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Black Women's Writing Revisited

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial: Black Women's Writing Revisited

By Sabine Broeck, University of Bremen, Germany

1 But some of us are brave: all the women are white, all the blacks are men - this anthology title for the collection edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and the late Barbara Smith, first published in 1982, summed up the concerns black women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s had put on the political, cultural and literary agenda, ever since the groundbreaking publication of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* in 1970. Pointing to the suppressions and negations of both, white feminism and black liberation and their discursive constructions of subjectivity, agency and a potential for resistance, writing by black women had created a powerful moment of social and cultural awareness which reverberates - even though in many contexts rather as an underground existence - until today and has been resurfacing in the contemporary interest in and attraction of theories of intersectionality. However, despite the noticeable current regard for the crossroads or interconnected axes of analysis framed by race, class, gender and sexuality though, the particular generative power of black women's writing as the crucial impulse to that critical development has, beyond the African-American context, gone missing. With a selection of contemporary criticism, this issue of gender forum wants to draw attention to the manifold contributions of black women's writing both to a cosmopolitan literary and cultural heritage of women, as well as to international Gender Studies.

2 In her reading of Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* Sabine Broeck reads Hartman's work on slavery as a commentary on the foundational violence which helped to put the modern Euroamerican world's white subjectivity in its place; the article points out the implications of contemporary meditations on the slave trade for Gender Studies' epistemological horizon.

3 Terri Francis' article interrogates the ways in which with *The Black Interior* and *Power and Possibility* poet/author Elisabeth Alexander speaks in the tongues of many genres. She discusses Alexander's anthological or collective first-person voice as analogous to the Rastafarian (imperfectly realized) ideal of unity among people.

4 Alice Pauline Gumbs examines the possibility of a co-productive relationship between black women of the same generation, countering the presumption that a black woman could only expect unconditional love from her mother. Black feminists operating in literary collectives from 1979 to 1990 stole the key term "motherhood" out of its heteronormativized function and instead used it to create a cultural politics of presence which both frames the

political practice of black feminist publishing and scholarship in the 1980's and provides a framework for how black feminist scholars, writers and publishers today can engage a legacy that will still be in the making.

5 Katharina Gerund examines the impact of Audre Lorde's work as writer/activist on the development of Afro-German women's communities. Her essay analyzes transatlantic dialogues and interactions, which are primarily based on gender and black solidarity and outlines Lorde's seminal role for Afro-German women as well as the meaning of Lorde's work in Germany within the context of the African Diaspora.

Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique

By Sabine Broeck, University of Bremen, Germany

Abstract:

What emerges from Saidiya Hartman's, and Hortense Spillers's work about slavery which I am reading as a rather elaborate argument taking off where Toni Morrison left it with *Beloved*, is a picture of foundational violence which helped put the modern Euroamerican world's white subjectivity in its place. One of the ways this happened was the structural obliteration of access to gender, that is, gendered subjectivity for black human beings, male or female, while at the same time making black human beings, and particularly females, the target of white transgressively abusive desires of all shades and forms. I will draw out the implications of contemporary meditations on the slave trade for Gender Studies' epistemological horizon. I will follow Hartman's and Spiller's evolving arguments by way of a close reading which challenges (white) gender studies borders erected around the sanctity of gender as the founding difference of western societies.

1 One of the claims in the call for papers for this issue of *Gender Forum* was to document the blurring of distinctions between writers, in the sense of a strictly literary production, and theorists, philosophers, critics engaged in epistemological production (and vice versa) - a diffusion which has become something like a hallmark of black women's cultural production ever since Angela Davis', Alice Walker's, Toni Cade Bambara's, Audre Lorde's, June Jordan's or Sylvia Wynter's earliest interventions, as well as Hooks', Morrison's, Williams' or others in later years. Black Womanism, in Alice Walker's term, brought forth writer/critics who have created a web of creative and critical theoretical contributions to contemporary theory within cultural studies in the widest sense. All of these authors have been taking black women's cultural production beyond the field of literature in a narrow sense, and thus their work should have been received beyond the academic discipline of literary criticism much more stringently, as Barbara Christian so trenchantly argued in her "The Race for Theory". (1987)

2 The still palpable legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, and New World Slavery became one of the crucial concerns the more those black women writers stepped up their critical inquiry of the entanglement of racism and sexism, and argued for the overdue critical examination of this nexus in two directions, both with the black liberation and the white feminist movements of the 1970s, and subsequently with their academic successors in the 1980 and 1990s. In this context, the publication of *Beloved* (1987) the Nobel Prize award and the novel's subsequent mainstream success must be marked as a watershed moment in that it put slavery, as well as the black woman's plight resulting from it, on the public agenda to a

hitherto un-witnessed extent. The novel's impact on US literary history, as well as on cultural studies' discourses (within and beyond academia) in terms of a reckoning with slavery as one of the haunting United States traumata, of a discussion of cultural memory, and of an acknowledgement of the long term effects of enslavement on the public psyche has been extensively documented in what amounts to a veritable school of *Beloved* - scholarship, now active for 20 years (see for example Broeck 2006).

3 When Toni Morrison published *Beloved* in 1987, she created not only the most widely publicized, translated, received and criticized literary representation of slavery and its aftermath - next to Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to which the novel entertains obvious revisionist intertextual relations - she also rather purposefully created a want. In her Nobel Prize winning novel, the Middle Passage itself, the voyage the enslaved Africans were forced to undergo as movable property, as things, by the terroristic rules and conditions of the slave trading economic and cultural machine, becomes the literary space of a telling narrative void. Those passages in *Beloved* which directly engage the trauma of the slave trade, remain urgent language fragments, arranged more like a dazed and always already collapsing chant than the swift and artful narrative stridency characteristic for the novel. At the point where the reader awaits a narrative recollection of the Middle Passage, any syntax has collapsed; any clear indication of a narrative perspective has disappeared into a litany of stumbling passages the origins of which remain lost to the reader; the verbal register has become reduced to desperate repetition. As if in an echo of Adorno's dictum, *Beloved* seems to forbid itself any narrative after, and of the Middle Passage; instead, the text dares the reader with the ambiguous morality of textually accommodating the devastating loss of human lives by way of *Beloved's* lapse in, and loss of a novelistic storytelling capacity. (Broeck 1999) In *Beloved*, it is the very void of story which gestures towards an ethically, and linguistically impossible representation.

4 This void is articulated as well in the publication, in the very same year, of Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,: An American Grammar Book" (I will be using the essay here as reprinted in (2003) in which she lays out the skeleton of a theoretical framework to reconsider the dubious role of gender as a modern western paradigm from the enslaved Africans' points of view. Spillers' groundbreaking essay corresponds to Morrison's novel in intricate ways: both are concerned with the particular position of Black women in the orbit of slavery, and its aftermath, and both focus on the violence and abuse directed against Black human "flesh"- Spillers' direct use of the word here appears quite in tune with Morrison's images of her protagonists' scarred back, branding marks, violated mouths and genitalia, and

stolen milk; as well as with Baby Suggs mournful celebration of "black flesh" - to raise the question if 'gender' (and the adherent notions of self definition) might have the epistemological function to further add to black people's abjected position in the modern world, since they cannot access gendered subjectivity. The limitation of access to a system of human binarisation functioned so as to arrest African-origin humans in the flesh, as well as to endow white Euro-American human beings with the property of engendered selves:

To that extent, the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange. While this proposition is open to further exploration, suffice it to say now that this open exchange of female bodies in the raw offers a kind of Ur-text to the dynamics of signification and representation that the gendered female would unravel. (220)

My intervention here means to follow Spillers' provocative insight in juxtaposing it with the feminist credo of "we shall not be slaves" which originated with early modern feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, enabling white women until today to discuss gender as a privilege of the subject whose pretense to universality has by now been thoroughly critiqued by postcolonial studies. Spillers put this point on the agenda in 1987, clearly pointing towards the implications of her argument for white gender studies:

Indeed, we would go so far as to entertain the very real possibility that sexuality, as a term of implied relatedness, is dubiously appropriate, manageable or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master's family to the captive enclave. Under these circumstances, the customary aspects of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire" are all thrown in crisis. (221)

5 In a series of novelistic and essayistic texts writers have since then engaged to fill that void with feats of the imagination, to counter the oppressive silences of the historical record. Cultural critics like Spillers herself, but most recently, and prominently Hartman have pushed the issue of returning slavery to the postmodern moment of critical theory, over and against either sheer forgetfulness, or relegation to a sub-discipline of history. This return serves to raise critical awareness of modern western societies' genealogies in the transatlantic system of *thingification* that is, the most extreme commodification, from a black feminist perspective. In this venture, Hartman's second book, *Lose Your Mother* (2008), mobilizes the rather effective device of creating a narrative first person of essayistic inquiry as a veritable time traveler who is able to transcend the distinction between Hartman's autobiographical present and the historical archives' past. At the same time, her persona in the text becomes a listening membrane for black memory in whatever fragmented form it might be sought out, or encountered. Autobiography, historical documentation, poetic narrative, philosophical

meditation, pamphlet, travel journal, oral history - all these subgenres thus aggregate and form a distinct kind of textual reflection.

6 Hartman herself locates the text's *raison d'être* in autobiography: she wants to engage the African-American community, and a wider black diasporic readership in a deconstruction of political mythologies of "Africa" while at the same time keeping slavery's time, creating a proactive counter-memory against the repeated and still repeatable loss of human lives in the Middle Passage. As she states very pointedly, she wants to counter mythical notions of the Africa as black haven with a painstaking recording of her encounters with the remnants of slave trading in Africa, including an unflinching look at African tribal elites' responsibility for this barter in human beings, for forsaking the "lost tribes." (235) Her authorial persona undertakes, as it were, a Middle Passage to Ghana in reverse, an imaginary reconstruction of centuries of slave trading of African-origin human beings from the previously non-existent, annihilated position of the human thing, the "commoner" as she terms it.

