then her hands moved, embracing Ruby’s full breasts with a crablike grasp. She squeezed them, relaxing tension. Black meat between her yellow fingers. Her mouth sucked on the hard small nipples. Ruby was breathing hard, her nostrils open. Flip was loving her, fondling her sex and breasts, exposing Ruby’s own hot lust, in short breaths, panting.²¹

Ultimately, Flip finds a pathway towards sexual liberation through feminist consciousness raising group meetings where she is encouraged to “touch the feelings” inside of her. In a later scene, Flip travels to Berkeley to attend a feminist consciousness raising group where she

¹⁸ Red Jordan Arobateau, *The Bars Across Heaven*, (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), 28.

¹⁹ Arobateau, 28.

²⁰ Arobateau, 97.

²¹ Arobateau, 150.

is encouraged to “get and give strokes.”²² Her primary objective throughout the novel is the destruction of “the pig,” a voice that says “You’re a whore, a slut, a bitch!” every time you enjoy sex.”²³

At these meetings she finds the “best human contact she has ever found in her life” from “women who had touched her both mentally and soulfully.”²⁴ Flip kills “the pig” by asserting her “sex-power,” a term that riffs off of and alludes to Arobateau’s engagement with the Black Power Movement of the 1970s. *The Bars* takes place in 1967, just a year after Stokely Carmichael coined the term black power. Sex-power is a way of articulating her right as a queer black woman to the sense of affirmation and human connectedness that can come from sexual pleasure and intimacy. Sex-power captures a more expansive vision of black resistance in the 1960s and 70s that included queer people.

Titillation is a critical aspect of sex-power and Flip’s movement towards what feminist studies scholar, Mireille Miller-Young refers to as erotic sovereignty. She writes,

Erotic sovereignty is a process, rather than a completely achieved state of being, wherein sexual subjects aspire and move toward self-rule and collective affiliation and intimacy, and against the territorializing power of the disciplining state and social corpus. It is part of an ongoing process that uses radicalized sexuality to assert complex subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotype, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation of the neoliberal state.²⁵

Arobateau and other black women artists in the 1970s both participated in the process of erotic sovereignty through the cultivation of raunch. Jillian Hernandez who coined the term “raunch aesthetics” defines it as “an aesthetic, performative, and vernacular practice, an explicit mode of

²² Red Jordan Arobateau, *The Bars Across Heaven*, (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), 35.

²³ Arobateau, 82.

²⁴ Arobateau, 94.

²⁵ Mireille Miller Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 16.

sexual expression that transgresses norms of privacy and respectability. Raunch aesthetics celebrates the movements, looks, sensations, and affects of bodies.”²⁶ For Hernandez, raunch is “evocative shorthand to describe explicit, unromantic, and poor/working class sexualities.”²⁷

The Remix: Sex, Loneliness, and Soul Music

While Arobateau may have been one of very few black feminists at the forefront of the raunch aesthetic in literature in the 1970s, he was part of a larger cultural landscape of black women who assertively expressed themselves as sexual beings. Raunch was present in the sexually explicit lyrics of Betty Davis’ music and on stage performance. In both *The Bars* and *Ho Stroll* (a sequel published in 1975), Arobateau riffs off of the music of black women singers like LaBelle, Lyn Collins, Donna Summers, and Betty Davis. Arobateau’s ideas about black sexual politics and liberation were formulated in part by sampling from the lyrical energy and political consciousness of these singers and others. Flip’s call for a thriving life evokes the popular 1974 album *Nightbird* by LaBelle. The album opens with the funky soul hit “Lady Marmalade,” a song that tells the story of a New Orleans sex worker who propositions a customer for sex (“Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?”). While Arobateau only samples one song from *Nightbird*, the themes and messages relayed throughout the album are present in both novels. Like the funky and raw directness of LaBelle singers in “Lady Marmalade,” Arobateau’s characters inhabit a similarly explicitness in expressing their use of and desire for sex.

Nightbird also contains a song entitled “Are You Lonely?” which provides a rich context

²⁶ Jillian Hernandez, “Carnal Teachings: Raunch Aesthetics as Queer Feminist 20 Pedagogies in Yo! Majesty’s Hip Hop Practice,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 11 (2014), 94.

²⁷ Hernandez, 92.

for understanding Flip's ongoing struggle with loneliness in the novel as well as the larger implications of loneliness as affective response to black suffering. In the song, black loneliness is defined in terms of oppression and urban blight. Patti LaBelle sings about black despair when she delivers lines about the "tears your people cry" and "living in a city without a heart." The song continues to describe class disparity:

See the well-dressed preacher, living like a king
 Hold the unwed mother, who's afraid to scream
 See the hungry children, posing for a shot
 Hear their mothers tell them, that's all we've got
 Ain't that lonely?²⁸

Here black loneliness describes the urban decay of the 1970s that was seen in cities across the country where black and brown people were neglected by the government. Jill Stauffer coined the term ethical loneliness, which she describes as

"a condition undergone by persons who have been unjustly treated and dehumanized by human beings and political structures, who emerge from that injustice only to find the surrounding world will not or can not properly hear their testimony—their claims about what they have suffered and what is now owed them—on their terms. So ethical loneliness is the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard."²⁹

In *The Bars* Arobateau theorizes loneliness through the voice of Flip who expresses the ways in which to be black, queer and working poor is to live a constant state of loneliness. In *The Bars*, Arobateau's notion of black loneliness is expansive, it captures the experience of collective queer isolation and sexual oppression as well as the personal experience of shyness and being biracial. He wrote, "1968. A lesbian. I walked these street with no culture behind me to back

²⁸ Labelle (Patti Labelle, Nona Hendryx, Sarah Dash), "Are You Lonely," by Nona Hendryx, recorded in 1974, track 3 on *Nightbirds*, Epic, vinyl.

²⁹ Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1-2, accessed July 27, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/stau17150.5>.

me up.”³⁰ Flip is a newcomer to a city where she has difficulty finding intimate connection. Flip states, “Nobody knows I exist. Nobody knows my name. I been in this city two years and I don’t have a woman.”³¹

The most direct engagement with the album *Nightbirds* comes at the end of the novel in a scene where Arobateau samples lines from the song “What Can I Do For You.” The song plays from a jukebox in a black club in Oakland where Flip mingles with sex workers and pimps. She participates in conversations about the economic exploitation and violence that sex workers face while trying to find Ruby, who she intends to pay for sex. When Flip finds Ruby and the two agree on the terms of sexual transaction, Arobateau inserts the lyrics of the song “What Can I Do For You.” He wrote,

“People want truth or nothing at all. People want sincerity and nothing false. People need happiness, as land needs rain from above. We need rain. We need life. We need love. Most people find it so hard to live without love, love love.”³²

The scene continues with a short interaction between Ruby and Flip in which they discuss the logistics of their sexual exchange—when and where it will happen. Arobateau continues to insert more lyrics from the song and builds an explicit connection between Black Power and sexual liberation. He wrote,

People want to live, not merely exist. People want to enjoy, not suffer in fear. People need understanding, not confusion. We need power and we need peace.³³

³⁰ Arobateau, 49.

³¹ Arobateau, 14.

³² Arobateau, 137.

³³ Arobateau, 138.

In this scene, Arobateau samples lines from “What Can I Do For You” to highlight Flip’s intersecting categories of oppression as both black/biracial, lesbian, and woman. Arobateau drew from traditional narratives of black struggle that speak exclusively to race and class oppression and he reappropriates it in the service of a more intersectional vision of Black Power—one that includes sexual freedom. The lyrics sampled from black women singers are inserted to both affirm and transgress dominant definitions of Black Power during the 1970s. After, sampling these lyrics, Arobateau turns to the notion of sexual pleasure as a commodity of exchange. He wrote, “Flip was buying power. She was in touch with a weird strength. Strength. A feeling she had rarely in life. But if she had cash dollars in her pocket, she knew she would be needed. She could GET.”³⁴

During this era, the Black Panthers addressed the material reality of black loneliness through survival programs that sought to address immediate issues like voting, health care, housing, and education. As noted by historians such as Robyn C. Spencer and Ashley Farmer, black women played a critical role in the Black Power movement. Farmer argues that “Panther women boldly asserted that black women from all walks of life were revolutionary leaders.”³⁵ “The Black Revolutionary Woman” also engaged with the movement was through revolutionary art. Farmer cites a variety of writers and visual artists—Tarika Lewis, Gayle Dickson, Judy Hart—who centered black women in their work for the party. In *The Bars*, Arobateau engages with Black Power in ways that both resonated with and challenged “The Black Revolutionary Woman.” Like women of the party, Flip is outwardly at war with “the pig.” However, Flip’s

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power : How Black Women Transformed an Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 90, accessed July 27, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

sense of what “the pig” and Black Power represent is much broader and centers working class black queer consciousness.

For Flip, power is derived from both her access to money and her ability to use it as a means to access sexual exchange. The stroll, a term that describes both the underground sexual economy as geographical space as well as the movement of bodies in these spaces, is a site of both increased sexual freedom and autonomy and acute danger. While Flip is critical of the violent and misogynistic treatment that sex workers face at the hand of male pimps and also homophobic attitudes towards her as a sexual consumer, Flip feels a sense of agency through her role as a “trick.” On the stroll, Flip is able to circumvent the kinds of race, class, and sexuality based forms of discrimination that she sees as blocks to a thriving sexual life. On “the stroll,” anti black and anti queer discrimination are often overwritten by capitalist need—all Flip needs is money. As such, “the stroll” is a space where Flip is able to acquire “sex-power” through her role as consumer and in the act of sexual gratification.

In *The Bars*, Arobateau stitched together a variety of sources to represent those who had little representation elsewhere in society. Arobateau riffs on Labelle lyrics in order to position Flip within both a universal and distinctly queer black working class discourse on human need for love and sexual intimacy. I use the term riffing as a literary technique that Arobateau employs throughout his writing as a way of engaging with the themes, language, and aesthetics of a text to create new meaning. Arobateau’s conceptions of black queer sexual agency and power riff off of a constellation of musical influences explicitly mentioned and unmentioned in his novels. The Supremes’ 1970 song “Everybody’s Got the Right to Love” is not sampled in *The Bars*, never-

theless, the novel riffs off of the song's themes. They sing, "without love, you can't survive."³⁶ In 1973, two years before Arobateau published *The Bars* and *Ho Stroll*, Labelle released the album *Pressure Cookin*,³⁷ an album steeped in black feminist revolutionary overtones best known for the groups rendition of Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." This song, too, was not sampled in the novel but likely informed the political consciousness present in the novel.