7 While Hartman's and Spillers' text crucially address what Spillers has called intramural conflicts, and while they have created vanguard theory for critiquing patriarchal and sexist hegemonies within black diasporic communities (a feature that they share with the radical purposes of dozens of African and black diasporic female writers in the last few decades who I cannot even begin to list here) that imminently 'homebound' term of address does not concern me here. I will offer a rather particular reading of Hartman's work. One her most compelling points in her first book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), had been the exposure of white US American society's libidinal, emotional, cultural and legal investments in the enslavement and later, racist oppression of black people:

Although assertions of free will, singularity, autonomy and consent necessarily obscure relations of power and domination, the genealogy of freedom, to the contrary, discloses the intimacy of liberty, domination, and subjection. This intimacy is discerned in the inequality enshrined in property rights, the conquest and captivity that established 'we the people,' and the identity of race as property, whether evidenced in the corporeal inscriptions of slavery and its badges or in the bounded bodily integrity of whiteness secured by the abjection of others. (123)

Indirectly, Hartman extends this argument in her recent work, focusing on the triangularized inhumanity of 300 hundred years of trading in enslaved Africans executed by Africans and Arabs, by many European nations, and by Americans to the point of saturating the entire modern transatlantic world with its regime.

8 Black women writers have made it their prominent purpose to go behind the veiling screen (white) abolitionist memory left in the archives, and in white western public memory - which has been recently rejuvenated militantly in ubiquitous bicentennial celebrations. They

have persistently raised the question: if slavery did create a modern "behavioral vortex of money, property, consumption and the flesh" (Bhana Young 4), what does that mean for critical thinking today, exactly? Tracing the slave trade in ways as visceral as it has been elusive in history's archives, Hartman's symptomatic reading of the "dead book", as she calls the vast archive of slavery, follows a particular textual strategy by which the trace of enslavement - a notorious deconstructive term in the arsenal of *différance* - becomes charged with referential value clearly in excess of its metaphorical workings. By way of a particularly striking example, I quote her description of her visit of the slave holding dungeons in Ghana's slave fort, Elmina, now a major tourist attraction:

Human waste covered the floor of the dungeon. To the naked eye it looked like soot. After the last group of captives had been deported, the holding cells were closed but never cleaned out. For a century and a half after the abolition of the slave trade, the waste remained. To control the stench and the pestilence, the floor had been covered with sand and lime. In 1972, a team of archeologists excavated the dungeon and cleaned away 18 inches of dirt and waste. They identified the topmost layer of the floor of the compressed remains of captives - feces, blood, and exfoliated skin. (115)

This strategy of *re-referentializing* becomes the crucial political lever for Hartman's text to turn the tables on slavery. Paradigmatically, *Lose Your Mother* calls for a shift of attention towards a protocol of white western investments in the effective system of enslavement. The very mass of details the text assembles to document, against the grain, the catalogued but previously neutralized transgressions of the trading machine, forces a white reader to reconsider the investment in, as well as the short - and long term benefits of the discourses and practices of enslavement for modern white European societies. Beyond its autobiographical context, and beyond its intramural address, *Lose Your Mother* needs to be read as a major contribution to theorizing transatlantic modernity as driven by the technological machinery, the economy, and epistemology of enslavement. As a sort of coterminous address, the text contains a rather trenchant critique of - white - modernity:

Impossible to fathom was that all this death (*the millions dying in the Middle Passage*, my italics) had been incidental to the acquisition of profit and to the rise of capitalism. Today we might describe it as collateral damage. The unavoidable losses created in the pursuit of the greater objective. Death wasn't a goal of its own but just a by-product of commerce, which has had the lasting effect of making negligible all the millions of lives lost. Incidental death occurs when life has no normative value, when no humans are involved, when the population is, in effect, seen as already dead. Unlike the concentration camp, the gulag, and the killing field, which had as their intended end the extermination of a population, the African trade created millions of corpses, but as a corollary to the making of commodities. To my eyes this lack of intention didn't diminish the crime of slavery but from the vantage of judges, juries, and insurers exonerated the culpable agents. In effect, it made it easier for a trader to countenance yet another dead black body or for a captain to dump a shipload of captives into the

sea in order to collect the insurance, since it wasn't possible to kill cargo or to murder a thing already denied life. Death was simply a part of the workings of the trade. (31)

9 As with Spillers' "Mama's Baby," I see this critique as a challenge to gender studies that reaches beyond both, the "add-on race approach" that dominated so-called multicultural gender studies in the nineties (see Wiegman), and in the early years of the 21 century; it also provides a rather skeptical angle on the more recently en-vogue discourse of intersectionality which has recently arrived in Germany, at least, with roughly a decade of time-lagging. (see Walgenbach et.al.) It seems to have fallen to a black female epistemological location to articulate the most radical cultural memory of transatlantic modernity, and to unearth a historical baggage of systematic dehumanization at the core of western contemporary societies that gender studies needs to address, because it is to those configurations of violence that gender as we know it, has to be traced. I am writing this against the long deplored but ongoing phenomenon in white feminist and gender studies theory to instrumentalize black women as ethnographical witnesses on their own plight, in direct and not so direct ways, and to constantly ignore or negate black women's theoretical, and critical input as relevant to gender studies as such.

10 After this exposition, let me now move to my close reading proper. How does a reading of the slave trade impact on theory for gender studies? The focus of Hartman's attention in her chapter "The Dead Book", and its accompanying article piece, "Venus in Two Acts" (2008) is on the black female doubly violated: first made into a mere thing, abject in her opaque human subjectivity which the machine of enslavement refuses to constitute in its own terms, and which thus does not exist. That absented claim to human subjectivity, secondly, also entails the dispensation of any access to human differentiation, according to categories like age, region, tribal origins, language, or what passed at the time for gender distinctions - except, crucially, for instructions about slave ship packing, and, of course, except for the suffering of so called sexual transgression and abuse enacted on what amounted to nothing more than a female anatomy. As Hartman writes, following her descent into the archives of enslavement - documents kept by slave ship captains, insurance companies, abolitionist pamphlets, doctors and legal institutions:

There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, the display of the violated body, and inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative history. (2008, 2)

11 Two crucial related questions pertaining to content and form result from this; the first is: "How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?" (Venus 3), and the second, paramount for Hartman, as well as many other black writers, male and female:

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives as counter-history, and aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting the grammar of violence? [...] Do the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking (again)? (2008, 4)

The dangers of looking and of thus creating a panoptikum of what Hortense Spillers early on called a "pornotroping" (206) of the enslaveds' history weigh in on Hartman's text heavily; the only strategy available to deal with that ambiguous challenge is a constant level of self-reflection, puncturing Hartman's text almost to excess because:

Scandal and excess inundate the archive: the raw numbers of the mortality account, the strategic evasion and indirection of the captain's log, the florid and sentimental letters dispatched from slave ports by homesick merchants, the incantatory stories of *shocking* (*ibid.*) violence penned by abolitionists, the fascinated eyewitness reports of mercenary soldiers eager to divulge 'what decency forbids (them) to disclose,' and the rituals of torture, the beatings, hangings and amputations enshrined as law. The libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past. What has been said and what can be said about Venus *take for granted* the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire and violence. (2008, 5)

12 With its excessive, repetitive questioning gestures towards images of the dead, Hartman' text performs a wake for the nameless millions lost in the middle Passage; with Foucault, *Mother* speaks of the "precarious domicile of words that allowed the enslaved to be murdered" (2007/8, 250) against which another artifice of words is left as the only however fragile and intangible re-compensation. Working with the archival material which slave trade historiography has of late unearthed in great quantities, she reconstructs the scenes of torture, abuse and annihilation filling the ledgers of slave trading, as well as abolitionist records, as mere numbers, as ciphers of obstinacy, loss or safe cargo. Aggressively, her text strains against the process of historiography's familiarization which has rendered the corpses for a second killing. Her purpose is - to the contrary - to de-familiarize enslavement in its detail for her readership; thus she critically reworks the phrasing by other scholars whose very words, in her eyes, recapitulate - despite all best intentions - the litany of regular normalcy: "Outrages of that nature were so common on board the slave ships that they were looked upon

with as much indifference as any trifling occurrence; their frequency had rendered them familiar" (2007/8, 143). Hers becomes a meticulous effort to make readers understand the extent to which the annals available to historiography amount to a comprehensive book of the dead, to a pornography of suffering which "flummoxed the London public" (145) during the heydays of the abolitionist campaigns, became sanitized in slave trade historiography, and regain their ability to haunt contemporary readers only if connected to an ethically self-reflective, and deconstructive reassembly of detail. Past the contemporary international debates for monetary reparation (167-169) Hartman goes straight for a white audience which has deluded itself for the longest time about the pertinence of slavery to white Euro-America, claiming, as James Baldwin and others have also noted with rage, that they, as the "authors of devastation" could be "innocent" (169). Her text's pertinence lies in an awareness of how early, and in how constitutive ways, the modern world we inhabit was grounded in the purposeful creation of human thingness, of human property outside the realm of human subjectivity.

13 Vis-a-vis the "dead book," as Hartman reiterates, there is not one single autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage. (3) Accordingly, the challenge to represent the absented human clamor which haunted Morrison's *Beloved* implicitly, Hartman makes explicit. In one self reflective turn after another, she agonizes about the impossibility of narrative which the counter-history she aims for requires being written, but which actually can never have a solid foundation in a human voice, may only be - as I argued in *White Amnesia - Black Memory* (Broeck) delivered in the paradoxical mode of invented testimony. In *Lose Your Mother*, she describes her discourse - something akin to the gesturing towards story, but overlaid by a persistent arresting self-questioning of that very narrative - as "critical fabulation" (2008; 9, 10, 11). Her witnessing, as she sees it, has always already failed by necessity, so that, in a strange and perturbing way, she knowingly reproduces excess, in order to keep herself to and produce in her readers, the "acuity of regard" (Scarry, in Hartman 2008, 4). She keeps re-articulating her project in impressive ways which will need readerly patience to be digested in full:

The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power. The archive yields no exhaustive account of the girl's life, but catalogues the statements that licensed her death. All the rest is a kind of fiction: sprightly maiden, sulky bitch, Venus, girl. The economy of theft and the power over life, which defined the slave trade, fabricated commodities and corpses. But cargo, inert masses, and things don't lend themselves to representation, at least not easily? [...] Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities

of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of "what could have been," according to Lisa Lowe, "symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods." (2008, 11)

Her terms of address thus oscillate from mourning to meditation, to reflection, and to radical revision: "The dream is to liberate them from the obscene depictions that first introduced them to us, It is too easy to hate a man like Thistlewood; what is more difficult is to acknowledge as our inheritance the brutal Latin phrases spilling onto the pages of his journals" (2008, 6).