In 1975 Arobateau self-published the novel *Ho Stroll*, a sequel to *The Bars* written in two parts. In it, he continued to sample the voices of black women and to riff on a myriad of themes—economic struggle, loneliness, sex-positivity.³⁷ *Ho Stroll* opens in 1972 in Oakland on a street frequented by pimps and sex workers. The novel is distinct in its shifts between first and third person that at times make the narrative voice unclear. At the beginning of the novel, Arobateau states that the novel was written in 1973 or 1974 when he was 30. The novel's protagonist, Flip, is 30 in 1972 making her almost the exact same age as Red when he wrote the novel. Arobateau wrote, "She was near 29. Homosexual, about 5'3" Slender to medium build. Her racial heritage was black, tho she appeared to be white."³⁸ This description mirrors Arobateau's racial background and sexual identity.

These shifts in narrative point of view and the overlapping biographical details between Arobateau and the protagonist invite a biomythographical reading of *Ho Stroll* (and *The Bars*). Arobateau's writing in both *The Bars* and *Ho Stroll* has the quality of journal writing which ef-

³⁶ The Supremes, "Everybody's Got the Right to Love," by L. Stallman, recorded in 1970, track 1 on *Everybody's Got the Right to Love*, Motown, vinyl.

³⁷ In the article "When Malindy Sings," Farah Griffin argues that black women's singing voices have been employed to shape "narratives of nation." (105). Here, I am interested in how Arobateau calls upon black women singers to in order to express black queer desire.

³⁸ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Ho Stroll: A Black Lesbian Novel* Book 1 (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), chap. 1. Kindle.

fectively de-masks the author as authoritative writer and places him in the position of intimate narrator. The non traditional use of grammar and punctuation in both *The Bars* and *Ho Stroll* may be read as an intentional literary choice that challenges norms of black literary respectability. Arobateau bypassed the grip of literary gatekeeping by not placing his writing through the vetting process of outside editor or publisher. In doing this, he asserted a space for himself as a working class black queer writers and other black women writers of decades to come to write what and how they want. This sense of artistic dignity carried over into the his fiction.

In *Ho Stroll*, Flip describes her romantic and sexual aspirations in terms of dignity. She states the desire to exist in the world “the way I see myself, the way I want to be.”³⁹ Like in *The Bars*, the struggle to achieve sexual dignity includes a fight against the effects of personal and systemic loneliness. Arobateau wrote,

Two months without an orgasm. Her soul is dry, its barren. She looked down at her pubic hair, her fingers felt into her wet sex. “This is the wasteland of my love. I’ve been scathed by lovers, & now, in my loneliness, I’m rusted Hurt runs through my loins.”⁴⁰

Having recently left relationships, in *Ho Stroll* Flip is “back on the welfare roles again, after being supported for three years by several ladies white, middle classed women.”⁴¹ She survives through a combination of money earned doing several odd jobs (delivering newspapers, cleaning homes, and telephone soliciting) and welfare. Like in *The Bars*, Flip must continue to creatively resist state imposed constraints on her ability to achieve comfort by hustling. Flip states,

“My welfare worker has no way of tracking this income as no tax was withheld. I was still holding onto my government check, I wasn’t going to let go go that motherfucker too easily. The extra income would take me closer to my goal. To have something. A nice apartment, comfort, a sofa, a stereo, a waterbed, a refrigerator full of steaks.

³⁹ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Ho Stroll: A Black Lesbian Novel* Book 1 (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), chap. 1. Kindle.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Ho Stroll: A Black Lesbian Novel* Book 1 (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), chap. 1. Kindle.

A nice car.”⁴²

Throughout the novel, loneliness as a result of not having one’s need for comfort (financial, intimate, and social) met is a reoccurring theme. In *Ho Stroll*, Arobateau used sampling as a literary technique again to amplify both the collective and personal struggles of black women by borrowing from the lyrics of Billie Holiday’s “God Bless the Child.” He wrote, “After 28 years of ‘getting my thang together’ and being unpaid, I’d learned Billy Holidays song, ‘empty pockets just don’t make the grade.’”⁴³ Arobateau channels the voice of Billie Holiday within this context of queer longing to transform “the child that’s got his own” into a working class black butch lesbian. His sampling of the famous song is a critique of the ruthless scarcity of resources under capitalism wherein a wealthy ruling class owns and controls not only material goods but also has the power to shape intimate relations. Flip states, “I realized that if I was going to get me a righteous woman, I’d have to make a change. Get some style, get my pad together, get some game.”⁴⁴ Flip’s conceptualization of romance and sexual intimacy is directly tied to his access to capital. The personal “change” needed to find “a righteous woman” is achieved through adornment and by creating the kind of domestic comfort that would attract a partner.

The desire for comfort in *Ho Stroll* explores what it means to pursue thriving black queer life. Flip’s material desires exceed the basic living that the state sees as fit, she seeks prosperity by improving the terms of her material conditions (“a refrigerator full of steaks,” a “nice apartment,” ect.). These aspirations provide a vision of black thriving that stretched beyond the

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

political agenda of the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s. Like in *The Bars*, Flip turns to sex workers to meet her emotional and sexual needs because “there aren’t enough women brave enough to go off into this life style of a homosexual.”⁴⁵ Gaining a steady flow of income enables Flip to access sexual and emotional gratification as a commodity. The drudgery of Flips’s daily existence and the constraints placed on her as a working class butch lesbian of color are intercepted by social and sexual interaction with sex workers.

Flip’s presence on the stroll is also a way for her to engage with her blackness and her working class background. Flip states, “I’ve lost my black roots for a minute, dealt with all the white faces of the women’s movement. As I went between my Karate class, to a free commune, where my lover and I paid no rent, occasionally, during the day those roots were stirred. A burst of black music ignited my soul.”⁴⁶ Flip’s loneliness is connected to both her romantic, racial, sexual and class status. She continues to be unable to find a sense of kinship and belonging because of what she perceives as her racial ambiguity. For Flip, there is a distinct correlation between the organization of space and political identity. Bars are where is able to find “her gay community” but not her black community. One evening, in order to fully experience community as both black and lesbian, she travels to two bars. The Sisters Circle is a white lesbian bar where Flip feels “bored” and the “music was dull.” Later she goes to Soulville, a black men’s gay bar that “let in every nigger off the street.”⁴⁷ At Soulville, Flip faces the possibility of violence at the hands of drunks and homophobes. The stroll becomes a space where Flip has the most possibility of being

⁴⁵ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Ho Stroll: A Black Lesbian Novel* Book 1 (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), chap. 1. Kindle.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Ho Stroll: A Black Lesbian Novel* Book 1 (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press, 1975), chap. 2. Kindle.

her full self as a working poor black butch lesbian.

Loneliness, as the product of existing in “a world that will not or can not properly hear [one’s] testimony,” is also present throughout Arobateau’s decades long relationship with the literary establishment. Despite his consistent attempts to be better paid and to achieve more mainstream visibility, like Ann Allen Shockley and SDiane Bogus, Arobateau was not of direct interest to black feminist literary circles or the broader literary establishment. Arobateau’s marginalization as a writer was compounded not only by the working class subjects of his novels but was likely also effected by his class status as a writer. Unlike Shockley and Bogus, Arobateau did not hold a graduate or undergraduate degree and did not have access to the networks, resources, and support that they had. Throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, Arobateau was absent from groundbreaking anthologies and literary criticism that centered the experiences of black women like *Keeping The Faith* (1974), *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983), *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (1993), *Sisterfire: Black Womanist Fiction and Poetry* (1994) and many others. These collection made important statements on a growing body of work written by black women and the presence of a black feminist literary tradition—one that Arobateau was not a part of.

The Bars Across Heaven, *Ho Stroll* and many of Arobateau’s other novels falls outside of what Barbara Smith referred to as “common approaches” of black women’s literature and also challenged her definition of the “traditional Black female activities” that black women characters engaged with in fiction.⁴⁸ Arobateau’s novels addressed topics like sex work, crime, San Francis-

⁴⁸ Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, Hull, Gloria T. (ed.); Bell Scott, Patricia Bell (ed.); Smith, Barbara Smith (ed.) (New York: The Feminist Press CUNY, 1982), 165.

co nightlife, and included explicit descriptions of sexual fantasy and desire. The larger issue that Smith's essay points to is the way in which street lit, a genre in which Arobateau was a pioneer, falls beyond the boundaries of what has been considered to be black feminist literature and black feminist literary tradition.

While Smith called for more recognition of black lesbian writers, she dictates a call for a specific type of black lesbian writing that has shaped how we engage with the archive. Not only does *The Bars Across Heaven* fall outside of Smith's construction of black feminist literature, it is an uneasy fit for her definition of lesbian literature as well. In comparison to Smith's conception of lesbian literature, *The Bars* confronts the subject of intimacy and sexual desire, it does not conform to traditional standards of grammar and punctuation, and ultimately upsets Smith's construction of black and lesbian literature. This absence of Arobateau's work highlights the need to look beyond canonical voices and traditional sources of black feminist literary activity.

Between the 1970s and the early 2000s, he tenaciously wrote a combination of over fifty novels, plays, and collections with little regard for mainstream literary tastes or conventions. In a review in *Dykespeak* in 1994, Arobateau's writing was described as "wild" and "undisciplined." A reviewer named caryn described Arobateau's spelling as "atrocious" and wondered whether his spelling errors were intentional or not.⁴⁹ Other reviewers have delivered similar critiques. In "Graffiti Artist of Lesbian Literature," Lee Lynch described Arobateau's writing as "uncontrolled," "clumsy" and "undisciplined."⁵⁰ Another reviewer, Teresa DeCrescenzo, wrote, "I think

⁴⁹ Review in Pocket *Full of Change* published in the 1990s, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, The Bancroft Library.