14 Thistlewood, the British slaveholder who wrote an extensive and self-indulgent account of his practice as an early modern owner of human beings on his plantation in Jamaica, here stands in for the masterful regime of New World slavery in its inseparable connection to early modern investments in white western civilization, to wit, Hartman's oxymoronic conjunction of obscenity and Latin, via the tie-in of "brutal". As a cautionary tale, Thistlewood's recollection - though easily despicable - amounts to quite a challenge for a white community of readers. Because Thistlewood, if read epistemologically, not ethnographically, or 'historically,' calls white readers into a profound dis-identification with humanities' trajectories rooted in modern Enlightenment's premises. Thistlewood's freedom to transgress against human beings turns out to be quite commensurate with modern notions of the sovereign subject - even though abolitionism duly used his writing as the kind of propagandistic pornography Hartman also dissects. As Hartman argues, the slave barracoon must be looked at not just as a holding cell, but more importantly, as a modern episteme which controlled as well the practices of history, and collective white memory, creating a "second order of violence" which reached far into abolition. (2007/8, 5) Faced with the regime of this episteme, Hartman's, Spillers' and Morrison's work, among others, urges Gender Studies to move away from benevolently thinking about race, as in "add race" to postmodern thinking about the modern self, for the formation of which the gendering of subjects - male and female- was essential. Instead, we need to discuss the modern gendered subject as situated in a nexus of property versus sovereignlessness, to take Hartman and Best's term, (as the *sine qua non* of black human beings), of *blackness as abjection* outside all the defining categories of modernity. Thus, Hartman's question becomes: How does the recognition of the creation of sovereignlessness "better enable us to chart the relation between

pasts and presents, to think about the relation between capitalism and slavery and the dilemmas of the present" (2006, 12)? That is to say, for me the founding *difference* of early modern Euro-American societies was subject versus abject, of sovereign self versus sovereignlessness, of *thinged* property versus the subject; gender as modern category, comes to figure *within* that economy, that epistemology, as precisely a category to negotiate, for white European and US women, towards a status of sovereignty, subjectivity and property rights.

15 The point I want to make is not that African societies did not organize themselves around different cultural social and economic interpellations for men and women, neither that in new world slavery, and colonial societies female beings were not subjected to particular politics and practices - most importantly - rape, and the theft of motherhood. However, as Spillers has argued, and as Hartman's texts illuminate, enslaved African-origin female beings never qualified as women (because of their non-humanness, it followed logically) in the Euro-American modern world, and therefore were not interpellated to partake in the ongoing social construction and contestation of gender. The point I do want to make is that *gender* - a category that would have enabled a black female claim on social negotiations did not apply to 'things', to what was constructed as and treated as human flesh. Moreover, that very category gender emerged in western transatlantic rhetoric precisely in the context of creating a space for white women, who refused to be treated like slaves, like things. Modern gender, with early modern feminism, constituted itself discursively precisely in the shift from 18th century female abolitionist Christian empathy with the enslaved to the paradigmatic separation of women from slaves, a process that repeated itself in the late 19th century American negotiations of, and between, abolitionism and suffrage. The fact that black women have - in their long history in the western transatlantic world - consistently fought for an access to the category gender to be able to occupy a space of articulation at all, most famously, of course, in 19th century Sojourner Truth's angrily subversive exclamation "Am I not a woman and a sister?", does not alter the structural complicity of gender as a category with the formation of the sovereign modern white self. That is to say to have, or to be of female gender which could claim and deserved certain kinds of rights, and treatment, staked the claim of white 18th century women to full human subjectivity, as opposed to thingness. The infamous and very persistent use of the analogy of women and slaves (Broeck) provided a springboard for white women to begin theorizing a catalogue of their own demands for an acknowledgement of modern, free subjectivity as antagonistic to enslavement; as a discursive construct, then, modern gender served the differentiation of human from property. White Feminism *and*

gender theory have thus played active roles in the constitution of modern societies as we know them that need far more reflection in shaping and negotiating the expectations of how to do gender properly, even in its critical modes - roles that were claimed rather rarely in conjunction with, or based on an acknowledgment of black people's agency. To me, the corruption inherent in this history demands a bracketing of the category gender, a coupling of it to that history to lose its innocence. Making this kind of connection will also support Gender Studies to go beyond the epistemologically restrictive gender-race analogy which fired white female abolitionism - an ideological position that is untenable for gender studies in a de-colonial moment.

16 (White) Gender Studies may decide to reflect self-critically on its own embeddedness in the Enlightenment proposal of human freedom which strategically split a certain group of humans, namely enslaved African-origin people, from the constitutive freedom to possess themselves and as such, from any access to subjectivity, which entailed, as Hortense Spillers above all has argued, a splitting of African-origin women from gender. If, thus, the knowledge of the slave trade and slavery will become the site of a re-reading of Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, a revised theoretical, and material approach to an epistemology of emancipation like Gender Studies will be possible. Gender Studies, too, lives "in the time of slavery," in the "future created by it" (Hartman 2007, 133). It is the economic, cultural and epistemic regime of human commodification, that transgressive nexus of violence, desire and property which first formed the horizon of the Euro-American modernity that US and European intellectuals, including Gender Studies, have known and claimed. The Enlightenment's proposal of human subjectivity and rights which was in fact inscribed into the world the slave trade and slavery had made (Blackburn), created a vertical structure of access claims to self-representation and social participation from which African-origin people, as hereditary commodities, were a priori abjected. It is on the basis of that abjection, that the category of woman, of gender as a framework to negotiate the social, cultural and economic position of white European women was created. To accept that the very constitution of gender as a term in European early modernity was tied to a social, cultural and political system which constitutively pre-figured "wasted lives," and an extreme precariousness of what constitutes human existence, throws contemporary notions of gendered subjectivity into stark relief. Hartman's work, therefore, may be read as just as axiomatic as Bauman's, Butler's or Agamben's in measuring postmodern global challenges to critical theory. Elaine Scarry's, Susan Sontag's interventions on pain and voyeurism, and Spillers' or Wood's considerations, more specifically, on the sexualized campaigns of Anglo-

American abolition, have compounded the challenge for an epistemology of slavery as a modern episteme not to recycle abolitionist titillation - the risk to become part of a second order abolitionist discourse must, however, be run. To play an active role in the project of decolonizing (post)modern critical theory, gender studies need to acknowledge and reckon with black de-colonial feminist interventions beyond add-on approaches. Those interventions will enable an epistemic turn away from the solipsistic quasi universal presentism of much of contemporary theory, and make it answerable to its own indebtedness to the history of early modern Europe, and the New World. Hartman's and Spiller's texts, as well as Morrison's writing become something like deconstructive guides: we are being asked to look, and listen with black women's perspectives - but at the same time the texts fold back on themselves, and thus on our reading; they disrupt a smooth appropriation of suffering, they derail us from a swift hate for the Thistlewoods (Mother, 61). Those texts under scrutiny here do enact a kind of self-conscious parasitism, forcing readers into complicity - but they refuse to do it innocently, disrupting a renewed take on slavery by way of abolitionist benevolence. They teach readers that the boundaries of the archive cannot be trespassed at will, and without consequence; and they also teach us to respect what Hartman calls, with Fred Moten, "black noise" (2008, 12).

17 "I, too, live in the time of slavery" - is a statement not yet widely enough echoed; gender theory needs to expose itself to the demands of modern history. At a time of rampant takeover by globalized forces of neo-liberalism, for (white) gender studies theory the challenge is to achieve agony instead of complicity with the corporate projects and, particularly in Europe, with the recent onset of a rampant eulogizing of Europe as the mythical ground of universal freedom. This urgency of the modern past as postmodern present may be shored up against all too flippant deployments of Agamben's, Bauman's or Butler's respective terms of "precarious lives" - terms which need to be reloaded with their entire modern history. (White) critical gender theory, as much as it has been a modern critical agent in the negotiation of patriarchal power, has also partaken in the violence of discursive formations that produced the disposable lives of "black flesh". Black women writers like Hartman, Spillers or Morrison argue for creating or maintaining - in the face of much postmodern indifference or abandon - a particular "relationship to loss". Their work, as formulated most clearly by Hartman, calls for a "redress project" which challenges white reading communities - in the present case, a reading public trained in gender studies, that is - to go beyond the confines of gender. To re-arrive in the time of slavery calls for a political orientation in support of "fugitive justice," in Best and Hartman's words,

to interrogate rigorously the kinds of political claims that can be mobilized on behalf of the slave (the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present. [...] [W]e are concerned neither with 'what happened then' nor with 'what is owed because of what happened then,' but rather with the contemporary predicament of freedom, with the melancholy recognition of foreseeable futures still tethered to the past. [...] [W]hat is the story about the slave we ought to tell out of the present we ourselves inhabit -- a present in which torture isn't really torture, a present in which persons have been stripped of rights heretofore deemed inalienable? (Best and Hartman, 3, 4)

Hartman (and her co-author, Stephen Best) have outlined a series of questions for the Redress Project, the most important in my context being the following:

What is the violence particular to slavery? [...] What is the essential feature of slavery: (1) property in human beings, (2) physical compulsion and corporal correction of the laborer, (3) involuntary servitude, (4) restrictions on mobility or opportunity or personal liberty, (5) restrictions of liberty of contract, (6) the expropriation of material fruits of the slave's labor, (7) absence of collective self-governance or non-citizenship, (8) dishonor and social death, (9) racism? We understand the particular character of slavery's violence to be ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom. What is the slave -- property, commodity, or disposable life? What is the time of slavery? Is it the time of the present, as Hortense Spillers suggests, a death sentence reenacted and transmitted across generations? (Best and Hartman, 5)

18 For the still largely white gender studies academic community in Europe to adopt itself to the redress project means a re-location into the time of slavery, into a genealogical continuum which reaches from the early modern period into postmodernity. This kind of "bracketing" gender might result in an expansion of urgently needed sites of cross-racial alliance, for gender studies to find a position from which to share not only postcolonial melancholia but also transcultural conviviality, as Paul Gilroy has recently phrased it. This conviviality requires white critical communities to read black women writers/critics work not as ethnography, but as lessons in decolonization itself. Working through Fred Moten's *In The Break*, Hartman postulates:

By throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object," if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity, trying to narrate "the time of slavery as our present," to "imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended," and finally, to move beyond "the ongoing state of emergency on which black life remains in peril. (2008, 11, 12)

Euro-American modern societies created the paradox of dehumanized but at the same time racialized and hyper-sexualized group of about 12 million people at the locomotive disposal of white ownership. As black writers have insisted for generations, and Hartman's work

confirms yet again, this transatlantic moment of early modernity amply qualifies as the first instance of "the lager." Beyond an innocence of 'gender' as a category rooted in a narrative of universal freedom, the political point that Gender Studies needs to adjust itself to is to trace its own story as much to a story of the realization of subjectivity as to a story of abjection, and foundational commodification of black human beings.