⁵⁰ Lee Lynch, "Graffiti Artist of Lesbian Literature." *Lambda Book Report* 4, no. 11 (July 1995): 16, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9510106424&site=eds-live>.

that the real problem with Arobateau's work is that it never gets beneath the surface to examine deeper issues."⁵¹

Black male writers were also among Arobateau's major critics. In an interview in 1977, Ishmael Reed bitterly criticized black women writers who "[filled their] books with ghetto women" and were therefore more successful with book sales than he.⁵² In the interview Reed also implied that black lesbians were tokens and therefore to be taken less seriously.⁵³ While Arobateau certainly did not have the successful book sales or popularity that inspired Reed's acerbic comments, his words offer some insight into the sexist and homophobic literary climate in which Arobateau existed. Arobateau's greatest challenge was mainstream refusal to engage with his work which rendered him as an invisible outsider throughout his career.

Although Arobateau struggled throughout his professional life with rejection from numerous presses, publications, and critics—Random House, *The New Yorker*, Alfred A. Knopf—he made was clear that his work was never written for a mainstream audience. When asked in an interview whether he cared about the criticisms he received about the content and syntax of his writing, he flatly responded "No." He continued, "some people might like [my writing because] they might be tired of this prosaic same as a wreck cookie cutter, edited to the max shit."⁵⁴ Arobateau refused to be disciplined by criticism from editors and reviewers, instead he remained confident in the value of his writing and audience. He self-published writing that defied expecta-

⁵¹ Teresa DeCrescenzo. "A Look at Novelist Red Jordan Arobateau." *Lesbian News* 22, no. 12 (July 1997): 16. <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=qth&AN=9708224491&site=eds-live>

⁵² Smith, 163.

⁵³ Smith, 171.

⁵⁴ Red Jordan Arobateau (writer) in discussion with Naomi Extra, June 2018.

tions of grammatical convention and sexual representation in black women's literature. By writing towards titillation while also blatantly disregarding grammatical convention, Arobateau challenges the literary establishment and also black women's longstanding relationship with literature based on respectability.

Despite being ignored for most of his career, as the sex wars of the 1990s also unfolded, the professional tide change and Arobateau began to experience increased interest in his writing. Lesbian and woman centered publications like *On Our Backs* began to solicit him for work and he developed working relationships with editors that led to more paid publication opportunities than he had experienced in previous decades.⁵⁵ White feminists like Susie Bright lauded him for his audacious portrayals of female sexual pleasure. He also established working relationships with Marcy Sheiner who served as editor for the magazine as well as the trans writer, Pat Califia. Arobateau also appeared in readings alongside contemporary literary notables Eileen Myles and his writing became available in widely distributed anthologies.⁵⁶

In the 1990s, Arobateau was also taken on by Masquerade publishing house. Through Masquerade, he published a number of novels including *Satan's Best* (1997), *Rough Trade* (1996), *Lucy and Mickey* (1995), and *Black Biker* (1998) These novels were a means for Arobateau to revise and revisit some of the political threads that his novels took up in the 1970s such as feminism, gay liberation, and racial injustice. *Lucy and Mickey*, for example, is a pre Stonewall fictional account of queer life that follows two young lesbians as they engage in various adventures. Mickey is an eighteen year old biracial stone butch lesbian and Lucy is a white

⁵⁵ See "Daddy" in the Feb-Mar issue and "Horsy-Horse Dream" in the Summer 2005 issue of *On Our Backs*.

⁵⁶ An excerpt of Arobateau's novel, *Suzie Q*, appeared in the anthology *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction* (2002)

sex worker. Their initial encounter is a business relationship based on sex but quickly develops into one of romantic and sexual desire. Arobateau describes *The Black Biker*, a novel is set in the 1990s, as being “Afro-Centered” and about “comparisons of class; race conscious, money issues, women power, and dike validation.”⁵⁷

Both *Lucy and Mickey* and *The Black Biker* contain an array of titillating sex scenes that contribute to the pleasure and value of the reading experience. Through Arobateau’s work, the emancipatory potential of black queer titillation comes into critical view. Hernandez’s definition of raunch aesthetics is useful in thinking about black women’s sexual culture in the 1970s into the 21st century. She uses “raunch aesthetics to index sexually explicit works that move beyond titillation and mass-marketed tropes.”⁵⁸ However, I am interested in troubling her conception of titillation as an artistic response to “move beyond.” I use the word titillation here as opposed to pleasure or erotic because it most strongly gestures towards pleasure as embodied sexual response. The corporeal response of arousal of not only manifests in the characters in Arobateau’s work but also serves as an invitation for the reader to gain pleasure from the literary encounter. Titillation, as an aesthetic and narrative intervention bears the potential to affirm the erotic worth of black queer bodies. It serves as sensory evidence; it is the outer life of black queer desire that exists beyond the page and affects the reality of the reader.

The Power of Pleasure: Reception in the 1990s

The value of Arobateau’s writing as a source of titillation is evidenced in the fan letters

⁵⁷ Red Jordan Arobateau, *Book Catalogue 2008* (self-pub., Red Jordan Arobateau Press), 26.