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I and I: Elizabeth Alexander's Collective First-Person Voice, the Witness and the Lure of Amnesia

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Abstract:

Black women's writing is characterized by expressive multiplicity in three major ways: intertextuality, intergeneric textual strategies and the collective first person. In this essay, I show the ways in which in *The Black Interior* and *Power and Possibility* Alexander speaks in the tongues of many genres and at times uses the first person collective or, "I and I," in a radical depth of identification between a reader and the text. I find that Alexander's anthological or collective first-person voice is analogous to the Rastafarian (imperfectly realized) ideal of unity among people, which is expressed through the collective first person pronoun, I and I.

1 Black women's writing is characterized by expressive multiplicity in three major ways: intertextuality, intergeneric textual strategies and the collective first person. Despite feted single-author publications by individual black women, it was the anthology, a collective expression of black womanhood as in the form of I and I, which ushered in the idea of black women writers as a discrete politicized and aesthetic phenomenon. It was initiated with the publication of Toni Cade Bambara's edited volume *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) and followed by Mary Helen Washington's edited anthology *Black-eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975). Showing that the anthology was "the outgrowth of work that had been ongoing" in her introduction Bambara writes, "throughout the country in recent years, Black women have been forming work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses " which further complicates one-sided images of the black woman (qtd. in Alexander, Power 90-91; Power 91). Acting as both an institutionalizing platform and a metaphor of "the black woman" the anthology embodies and encourages the formation of a collective subjectivity.

2 Exemplary of this writing practice and black feminist ethic, contemporary scholar Elizabeth Alexander's writing is diverse, consisting of poetry and prose that includes literary and culture criticism, reviews, and interviews and it is anthological, moreover, in its featuring of various genres. In her poetry and prose alike, Alexander investigates the formation of subjectivity-as-historical consciousness, primarily through her persona poems as well as her use of a collective first-person voice, the invention of personas and combining genres in her essays.¹

¹ Alexander's persona poems include: the title poem of her first collection, *The Venus Hottentot*, "The Josephine Baker Museum" and "Yolande Speaks" in *Body of Life* and "Narrative: Ali" in *Antebellum Dream Book*.

3 Alexander's prose is underappreciated in existing scholarship relative to her poetry, but the significance of her concern with subjectivity and culture in her essays has been noted.² One reviewer writes, for instance, that in *The Black Interior* essay collection, Alexander "explores the way in which the very notion of an African American "culture" impedes attempts at self-understanding and self-definition by its individual members" (Walsh 85). However, the reviewer's comment barely addresses what I have found in Alexander's prose: ground-breaking concepts of black culture around a racialized psychic space or dream life articulated as her innovative use of the first-person voice.

4 In this essay, I show the ways in which in *The Black Interior* and *Power and Possibility* Alexander speaks in the tongues of many genres and at times uses the first person collective or, "I and I," in a radical depth of identification between a reader and the text. I find that Alexander's anthological first-person voice is analogous to the Rastafarian (imperfectly realized) ideal of unity among people, which is expressed through the collective first person pronoun, I and I. This Jamaican/Rastafarian patois term, for which there is no counterpart in American or other forms of English and the concept of which is largely absent from modern languages, uniquely expresses the relational sensibility that Alexander uses as a black woman writer. She writes her social identity into being partly through explicitly addressing and representing the shared interests of a black female readership, breaking down traditional norms of objectivity and abstraction-without resorting exclusively to literal forms of direct address such as letters. Further, I contextualize these innovative rhetorical forms within Alexander's intellectual history, paying particular attention to the use of intergeneric textual strategies and the collective first-person voice (I and I) among illustrative writers that she references and analyzes in her work and beyond. While a thorough analysis of all of Alexander's essays is beyond the scope of this essay, I refer to several of them, selecting three for closer reading: "Anna Julia Cooper: Turn-of-the-Century 'African American' Intellectual," "The World According to Jet, Or, Notes toward a Notion of Race-Pride," and "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." Before delving into local analyses of Alexander's essays, I will look at her framing concept of black culture or what she calls "the black interior."

5 If in her essays Alexander presents her diverse interests then, on a deeper level, this

² Alexander's awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, two Pushcart Prizes, the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at the University of Chicago, the George Kent Award, given by poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and a Guggenheim fellowship. She is an inaugural recipient of the Alphonse Fletcher, Sr. Fellowship for work that "contributes to improving race relations in American society and furthers the broad social goals of the U.S. Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954."

anthological expression defines her subject, black culture, in terms of multiplicity.³ Such ideas depart from both the simplistic one-sided views of stereotypes as well as the respected notions of "twoness" or double-consciousness in African American cultural philosophy, first established by sociologist and historian W.E. B. DuBois. In his 1903 anthology of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* he emphasizes "irreconcilable" struggles between the two sides of black Americans' cultural origins (3). DuBois's words, "'One ever feels his twoness' would become a veritable mantra to legions of students of blackness and DuBois's image of an ineffably split African-American consciousness, and of bifurcation as the major twentieth-century trope for African American consciousness remains resonant today" (Power 35). It remains resonant despite major shifts in the modalities with which we view African American culture such as greater attention to the ways in which black culture has been shaped by migrations throughout the Diaspora, conflicts of race, class, and gender within the group and aesthetics that tend to favor multi-dimensional rather than two-dimensional fragmentation. Alexander revises DuBoisian double-consciousness by using collage as a metaphor for black culture.

6 Alexander's notion of culture seeks to address blackness as a coexistence of many conflicting, incomplete parts and sources. In "The Genius of Romare Bearden," which appears in *Power and Possibility*, she discusses her applications of the term collage.⁴ Alexander writes, "if African-American intellectual consciousness is split, it is split multiply rather than doubly, and that so-called fragmentation, arisen from the fundamental fragmentation of the Middle Passage, has become a source of our creative power." She continues, "Formal conflict is the locus of true innovation", citing for example, Du Bois' own *Souls of Black Folk*, which is not a two-part text or a translation between two languages; it is an experimental textual collage, an anthology of essays which effectively "makes the written space" in which he can explore his "collaged identity." Finally, collage enables us to envision a holistic theory of black culture: "Collage, in both the flat medium as well as more abstractly in book form and as a metaphor for the creative process, is a continual cutting, pasting, and quoting of received information, much like jazz music, like the contemporary tradition of rapping ... and reclaiming African American history" (Alexander, *Power*, 35-36).

7 Alexander argues essentially that collage as a concept applied to culture urgently unveils "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination." She goes on to term the life behind stereotypes "the black interior." The

³ In her 1992 dissertation, "Collage: An Approach to Reading African-American Women's Literature," Alexander argues that black consciousness is best understood as multiple not dual, against Du Bois' axiomatic formulation of black identity as split between irreconcilable strivings.

⁴ Romare Bearden was a twentieth-century American painter known for his large-scale mixed media collages, particularly portraits composed from the fragments of various materials.

combination of "collage" and "black interior" complicates what might easily be taken as a simplistic notion of the latter as another way of exoticizing black people as alluring but unknowable. She writes, "The black interior is a metaphysical space [...] [of] complex black selves" that is behind stereotype and beyond social convention. This notion of an expansive racial self is not a traditional view" (*Black*, x). Going back to the cultural debates of the Harlem Renaissance, for wider context on this issue, we know that essays such as "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," by Langston Hughes, "Negro Art Hokum" by George Schuyler and "Characteristics of Negro Expression" by Zora Neale Hurston" engaged the question of whether there was even such a thing as black culture. During the period we think of as a golden movement of African American culture because of the sheer number of publications, performances, and public personalities and the attention they received from international publics, black culture was not an undisputed given and was often viewed as an obstacle to artistry. Hughes's essay in particular argued for the richness of working-class black expression, but he needed to argue his point against what he described as many black artists' tendency to reject "blackness" as a limitation to their expression when he found it to be the sort of liberating field of interiority that Alexander would write about so many years later in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For Alexander, perhaps taking a cue from Hughes, social identity is not seen as "a constraint but rather as a way of imagining the racial self unfettered, racialized but not delimited. What I am calling dreamspace is to my mind the great hopeful space of African American creativity" (*ibid* 5). Just by assigning black consciousness to the realm of the interior or the dreamspace, the psychic level of humanity, Alexander enables us to envision how social forces register upon subjectivity, upon a person, upon a community and how they refashion all of this for their own means.

8 Alexander's notion of racialized psychic space should not be confused with abstractions of racial identity. During the 1980s and 1990s, black women writers' work was toxically linked with deconstructionist theories that did less harm to Whiteness, which continues to determine cultural norms, and more harm to the expressive cultures women and people of color. At stake is not only the theoretical textual space for black women intellectuals. As significant are the hard won physical locations, such as offices and positions of authority on college campuses and other manifestations of our literal roles in the university and other spheres of intellectual life, which appear to be alarmingly expendable and misunderstood.⁵ As academia genuinely moved to make space for the writings of women and people of color, Alexander writes:

⁵ See Rooks, Noliwe M. "The Beginnings of Black Studies." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 10 Feb. 2006: B8.

[It] birthed a tricky trend: to so theorize and construct and deconstruct identity 'categories' that some were apt to forget women and people of color themselves, in bodies, who wrote things that we urgently needed to read and who remained grossly under-represented among the professoriate, women and people of color whose voices and actions in historical, political and cultural life were too often marginalized, trivialized, forgotten, or erased. As "race" became a "category" [...] the focus was lost on actual people of color [...] (Power 202).

In other words, theorizing race served as a new way of universalizing and obscuring the specificities of black experience. Race became a category between quotation marks as well as a euphemism for racism that was disengaged from its historical determinants and the people that embodied it, partly as a result of cultural shifts away from clearly defined racial lines. Alexander's concept of a racialized dream space reconstructs the notion of race around interiority and physicality, which would seem to be contradictory. However, for Alexander embracing racial identity releases the individual from what she calls the shorthand of sociological and fantasy discourses and into the freedom to know and be known by their real culture in all its horror and glory.

9 Turning to examples from Alexander's prose, we locate the ways in which she negotiates the conflicting but, in her view, not irreconcilable imperatives toward psychic dream space and racial identity. Alexander draws upon crucial scholarship in which writers modeled forms of flexible thought and textual multiplicity. Her influences include intellectuals who have made use of fragmentation in their works, such as Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, *The Black Book*, which is a cultural scrapbook edited by Middleton A. Harris, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's concept of heteroglossia in literature, Alice Walker's use of the epistolary form in *The Color Purple*, Faith Ringgold's quilts and, of course, Bearden's collages. Through these examples we can understand how her concepts of collage and interiority work together to make possible expressions of self that are fragmented without being incoherent, both racialized and dreamlike. However, the greatest direct influences on Alexander are fellow scholars such as Henderson, lawyer and professor of law Patricia Williams and literary theorist Hortense Spillers who prioritize the capacity of texts to speak in tongues or themselves write in multiple genres. And they do so with particular urgency grounded in their historical position as black women. Alexander quotes from Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: The Diary of a Law Professor*: "I am trying to create a genre of legal writing to fill the gaps of traditional legal scholarship. [...] To this end I exploit all sorts of literary devices, including parody, parable and poetry" (qtd. in *Black* 104). Williams sought to address what Spillers has described as the ways in which

[t]he language of the historian was not telling me what I needed to know. Which is,

what is it like in the interstitial spaces where you fall between everyone who has a name, a category, a sponsor, an agenda, spokespersons, people looking out for them- but you don't have anybody. That's your situation. (Eversley and Morgan 308).

10 Alexander may not write with exactly the same intergeneric textual strategies as Williams or address the precise issues of historiography Spillers describes but she does write within a conceptual framework that to a large extent builds upon these scholars' ideas and agendas. Alexander's bibliography illustrates an aspect of what Hazel Carby calls an "intertextual coherence" or a shared discourse among black women writers that is thoughtful and deliberate as they draw upon each other's work in order to address shared concerns (160-169). Thus when, in her essay on Cooper, Alexander describes the author's intergeneric textual strategy, which I refer to as "speaking in tongues," in which "the essays are at once allegory, autobiography, history, oratory, poetry, and literary criticism" we can observe her marking the historical precedent for Williams' intergeneric forms and her own work in diverse genres such as poetry, prose, and drama.⁶ Alexander goes on to assert, "only such a diverse structure could encompass the tensions of forging an African American, female, demonstrably thinking self from whatever intellectual material was at hand" which demonstrates to us the urgency with which Alexander views formal innovations in writing among black women (101).

11 What makes Alexander's engagement of Cooper so persuasive is her critical approach. As a black feminist scholar, Alexander tends to avoid the family metaphors that abound in black feminist writing and yet she writes about the writers whose works are important to her with close, intimate attention to their craft. Her essay on Cooper is not only a praise song in a single-minded form of sisterhood; rather Alexander's essays on black women writers demonstrate the ways in which one can have a critical relationship to a writer-forbearer such as Cooper. Used as a critical device the term I and I means that as Alexander critiques her subjects, she voices them. And in so doing she makes and marks her own emergence as a writer, clearing tracks for her to write herself into textual expression, which is to say, into intellectual existence. But there is nothing "natural" about this process of critical engagement between black women writers. Alexander writes that "the great utility of so much black feminist theory was the guiding truism that black women have blazed alternative routes to making sense of the world, that regardless of our differing circumstances, we have had to look from the outside to make sense of a world that has not endeavored to include us among its intellectuals" (*Power* 3). These "alternative routes" required alternative written expressions

⁶ Alexander's play, "Diva Studies," was produced at the Yale School of Drama in May 1996, and she was a dramaturge for Anna Deavere Smith's play "Twilight" in its original production at the Mark Taper Forum.

and intergeneric textual strategies are formal innovations in black women's prose.

12 In "Anna Julia Cooper: Turn-of-the-Century 'African American' Intellectual" Alexander does a close structural analysis of Cooper's use of the first-person voice in *A Voice from the South, Written by a Black Woman*. Literary historian Mary Helen Washington called *A Voice* "the most precise, forceful, well-argued statement of black feminist thought to come out of the nineteenth century" (qtd. in *Black* 99). This essay, first drafted for Alexander's dissertation, represents fundamental principles for her current theories of culture that are necessary to explore. As the essay is about the best-known writing of the fourth African American woman to earn a Ph.D., which she did at the age of sixty-seven, it is certainly celebratory.⁷ Alexander does not, however, withhold criticisms of Cooper's essentialism about both men and women as well as the sense of superiority that at times seems to underlie her sense of duty toward the masses of African Americans (*Black* 106; 109). The essay's understructure, however, consists in Alexander's own search for writing models, written as it was while she was studying for her Ph.D. It shows the elements in Cooper's work that Alexander found most important: Cooper's intergeneric textual strategy and her expansion of the concept of "I" to include "us."

13 In Alexander's view, Cooper grounds her philosophy in the specificities of her own life with well-chosen autobiographical elements, such as her region and parentage. In turn these details of her life as the daughter of a slave, an educator, a mother and so on, clarify what I understand to be the vagueness of the unspecified "a voice" and the broad reference to "black woman" in the title of Cooper's book. The book is not published anonymously and its authorship is known. However, by using the terms "a voice" and "black woman" in the title Cooper leaves room for a shared black woman's perspective and indicates that she understood her self-expression to be a collective and representative one. Alexander points out that one of the ways in which Cooper constructs this relationship is to reconstruct or ignore the limitations of time. For example, according to Alexander, Cooper writes that she "was born during the civil war years, "which began in 1860, when she was born in 1858 before the war. Alexander figures this misstatement as a "blueprint for the ideas of self-situation" that Cooper uses in *A Voice* to "place herself squarely within the slave community" as a "prophet" and one with "privileged status" (*Black* 105-106). Alexander goes on to say that Cooper's association with the Civil War "illustrates the war Cooper will fight in *A Voice* between intuition and 'book learning'" (*Black* 106). We will see in Alexander's essay *Jet* that she addresses a similar tension between something like visceral connections to black identity and responsibility

⁷ Cooper earned her degree at the Université de Paris, Sorbonne for her thesis, written in French, on attitudes toward slavery in France between 1789 and 1848.

toward social integration.

14 Although for lack of space I cannot rehearse Alexander's thorough and detailed analysis of Cooper in its entirety here, I want to emphasize the ways in which the nineteenth-century scholar's influence is in terms of writing forms, rather than only or primarily an emotional sense of sisterhood. There were a number of early black women writers who might have offered Alexander writing models, including Frances Harper, Harriet Jacobs, and Ida B. Wells. However it was Cooper's "sense of racial collectivity and duty" coupled with her formal innovations in the collective I, which Alexander felt would best "open up the way [she] saw [herself] and record that which is unreconciled and perhaps unreconcilable inside [I and I]" (*Black* 104). My insertions replace the pronouns "we," "ourselves," and "us," respectively and respectfully. I made this move in order to try to illustrate the ways in which Alexander's claims on Cooper are both personal and collective, on behalf of her own imagined audience of women readers who would share her search for writing models whose work would help them to think about their own creativity as Cooper did for her. Alexander is particularly taken with Cooper's first-person voice. She writes:

Cooper's strategic use of the first-person 'I' reveals the ways in which she allows her own experience-her own existence, even-to inform the rhetoric of her text as evidence for the feminist strategy she advocates. By metaphorically writing her body into the book, Cooper forges textual space for the creation of the turn-of-the-century African American female intellectual (*Black* 101).

The ways in which Cooper reaches out to her audiences as witnesses, not just distant readers, through the life experiences she narrates and the issues facing black women that she represents become clearer through Alexander's analysis. By expressing "I" she logically addresses "you." Alexander quotes Valerie Smith who writes, that autobiography is "process, rather than genre;" and adds that it is "a mode of thinking and therefore a theory of reading as well" (qtd. in *ibid.* 112). When the writer talks about herself, the reader rises out of his or her own abstraction or objectivity in order to make a more direct and immediate connection with the writer and her ideas. She reads autobiographically, in other words. In this essay about scholarship and subjectivity, Alexander certainly wrote about her own relationship to Cooper. She gives us a glimpse into why and how she read Cooper at a moment "marked historically by Anita Hill's treatment during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearing" (*ibid.* 102). Far from a confessional, Alexander writes the beginnings of her own intellectual biography, asking, "How would I 'write theory' in a voice that was truly mine? Why, in academic exercises, did I frequently feel that so much of my knowing was inaccessible to me? Yet why did I also not feel comfortable writing in the 'womanist' mode of Alice Walker" (Alexander,

Black 103)? Alexander selects Cooper rather than her contemporaries and she eventually describes her affinity with the legal scholar Williams rather than *the* black woman writer of her day, Walker. For Alexander, Williams and Cooper were writers who shared some of the specific details of autobiography and intellectual history that she wanted to resolve as a prose writer and scholar.

15 There are many more ways that Cooper has influenced Alexander - use of wit and sarcasm, writing about the body, using corporeal, physical metaphors, the tension between intuition and book-learning, modulating the authority that comes with status as a Ph.D. and a educator, negotiating racial collectivity with individual needs for expression-than I can address here. However, in my view, the aspect of Cooper that shaped Alexander the most is the integration of the writing self with the reader and the way that Cooper used language, not just as a vehicle to carry ideas, but as tools to expand existing rhetorical barriers to the level of expression that she felt was most urgent in her day. Due to Cooper's use of autobiographical details in *A Voice*, Alexander points out that the text "becomes a symbolic representation of the body of the African American woman of letters" (*Black* 101). The autobiographical process between reader and writer, Cooper and Alexander, and Cooper and I through Alexander's analysis, makes *A Voice* an emphatic statement of and agent of a collective body of African American women of letters. Such a writing and reading community acts like a balm amidst the usual stereotypes naturally, but particularly when confronting the isolation that comes with her position as only the fourth African American woman to earn a Ph.D. In writing *A Voice*, Cooper created a place for herself as a writer in English, in the U.S. within her own communities and ours today.

16 Alexander ends her essay with wit that is perhaps inspired by Cooper's use of sarcasm in *A Voice*. She writes that as Cooper creates her self in writing, she forges a space for the "unimagined African American woman intellectual, working and thinking at the turn of her century, and this one" (*Black* 131). "This one" is somewhat ambiguous because it is not clear whether it refers to the century or to the unimagined intellectual. The richer reference is to the intellectual, to Alexander herself or even to the reader. With those two words, "this one" Alexander condenses, with the skill of the poet she is, the whole framework of ideas about the self, the reader and history that she has been writing about. The writer boldly imagines Cooper writing in the late 1800s imagining another Ph.D. candidate in the late 1900s-that *A Voice* was written with future generations of black women intellectuals in mind. There again we have the conflation of the reader and the writer through the text-a text wherein the author, in constructing I and I, a collective I, makes room for such identifications.