⁵⁸ Hernandez, 95.

he received in the late 1980s and 90s. As email became an increasingly popular mode of communication in the late 1990s and as internet began to develop as a widely accessible platform for writers and others to share and promote their work, Arobateau began to receive fan letters from readers across the U.S. and the world. These emails and occasional letters most profoundly captured how the politics of titillation operated in Arobateau's work. Through these letters, queer women expressed praise for Arobateau's writing, inquired on how to access additional texts, and described the ways in which reading about lesbian sex and working class culture affirmed their identities. One fan from England wrote,

It's so good to have someone telling the 'truth', speaking my reality. I've done some considerable publicity for you amongst dyke friends/lovers here in England! They are all marginalised women, excluded from the 'normal'/white, middle class lesbian world and love your work for the same reasons I do."⁵⁹

This letter captures appeal of working class lesbian literature across racial and geographical lines. Arobateau's international fans wrote from England, Ireland, and Spain. Several expressed both the importance and pleasure of reading literature that was honest or "real." One fan wrote, "I was really moved by your book, and how much honesty and insight you bring to your characters. Very tender, very painful, very real."⁶⁰ This reoccurring theme of realness that emerged from numerous fan letters is deeply tied to the inclusion of graphic lesbian sex in his novels. Another fan from Toronto wrote, "I find your writing to be highly erotic and fluid with no holds barred and most of all real."⁶¹ For fans, realness is a way of describing Arobateau's inclusion of

⁵⁹ Maria Antoniou to Red Jordan Arobateau, 9 Jan 1998, Box 1, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

⁶⁰ Unknown to Red Jordan Arobateau, 5 Dec 1997, Box 1, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

⁶¹ Maria to Red Jordan Arobateau, 30 Sep 1997, Box 1, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

explicit sex into the lives of his characters. Realness also alludes to the politics of titillation wherein sexual arousal allows the reader the possibility of having a real time physical interaction with the text.

Many of the fan letters note the valuable experience of being sexually aroused by reading in Arobateau's work. "I love the lesbian sexuality in it. It is more specifically graphic in describing the kind of sexuality I respond to than anything else I have ever read," wrote one person.⁶² This fan specifically notes how her engagement, which can be read as both sexual and intellectual, was greater than any other she had experience with literature. Other fans use words like "integrity," "truth" and "raw" to describe the way in which Arobateau explicitly captured the sexual lives of his characters. In particular, a fan from Barcelona compares the realness of his writing to the more abstract language linked to radical feminism of the 1970s. This fan described Arobateau's work as "not sanitized (ie.politically correct), or syrupy sweet 'wimmin loving wimmin.'" ⁶³

For many of Arobateau's fans, the sexual explicitness of his writing was directly tied to a sense of sexual agency and affirmation. A fan wrote, "I live in the Dallas area and am in the process of trying to come out... I read your book, *Rough Trade* and was really empowered (not to mention turned on!)."⁶⁴ While the fan does not make the explicit connection between her sense of empowerment and titillation, it is part of a web of associations that shapes how she thinks about sexual agency. One fan notes the importance of "putting this kind of sexuality out there"

⁶² Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, Box 1, The Bancroft Library.

⁶³ Denise Schockley Jenkins to Red Jordan Arobateau, 27 Sep 1998, Box 1, Folder 10, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

⁶⁴ Sonja Goodman to Red Jordan Arobateau, 7 Aug 1997, Box 1, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

and described Arobateau's writing as "graphic" and "hot."⁶⁵

There are few records that reveal how Arobateau's work circulated and that provide first-hand information on how he saw himself as a writer and sex positive feminist in the 1970s.

However, his non fiction writing in the 1990s helps us to see how he understood his work retrospectively. In the 1990s Arobateau began to articulate the political dimensions of his work publicly through essays, self-biographical writing and interviews in which he deconstructed his writing as well as its reception. In the essay "They Say I Write Sex for Money" published in 1997, he described his writing as a space where he "poured" his sexuality, soul, ideas, spirituality, political views, and his "dismay over the abuse of women" and his "subsequent CALL TO ARMS."⁶⁶

In the essay, Arobateau explained his choice to portray the sex lives of the characters in his novels and thoughts on why his work wasn't published more widely in the 1970s and 80s. He wrote,

Back then, one problem with getting my writing accepted was simply that I have always tended to describe the sexual activities of a human being in any given day to the same extent I describe their other aspects. For example, "She walked into the blue room of pink furniture, poured a glass of water, and drank deeply." This descriptiveness extended to sexual urges, needs, and acts, because I believe a book that contains the sexual ideas and performances of the protagonists as well as the rest of their mental and physical environment is a more complete book. Books that don't are usually missing something.⁶⁷

Arobateau's mission to represent the queer women of color characters in his novels as full bodied sexual beings is a major intervention in the fictive representations of black women. Prior to his work, there had been a very limited body of literary work published by black feminists that approached the subject of black women's sexual pleasure using titillating and explicit language. Sexually explicit language, in *The Bars* serves as a means for black women to access a

⁶⁵ Thyme to Red Jordan Arobateau, 18 Jan 1994, Box 1, Folder 11, Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

⁶⁶ Red Jordan Arobateau, "They Say I Write Sex for Money," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 191

⁶⁷ Arobateau, 191.

fuller range of humanity that includes their existence as sexual beings and a desire for sexual pleasure. The potential for bodily arousal that Arobateau presents to his readers is a statement on the erotic worth of black queer bodies; it posits black queer sex as desirable, pleasurable, and titillating.

The production of these explicit black lesbian sex scenes also offers an alternative to the erotic vision portrayed in the heteronormative and often misogynistic films and literature produced during the blaxploitation era such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Shaft* (1971) and street literature written by Iceberg Slim. In an essay published in *The Lesbian Review of Books* in 1996, he wrote,

History books tells us a lot about the lives of upper-class women such as Gertie Stein and Alice B but very little of the underprivileged lesbian factory workers, queer servants, and tranny seamstresses. There's a whole group of dikes to whom these characters, these books may appeal. Some of these dikes are sex workers. Some are street dikes and outlaws; they have never been spoken to in literature.⁶⁸

Throughout the 1990s into the 2000s, Arobateau tenaciously self published and distributed his work. His writing, as a body that defies time and space, is a model for black queer legacy making. His legacy has provided a series of direct and indirect connections to black women readers and writers in the 1980s and 1990s. *The Bars* and *Ho Stroll* (as well as other works) contain what scholar Brittney Cooper describes as the three primary forms of the hip hop literary aesthetic: 1) the transformation of lack into substance, 2) it “issues from a set of cultural experiences that pivot upon a dialectic of deviance and defiance,” and 3) it “privileges street consciousness and cultural literacy.”⁶⁹ Cooper argues that 1990s urban fiction writer “Sapphire’s invocation of hip hop

⁶⁸ Red Jordan Arobateau Papers, 1970-2017, The Bancroft Library.

⁶⁹ Cooper, Brittney. ““Maybe I’ll Be a Poet, Rapper”: Hip-Hop Feminism and Literary Aesthetics in “Push”. *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 55, accessed July 27, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/stable/23783601>.

is an early portrait of a hip-hop aesthetic in prose form.⁷⁰ Ultimately, Arobateau's writing points us in the direction of a longer history of black women's street lit writing that precedes the 1990s.

⁷⁰ Cooper, 55.

Conclusion

I began this research in 2014, at a moment when conversations on black women and sexual pleasure seemed to be exploding. On Facebook, black feminists were having lively and sometimes heated exchanges on Beyonce’s music and representations of black female sexual agency. Personal blogs and independently-run spaces like *The Feminist Wire*, *Racialicious*, *Very Smart Brothas*, and *MadameNoire* centered black perspectives and gave many black writers a platform upon which to launch their careers as writers. Black women sex educators, and coaches like Ev’yan Whitney urged black women to think about “what it really means to be sexually liberated—to be the truth of who you are as a sexual being. Not someone else’s truth, but yours—unwaveringly, unapologetically.”¹ Meanwhile, on television, Issa Rae’s series, *Insecure* broke new ground with its hilarious and candid depictions of black women living their lives which included talking about and having sex. Writer, Sidney Fussell went as far to argue that the television series *Insecure* and *Chewing Gum* “[represented] a new kind of sexual revolution for black women.”²

In addition to this explosion in popular culture and in online spaces, the social justice activism unfolding at the time also shaped my thinking and spurred my curiosity on representations of black women’s engagement with sex-positivity and sexual pleasure. In 2014, when Eric Garner was killed by police officers in New York City, activists around the country responded in a variety of ways. Writer and activist Kristiana Rae Colon co-founded the the #LetUsBreathe Col-

¹ Monthly email newsletter from evyan@sexloveliberation.com, Received by Naomi Extra on September 30, 2016.

² Sidney Fussell, “How *Insecure* and *Chewing Gum* Represent a New Kind of Sexual Revolution for Black Women,” published in Paste Magazine, December 6, 2016, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/tv/insecure/how-insecure-and-chewing-gum-represent-a-new-kind/>

lective with her brother in Chicago. The Collective describes itself as “an alliance of artists and activists organizing through a creative lens to imagine a world without prisons and police.”³ In addition to the Collective’s organizing work, in 2014 Kristiana Rae Colon launched Black Sex Matters, an event series that “celebrates sexuality and sex-positivity in social-justice movements and liberation struggles.”⁴ With a deep commitment to black feminist epistemologies, Colon’s concept of black liberation is unabashedly tied to sex and pleasure. Thinking about sex within the context greatly of the Black Lives Matter movement informed my understanding of sexual pleasure and sex-positivity during the 1970s and 80s as wedded to the black freedom struggle.

As conversations about black women and sexual pleasure were growing in the public sphere, robust discussions were also taking place in the academy. In 2014, both Jennifer Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy* and Mireille Miller-Young’s *A Taste for Brown Sugar* were published. Like Nash, I am interested in the ways in which reading practices shape our engagement with the black feminist archive. I, too, am interested in envisioning more expansive possibilities that make legible representations of pleasure, titillation, and joy. Treva B. Lindsey’s 2013 article, “Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture,” provided an early foundation for this project. In “Complicated Crossroads,” Lindsey locates “emergent pro-sex, black feminist perspectives rooted in contemporary popular culture.”⁵ She asks: “If the conversation, however, shifts from that of reproducing or pandering to controlling images of black womanhood to the excavation and establishment of sex-positive, African-American fe-

³ The #LetUsBreathe Collective, Accessed August 8, 2021, <https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/about>.

⁴ Naomi Extra, “Why Black Sex Matters,” published in *Lenny Letter*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.lennyletter.com/story/why-black-sex-matters>.