17 Alexander's writing is not as intergeneric as Cooper's in the same way nor is their use of the collective "I" done with the same implications. Alexander's goal would not have been to mimic *A Voice*. More to the point is that Alexander reads Cooper in order to be able to imagine her own relationship to writing and to develop her own voice, as she says in the essay. Her reading is autobiography. Her inclusion of this essay in her first collection of essays makes the importance of the nineteenth-century educator to her clear. And in doing so, Alexander constructs a chain of readership across the hundred or so years since the publication of *A Voice* that links her to Cooper to me and to my readers in a network of textual, anthological existence.

18 In "The World According to *Jet*, Or, Notes toward a Notion of Race-Pride," Alexander changes register from autobiography through collective identification to the question of group identity. Here the site of collectivity appears to be the shared readership of "a little lozenge of a magazine" called *Jet* (*ibid.* 91).⁸ Alexander uses constructed personal elements strategically in order to explore the individual interiority and the social complexity of the choice that I think she sees the African American community facing between blackness and integrated blackness. Further, she casts a skeptical light on *Jet's* "romantic language" of race-pride, while also, since it is the subject of her essay, presumably being drawn to it. Alexander creates a persona for the poem, a little girl during the Civil Rights movement, whose sense of identity is animated in ways that she felt were not sanctioned by the wider, more authoritative society around her.

19 In the age of integration, Alexander writes that the magazine, which featured black people who had achieved notoriety in some form, whether in horror or in glory, "seemed to [her] to sound black notes from the lower frequencies,"⁹ saying go ahead, hold hands, but know who your people are, and know that it means something crucial-though who could say what-to be of a people" (*ibid.* 94). Alexander's avoidance of being definitive with the phrase, "though who could say what" is crucial here because it represents resistance to prescriptive didacticism. Alexander's non-didactic, subjective writing encourages open-ended, unproven thoughts, which can yield actual dialogue and insight, writing as she does from inside an ongoing community dialogue that has scholarly, political and personal stakes. Thus,

⁸ *Jet* is a popular African-American publication founded in Chicago, Illinois in 1951 by John H. Johnson of Johnson Publishing Company. *Jet* is notable for its small digest-sized format. It was influential in the early days of the American Civil Rights movement, with its coverage of the murder of Emmett Till and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But as Alexander suggests in her narrative the fact that *Jet* had so many pictures of black people, particularly celebrities, and noted the rare appearance of black people on television documented presence and conferred importance.

⁹ The phrase "lower frequencies" is from the novel *Invisible Man*. See Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952.

Alexander's abrupt break in thought, "though who could say what," spoken under the breath yet made to stand out with the two dashes on either side, embodies her resistance to submit to traditional scholarly requirements and like her literary models, seek an alternate pathway. It is significant further, not just that there is a "war" of sorts here between the black notes and the idea of racial harmony, but that blackness is associated with the lower frequencies. Here, Alexander aligns race-pride and blackness with a private, visceral part of her consciousness while "hold[ing] hands," presumably a reference to integration and the Civil Rights movement, is associated with what could be seen as a public performance based on social expectations of respectability. Particularly arresting in that regard is the paragraph where Alexander presents a first-person persona. I stop short of saying that it is autobiographical because the essay is intergenerically critical of a magazine that is about aggrandized constructions of personhood—a black celebrity magazine. Whether it is literally Alexander is less important than the figurative meanings that emerge from her use of the persona and the fact that she would choose to mask her writerly self as a first-person voice at all and to do so in this way. Therefore, Alexander in the persona of a little girl "reading her grandfather's *Jet* magazines before she could read" symbolizes unattended-to pre-adolescent and pre-linguistic needs for recognition of the self among the black community.

20 It is important that Alexander describes the little girl as "sneaking." It is not that the magazines were hidden exactly, but the way Alexander characterizes their appeal as "sneaking into [her] subconscious" suggests that there was something forbidden yet alluring about them. Twisting a cliché in which a child sneaks peeks at an adult's hidden, forbidden pornographic magazines, Alexander describes herself looking at the pictures in *Jet*, drawn to images of "a black nation" that lured her into what I imagine as a near-illicit sense of blackness—whole, discernable, essential and bodily—from which integration had distanced, if not alienated her in some ways. She writes, "before I understood the profound difficulties of the enterprise of integration, that low rumble of race-pride was sneaking its way into my subconscious, to the part driven by compulsion, the part that yearned for the world according to *Jet*" (*ibid.* 94). It's as if integration was linked to a kind of respectable behavior or false performance while *Jet* tempted her toward blackness, which was true and raw. Alexander represents her concept of black culture as a pre-linguistic sensuality rather than an intellectual position. But this association does not mean that she views the lure of race-pride as irrational.

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21 After recounting her family's interpretation of the time someone threw a brick at their house, Alexander writes:

Jet is somehow a handbook for a logic that understands the primacy of race, the primacy of blackness; *Jet* understands the way in which some situations are reducible to and explicable by race and the way in which such formulations are not simplistic. This was important for me to understand as I grew up in an era in which the happy rhetoric of integration was gospel (*ibid.* 95).

Because *Jet* focused on people-celebrities and black people of note in various fields of endeavor, wherever they appeared on the cultural radar-the blackness that was its appeal to Alexander was an embodied one, linked to living people and how they looked. She holds up integration as its contrast, while recognizing that the magazine's black embodiments might seem outdated today: "[...] I thought about *Jet*'s legacy to me, what I remembered. It was the freaks, freaks whose stories were in *Jet*'s pages merely because they were freaks and black" (*ibid.* 95). She continues, addressing the reader directly, "why would anyone want to know these stories anymore, you might ask, but in this young millennium there is still something potent about a magazine that says, Your life is important because it is black. You exist [...]" (*ibid.* 96). The way that Alexander emphasizes *Jet*'s affirming role resonates with the basic premise of African American literature since its earliest expressions under slavery: to bear witness to the writer's subjectivity and by extension his or her community. The "I" means "we." Establishing and negotiating personhood through words has been a primary objective in African American writing and this has been the case in black women's prose particularly. In this essay, Alexander appears to negotiate her own personhood as a metonym for discussing issues that affect the larger community. There is a kind of call and response, or at least a call with an expected response, pattern in the essay that comes through most clearly in the last

section quoted above where she directly addresses the reader with "you may ask."

22 Alexander represents herself as a little girl who goes through a kind of mirror stage, seeking confirmation of her self through the reflection of others. But she also seeks a sense of "the real" over rhetorical constructions of who she is and what the world is like. The magazine intervenes between acceptable forms of identity, i.e. representatives of integration such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and a more basic desire to feel linked with people whose bodies look like hers and to know their stories. Perhaps her grandfather's copies of *Jet* were literally hanging on a rack on the back of the bedroom door, as she writes. But Alexander's positioning them there makes an apt metaphor for this magazine's position relative to the wider cultural and social movements of the day. Reading *Jet*, as figured in the essay, might be like watching Tyler Perry films, UPN, WB or BET, four examples of somewhat questionable but nonetheless celebrated media outlets and products that offer all-black programming marketed at least partly toward black folk, in the age of Barack and Michelle Obama, who are now in the process of the ultimate integration platform, a run for the U.S. presidency.¹⁰ If you watch that stuff, either you discuss your viewing habits with a sense of irony or criticism or, in certain circles, you don't admit to them at all. Like *Jet*, however, they fill a fundamental need for identification that is beyond respectability and integration. In conferring a sense of identity and meaning to those folks that appeared in its papers, *Jet* confers the same to its readers.

23 Cooper makes an analogy between herself and the young post-Emancipation black American community, and so too does Alexander seem to make an analogy between herself and the people, undefined beyond her family who embody a black interior. Through the figure of the little girl Alexander suggests to me that the civil rights community was in some ways disembodied itself in order to fit into an integration model. It was leaving behind its need to feel important as black people whether it was fantastical, odd, or terrible. Not that the civil rights movement was unconcerned about the body. I do not think that this is her point. There are ways in which the black body was undeniably in crisis, through lynching, attacks at demonstrations and in other violent, brutal ways. The civil rights movement was in many ways a movement to protect the black body, not just in an abstract political way, rather in a direct, literal way. *Jet* is known for having published the gruesome images of the murdered boy Emmett Till. Thus the magazine actually seems to represent bodily identification that is more gut-level and spectacular, though not necessarily pleasant. Who can be sure that this is

¹⁰ The Obamas have had several *Jet* or black pop culture moments during the campaign, however, including Barack Obama's shoulder brush gesture (Jay Z) and possibly the fist bump they exchanged after he announced that he would be the Democratic Party's presumptive nominee for the presidency.

what Alexander means since being suggestive without being strictly definitive is a most productive hallmark of her prose, but what my readings of her work makes me wonder about is whether it is the case that the movement for integration brought many gifts while that sense of psychic pleasure, comfort with one's own skin was perhaps not among them. And perhaps there are ways in which one actually needs to depart from the larger social movements, through somewhat essentialist, irreducibly and basic constructions of blackness like *Jet* in order to satisfy the ways in which they touch cords of basic desire in us for connection and recognition, particularly recognition, that make us uncomfortable because they make us vulnerable to our core, lower frequencies.