⁵ Treva B. Lindsey, “Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 6:1 (2013), 55, doi: 10.1080/17528631.2012.739914

male-authored sites of sensual, erotic, and sexual expressivity, then what occurs?”⁶ Lindsey’s work was a critical spark in my thinking about the long history of sex-positivity and the ways that black women may have expressed sex-positivism perhaps without even using the term.⁷ This dissertation is greatly indebted to and also seeks to expand Lindsey’s work. I take up Lindsey’s project of historicizing black women’s engagement with sex-positivity by drawing the history back further, exploring the late 1960s through the 80s.

Throughout this dissertation, I am also preoccupied with shifting how we think about feminist history. In *Battling Pornography*, Carolyn Bronstein argues that the rise of organized pro-sex feminism was intended to “to carve out some space for women to talk about sexual pleasure, lust, fantasy, and desire; and to challenge anti-pornography’s growing control over the feminist discourse about sexuality.”⁸ She situates white feminists such as Ellen Willis, Gayle Rubin, and Amber Hollibaugh as key voices of the movement. One of the initial questions that drove this study was: Instead of thinking about the pro-sex movement of the 1970s and 80s as centered on white feminist participation and discourse, what if we considered black feminists as intellectually active and creatively engaged as well? This dissertation seeks to build on feminist histories by exploring the ways in which black feminist writers engaged with sex-positivity. I argue that we can find serious engagements with pro-sex feminism both before and during the organized pro-sex movement in the writing of black queer writers. While neither neither Arobateau, Shock-

⁶ Treva B. Lindsey, “Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 6:1 (2013), 60, doi: 10.1080/17528631.2012.739914.

⁷ My curiosity in black feminist engagement with sex-positivity was also sparked by reading and engaging in lively discussion on “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” (1970) by Ann Koedt in a graduate seminar with Ruth Feldstein.

⁸ Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976–1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 281.

ley, or Bogus were referring to themselves as pro-sex or sex-positive feminists in the 1980s and it is quite possible that they might not have wanted to be associated with mainstream pro-sex feminism, as both theorizers and cultural producers, they were doing sex-positive work. This research urges us to consider multiple modes of participation that are possible in social movements.

As a project that is limited in scope, this dissertation attempts to offer a point of departure for further work on each author, black feminist literary reading practices, and on the history of sex-positive feminism. Shockley, Bogus, and Arobateau have been understudied not only in black criticism but also in African American and LGBTQ studies as well. Each author asserts their desire to exist fully in the world by making sexual pleasure and pain legible. In an interview with Arobateau in 2018, I asked him why he wrote about sex in his novels. He responded by saying “I’m feeling it, I’m going to write about it...I’m observing what’s around me. What could be closer to me than that?”⁹ Ultimately, this study of sex-positive black feminist writing is about freedom—black folks being able to tell fuller stories about their lives.

In each chapter, I have included biographical information on the authors’ lives and the struggles that they faced as writers. The inclusion of this material is intended to urge us to consider not only the texts they produced but also the larger landscape of literary culture and politics in which they, as writers, existed. What did it mean to be a working-poor black queer writer like Arobateau who insisted on self-expression at every turn, even if that meant producing work that others read as messy and incoherent? How do we read the work of writers like Arobateau,

⁹ Red Jordan Arobateau (writer) in discussion with Naomi Extra, June 2018.

Shockley, and Bogus within a culture that centers and rewards writing for being polished, in line with the conventions of grammar and syntax, and exhibiting a high level of “craft”? More specifically, what does it mean for black feminists to do literary criticism within a landscape that presumes that work by black writers is less relatable and less lucrative than that of white writers?

During the summer of 2020, the viral hashtag #PublishingPaidMe spread like wildfire, drawing attention to the disparities between black and non black writers. The quickly circulating Twitter thread gathered hundreds of “likes” and retweets and highlighted issues systemic racism and sexism in publishing. Then, in December of 2020, *The New York Times* published the article “Just How White Is the Book Industry?” which offered concrete data.¹⁰ It revealed that in 2018 only 11% of the fiction books published were written by people of color while a staggering 89% were written by white writers. This dissertation seeks to be a reminder of and a call for further discussion on what has been and continues to be at stake for black writers, especially those who do not fit neatly into the cadre of respectable writers.

Finally, in this study, I seek expand the types of sources we turn to when we think about black women’s sexual pleasure historically. The emergent body of scholarship that explores black women’s sexuality and pleasure mentioned above and in chapter one is focused on popular culture, music, and pornography. I suggest that literature is another site of sexual expressivity that has the potential to expand thinking on the constraints and possibilities of black freedom. Mali D. Gross stated: “Understanding what makes us feel good in fundamentally anti-Black economies (social, political, and economic) can provide greater insight into the inner workings of

¹⁰ Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek, “Just How White Is the Book Industry?” published in *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html>.

white supremacy than the things that we no longer ‘like’ or find ‘socially acceptable.’¹¹ The longing for comfort in the narratives of Red Jordan Arobateau, SDiane Bogus’ spiritual connection to Aretha Franklin, and the depictions of safety and pleasure in Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her*, each provide insight into the ways that white supremacy structures black desire but also imagines a world that reaches beyond.

¹¹ Mali D. Collins-White, Ariane Cruz, Jillian Hernandez, Xavier Livermon, Kaila Story & Jennifer Nash, (2016) “Disruptions in Respectability: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Souls*, 18:2-4 (2016), 463-475, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1230813

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