24 What is perhaps more certain is that *Jet* functioned as an instrument of "imagined community" that is formed apart from the imposed ideas of a group that would have been sociologically or fantastically defined by forces outside of or hostile to the group.¹¹ Segregation created an imagination of the black community to be sure but "imagined community" is a different kind of affirmation of collective identification from within. *Jet* facilitated these links to some degree. As a publication, it acknowledged with every issue, the reality of a black public, especially a reading black public, even if it is the pictures that stand out most. In Alexander's critique of *Jet*, she shifts from attention to writing style, which concerned her in Coopers work to the magazine's visual archive. *Jet*'s content metaphorically and literally presumed, then articulated a black readership tuned to its "low rumble of race pride" because it addressed them directly through pictures of black people. It reflected and created its imagined community because its weekly publication demonstrated and affirmed the fact that the readers were out there and would return week after week. But what I am most struck by is the "low" in the phrase "low rumble of race-pride." It is a reference to volume, most straightforwardly, but surely it also refers the place of race-pride on the cultural hierarchy relative to higher rumbles - magazines might be lower than books; *Jet* possibly lower than its counterpart *Ebony*; both of them lower than a feature on a black person in *Life* magazine. In any event, Alexander's portrayal of *Jet* in the essay shows its potential to offer a clearly defined black presence and race-pride in it amid the both social and psychological aspects of integration. But, with a mixture of regret and relief that perhaps after book-learning, this sensual pull to identity is less of a pull, Alexander's persona, no longer the little girl reading her grandfather's magazines, ends her *Jet* essay saying:

¹¹ "Imagined Community" is a concept established by Benedict Anderson, which states that a nation is a community socially constructed or imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Furthermore, the distribution of publications across distances great and small automatically construct community but they can also be seized upon to deliberately create community through shared images with which readers and viewers identify. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 2006, 6-7.

My problems with *Jet* are myriad but I'm still a reader. With each instance in which the violation of a black person is made public in its pages, I am able to think about whether it is violence, or its ever-present possibility, that unites us a people. And I still revel in straight-up celebration of black glory. However tacky, however ephemeral those photos of black celebrities outside *Ebony-Jet* headquarters may be, I still hold onto them as to an idea that this thing called black culture and these people called black people can both be productively, complexly understood as nuanced entities whose acts and practices we hold to the challenge of criticism (*ibid.* 98).

Here we find the real knot in Alexander's concept of black culture: how to be both embodied in ahistorically defined blackness and be "complexly understood as nuanced entities." She expresses the desire to "still hold on" to this thing called black culture while questioning and theorizing while yet being drawn toward its "low rumble" expressions. The attractions of the world according to *Jet* - that blackness is glorious, curious, and constitutes a world-complicates matters for Alexander's essay persona and we see changes from the beginning to the last paragraphs. Alexander's essay on *Jet* makes this magazine available to us in a time when "we still haven't 'overcome' (*ibid.* 98) and it enables us to envision the cultural conundrums that mark this post-Civil Rights era.

25 In "'Can You be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," Alexander addresses the specter and reality of present-day violence in late-twentieth century America decades after the height of the Civil Rights movement. She directly addresses the reader to whom she presents a collage or anthology of cases that describe witnessed, recorded violence. Evident in the title is her emphasis on racial identity through the capital letters that she uses to mark the word black. Once again she pays homage to Cooper who used "large, bold, capital letters, its body standing taller and stronger than anything else in the sentence, asserting its right to space" to write "BLACK WOMAN" in her essay (*ibid.* 125). More than an abstract notion of racial memory, Alexander grounds her ideas in the history of physical, bodily torture that is part of the collective history of people of African descent. However, rather than a notion of "glory" which guided her ideas about community and connection in *Jet*, in the King videos she unpacks a complex relationship between bearing witness to violence and the urgencies of community formation. Originally published during the 1990s, when it was becoming more common to place the term race into quotations, in order perhaps to illustrate its constructed nature, Alexander's thinking about an irreducible blackness was a significant departure.

26 In the King essay, Alexander argues that since the lived realities of many people continue to be determined by real racially motivated violence, there should be a space for what she calls "bodily history," a recognition of irreducible black collective, physical

memory. Further, she reclaims the history of "black bodies in pain for public consumption" and repurposes it, through the example of the Rodney King videos, as a site around which the black community could organize productively (*ibid.* 177). Alexander begins the piece as follows:

At the heart of this essay is a desire to find a language to talk about 'my people.' 'My people' is, of course, romantic language, but I keep returning to it as I think about the videotaped police beating of Rodney King, wanting the term to reflect the understanding that 'race' is a complex fiction but one that, needless to say, is perfectly real in at least some significant aspects of our day-to-day lives (*ibid.* 175).

When Alexander declares that she writes, "to find a language" we should hear an echo of Williams, which I quoted earlier. A quest for language rather than an argument drives the essay; thus it is true to its French roots *essai*, which leads to the verb *essayer*, meaning to try and is further associated with risk, *risquer*. One important difference is that an essay typically focuses on a single subject but Alexander presents a collage of subjects around an idea. In this case, the essay is divided into separate sections: "A Witness and a Participant," which is about scenes in Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative; "Emmett Till" "Rodney King" and "Post-black"? Post-script." I focus on the King section as well as Alexander's forms of address to the reader throughout the essay.

27 Returning to the opening lines quoted above, we read that Alexander connects King's experience to "our day-to-day lives." Alexander writes:

In these anti-essentialist, post-identity discursive times, I nonetheless believe that different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective memories, which are frequently forged and maintained through a "storytelling tradition," however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience. There needs to be a place for theorizing black bodily experience into the larger, ever-evolving discourses of identity politics" (*ibid.* 178).

In Alexander's concept then, King's experience, which is in a sense his personal, isolated reality, becomes generalizable as a community event through its telling. When viewed on television and interpreted through an historical lens, the Rodney King incident can and I think she might say should become all of our experience, through empathy, through being a witness. The videos act as storytellers and our viewership serves as the means to empathy and community formation. By learning our history we witness it and it becomes part of our collective memory (*ibid.* 183). The word metaphorically enters our flesh.

28 Empathy is a metaphoric, imaginative leap that can build collective memory and form bonds of community. Alexander frames her discussion of Douglass by asking, "What do the scenes of communally witnessed violence in slave narratives tell us about the way that 'text' is carried in African American flesh" (*ibid.* 181)? This reference to flesh can be linked with

Spillers' discussion of body and flesh in her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: American Grammar Book," which first appeared in the journal *Diacritics*. Alexander explores the idea further on in this section when she examines an excerpt from the Douglass narrative in which he describes his Aunt Hester being whipped. Alexander writes of Douglass' description of the beating:

Douglass's synaesthetic response is instantly empathetic, and the memory is recorded in a vocabulary of known bodily sensation. He imbibes the experience, which is metaphorically imprinted on his now traumatized flesh in the shrieks experienced as 'heart-rending' and that left him 'horror-stricken' (*ibid.* 183).

This scene communicates the ways in which violence is witnessed both visually and aurally. Through description of bodily sensations, Alexander writes, Douglass communicates empathy with his aunt. The text mediates how he feels; perhaps as he writes to find language for his feelings, he makes the experience part of his memory, thus part of his own bodily experience. There is also the implication that he is next, which Alexander addresses, saying Douglass's witnessing of the event revealed the true brutality of the institution and strengthened his resolve to escape. And, of course, he eventually was instrumental as an abolitionist orator and writer in the movement to overthrow slavery once he was free.

29 If empathy means stepping into another person's place or feeling that you are in their place and share the same fate-even that you are willing to share their fate then we need to figure out language to represent that unity. It is not merely that I step into King's place. When I watch him on the video that is me. That's I and I or I-me and I-him getting beaten like that.

30 Although Alexander does not literally use the term "I and I," as I read the way she constructs this radical formation of identification between the viewer and King in the videos, I recognize the concept of I and I. The notion of "I and I" in this specific orthography originates with the Rastafarians in Jamaica. Although it can be written in many languages - Je et Je for the French, Yo y yo for the Spanish, it signifies absolutely nothing in those languages because they do not have a concept equivalent to the Rastafarian use of the first person. I and I is an expansive notion of self that includes the speaker and his or her audiences. It refers to the unity between people and their shared interests. Sometimes I actually replaces other pronouns such you or him. Rastafarian gender politics (due in part to the sexualization of Rastas through Bob Marley's commercial reggae, which is a whole other story) is the crashing limit to all this notion of unity but their way of addressing each other with the pronoun I when they mean you or even he, goes some distance toward expressing my view of how the first-person voice works in such a unique way here.

31 Despite the fact that I and I looks like double-consciousness and resembles the

DuBoisian split into a bifurcated consciousness, it is actually closer to the collage concept, which is an infinite series of links between people, even between people and God, so that when any one person speaks, he or she bears a certain awareness of speaking for the group or with the group in mind. Of course, there are problematic limits to this—who represents whom and in whose interests? It is a concept that can be and often is abused when the desire power comes into play but it nonetheless represents a possibility of expression that opens up innovative aesthetic and social formations. I and I can represent what Alexander argues for in the expansion of I that would include the wider community. The way in which she corrals the media, often a hindrance to black community formation, into a vehicle of this formation—whether it brings news of glory or of horror, reclaims it from a multiracial viewership in the public arena and repurposes it for a *Jet*-defined viewing public of I and I.

32 Still, how to live with yourself after witnessing black people's, your people's horrific history? How to manage the pull toward NOT looking and NOT listening to the storytellers?"What do a people do with their history of horror? What does it mean to bear witness in the act of watching a retelling? What does it mean to carry cultural memory on the flesh" (*ibid.* 201)? Can you be BLACK and NOT LOOK at this?

33 One of the epigraphs to Alexander's King essay is from Betty Shabazz on witnessing her husband, Malcolm X's murder: "I still carry it with me all the time. I prayed for years for it to be taken away, not to be able to remember it" (qtd. *ibid.* 175). I and I feel that.

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"We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves": A Dialogically Produced Audience and Black Feminist Publishing 1979 to the "Present"

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Abstract:

In 1979, black lesbian feminist writers and scholars Barbara and Beverly Smith wrote, "There is...no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now." In order to make themselves "present" black feminists (especially lesbian and bisexual feminists) operating in literary collectives from 1979 to 1990 stole the key term "motherhood" out of its heteronormativized function and instead used it to create a shared space and time of co-production. In 1983, when Audre Lorde suggested "[w]e can mother ourselves," she was explicitly suggesting the possibility of a co-productive relationship between black women of the same generation, countering the presumption that a black woman could only expect unconditional love from her mother. In addition, Lorde's statement implicitly requires a complete transformation of the mode through which black female subjectivity is produced, invoking a politics of presence which both frames the political practice of black feminist publishing and scholarship in the 1980's and provides a framework for how black feminist scholars, writers and publishers today can engage a legacy that will still be in the making.

The Problem

Black mothers are dangerous.

1 In 2005 former U.S. Secretary of Education and officer of Drug Policy William Bennett publicly stated that aborting every black baby would decrease crime.¹ This neo-eugenicist statement about US race relations corresponds with globalized "family planning" agendas that have historically forced women in the Caribbean, Latin America, South Asia and Africa to undergo sterilization in order to work for multinational corporations. In 1977 World Bank official Richard Rosenthal went so far as to suggest that three fourths of the women in developing nations should be sterilized to prevent economically disruptive revolutions.²

2 Policy makers justify these disproportionate and selective barriers against the birth of people of color through a narrative about the deviance of black and "third world mothers." The moral of the story is that racist inequities and extreme poverty in "developed" nations is reproduced, not by the economic actions of the state, not by divestment from social institutions in communities of color, not from increased policing in the same communities, but by the cultural persistence of poverty perpetuated by the black mother who either passes "poverty" on through her genes, or at the very least nurtures it through her deviant mothering practices. Likewise, in this story, the global problems of pollution and global warming are not

¹ September 28 broadcast of Salem Radio Network's Bill Bennett's Morning in America.

² Luz Rodriguez, "Population Control in Puerto Rico", Conference Presentation at Let's Talk About Sex the SisterSong 10th Anniversary Conference, May 2006.

results of the environmentally detrimental practices of multinational corporations, but by "overpopulation" caused by women of color who defy the economically necessary worthlessness of their lives by daring to give birth. Which is to say that "population control" is exactly what it sounds like. Which is also to say, the attack on the reproductive subjectivity of black woman and other women of color is actually a pre-emptive attack on what women of color and young people were (are) positioned to create: a new world. I offer a revised reading of black feminist publication that takes into consideration the problematic discursive function of black women as producers.

3 In the face of this genocidal attack, black feminists from the 1970s to the 1990s appropriated motherhood as a challenge and a refusal to the violence that these discourses of stabilization and welfare would naturalize. While the U.S. state enacted domestic and foreign policies that required, allowed and endorsed violence against the bodies of black woman and early death for black children, black feminists audaciously centered an entire literary movement around the invocation of this criminal act of black maternity, demanding not only the rights of black women to reproductive autonomy in the biological sense, but also the imperative to create narratives, theories, contexts, collectives, publications, political ideology and more. I read the black feminist literary production that occurred between 1970 and 1990 as the experimental creation of a rival economy and temporality in which black women and children would be generators of an alternative destiny. A black feminist position became articulable and necessary not only because of the lived experiences of capitalism and empire that black women resisted, but also because of the successes and failures of the black cultural nationalist movement and the white radical lesbian/feminist movement. Critical of a racist, nationalist and patriarchal set of limits and amputations, this movement was necessarily as internationalist as the developing neo-liberal tactics of empire it resisted. If a growing neo-liberal world order endorsed the literal and social deaths of black women and children, then this literary movement, at its most radical, imagined the death of the dominant capitalist relation, a halt to the reproduction of the state and the counter-production of a livable community against the chronopolitics of development.³ And this is a queer thing.

4 To answer death with utopian futurity, to rival the social reproduction of capital on a global scale with a forward dreaming diasporic accountability is a queer thing to do. A strange thing to do. A thing that changes "the family" and "the future forever." To name oneself mother in a moment where representatives of the state conscripted "black" and "mother" into vile epithets is a queer thing. To insist on an black motherhood despite black cultural

³ Elizabeth Freeman. "Time Binds or Erotohistoriography." *Social Text* 84-85, Vol. 23, Nos 3-4, Fall -Winter 2005. Discussed in more detail later.

nationalist claims to own black women's wombs and white feminist attempts to use the maternal labor of black women as domestic servants to buy their own freedom (and to implicitly support the use of black women as guinea pigs in their fight to perfect the privilege of sterilization) is an almost illegible thing, an outlawed practice, a queer thing.

5 During the period between 1970 and 1990 the pathologization of black women's bodies occurred directly alongside a post-Civil Rights project of disciplinary inclusion in which both the black power movement and the mainstream white feminist movement were complicit. The Black Nationalist effort to construct a black patriarchy and the white feminist effort to tokenistically incorporate the labor of women of color led to an environment in which black women's writing was increasingly marketable. By 1990 Henry Louis Gates was able to explain that black women's writing was valuable because of its unprecedented marketability, combining the black interest and women's interest readerships that had developed in the post-civil rights era. With this statement Gates proclaims the fulfillment of a prophecy made almost one hundred years earlier by black industrialist Booker T. Washington who said (without literature in mind), "In proportion as the black woman is able to produce something that the white or other races want, in this same proportion does prejudice disappear." (87 cited in Ferguson) Roderick Ferguson cites this suggestion from Washington along with other statements about keeping young black women employed and off the streets in his article "Of Our Normative Strivings" in order to demonstrate his argument that the project of black uplift was complicit in the process through which normative sexual behavior became a prerequisite for acceptable racial difference in the construction of 'productive citizenship' in the post-slavery era. I read Henry Louis Gates Jr. alongside Booker T. Washington to point out a practice in the post-civil rights era through which the literary practices of black women were reincorporated into a capitalist and imperialist framework where black women's lives were "new subject matter" to be consumed and "new territory" to be discovered by an expanded market, which is similar to the way black bodies were prepared for resale in the post-reconstruction moment. (Gates 4) The reconstitution of the black family as a consumer unit and the reconfiguration of black women as marketable tokens were parts of the same process. The same capitalist narrative that had created black lack of family to reproduce enslavability, also created the post civil-rights black family as a circuit through which to perpetuate itself.

6 For this reason it is crucial for me to distinguish between the much examined topic of "black women's writing" between in 1970 and 1990 and the *black feminist literary production* during the same period which will be my focus in this article. Black feminist literary

production was not necessarily a distinct movement from the black women's literary renaissance of the time period, because its practitioners were deeply involved in this renaissance, but rather than tracing the *development* of a black women's literary tradition, this project seeks to reveal and participate in a rival temporality, a queer intergenerational focus on words that were not meant to survive. This article theorizes poetry as a productive act, examines the ways in which the poetics through which black feminists responded to and transformed the publishing possibilities of the time period, and proposes a shared refocusing of the impact of black women's literary work in the late 20th century. What I am calling *black feminist literary production* has a *queer* relationship to "black women's writing" such that the former exceeds and critiques the coherence of the later. The "queer" in this project, by denaturalizing and illuminating social reproduction, allows an examination of the politics and possibilities of production subsumed in racialized narrative of capitalism. In this instance queer outsidership and the place of the invisibly laboring, criminalized black mother merge. This queer relationship manifests in what I am calling a poetics of black queer maternity.

7 The black feminist literary practitioners that inspire this project were at once included in, excluded from and amputated by black cultural nationalist and white feminist movements because their deviant sexual positionality was not useful for a black nation or a multi-cultural liberal sisterhood, because of their inability or refusal to reproduce properly. Because of their inability or refusal to reproduce property, these black feminist literary engaged in a critical revision of family, a radical anti-imperialism and a socialist experimentalism. As Cathy Cohen has argued, the position of the pathologized black mother must be seen as a queer positionality.(Cohen 1997) I want to add that this position, in critical tension with capitalist ideas of family, is also a position out of time with the clock of development that uses the same progress narrative deploy welfare reform domestically and structural adjustment policies internationally. For all of these reasons these black feminist literary producers inhabited the queer threat of the pathologized black mother. She who refuses to reproduce the status quo threatens to produce a radically different world. The black feminist literary figures that led and epitomized this practice were lesbian and bisexual radicals such as Audre Lorde and June Jordan who are now historicized as queer ancestors.⁴ Cherrie Moraga, for example, recently proclaimed that black lesbian feminists such as Lorde, Pat Parker and June Jordan, gave lesbians like her, "a body, a queer body in the original dangerous, unambivalent sense of the

⁴ See, for example, the Audre Lorde Project, a center for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit people of color organizing in New York City (www.alp.org) or Zami an organization of "lesbians of African descent" in Atlanta or National Black Justice Coalition (an organization committed to the legal rights of black non-heterosexual people) feature of June Jordan on Day 1 of their black history campaign.

word, a dyke body that could not be domesticized by middle class American aspirations."⁵ I am proposing that the invocation of black maternity as an alternative to genocide in the period between 1970-1990 required the production of a queer time and space within which black women and young people could operate as co-producers in a future radically different from their present.⁶

An Approach

8 It may remain unclear to some readers why "mothering" of all things holds the queer transformative potential in my analysis. Does not the term mother retain an inescapable essentialism? Is it even possible to delink motherhood and the reproduction of racial difference? Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* provides a helpful critical precedent for the work of understanding mothering as the marker of a queer discursive strategy in black feminist publishing in the late 20th century. Wright argues that the figure of the black mother, as deployed by poets such as Carolyn Rodgers and Audre Lorde, interrupts the production of blackness in opposition to whiteness. Wright explains that whereas the masculinist knowledge production that has passed responsibility for the production of an ontology of blackness from man to man to man over time in a dialectical struggle with the white patriarchal knowledge project that seeks to reproduce white humanity through black abjection, the figure of the *mother* allows for a dialogic paradigm shift. The figure of the *mother* calls reproduction into question, reminding us that the production of racialized subjectivity occurs across difference, in dialog, not passing from one to one, but rather created as the tense reconstitution of race despite the dynamic coupling of different, but not opposite bodies. So while the erasure or subsumption of the subjectivity of mothers under the authority of patriarchy has facilitated essentialist reproductions of racialized dehumanization, the rival authority of the black mother has the potential to reveal racial difference as a social narrative, the terms of which are contingent and do not have to be reproduced.

9 To be sure, the use of motherhood in black women's literature is not *necessarily* queer. The most cited uses of narratives of motherhood in black women's literary criticism and literature in the late 20th century sought to argue against the pathologization of the black family, through representations of motherhood that were in conversation with cultural

⁵ Cherrie Moraga at "Sister Comrade" a celebration of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker at the First Congregational Church in Oakland, California on November 3rd. 2007.

⁶ See Judith Halberstam in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press, 2005. And Jose Munoz *Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism* (forthcoming).

nationalists towards the reproduction of a black race. In this paper I seek to distinguish between *representations* of black motherhood and black feminist *revisions* of the significance of mothering. The latter, I will argue, uses the pathologization of black maternity to create a queer revision, revealing the socially produced predicaments of black mothers and offering rival structures of nurturing and futurity. In order to make this distinction as clear as possible I will take some space here to clarify my uses of the terms "queer," "black" and "maternity" in this statement.

Queer

10 I use queer not as an identity marker, but rather in the way that Roderick Ferguson interprets Barbara Smith's use of the term "lesbian" in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." (1977).⁷ In that text, written during a period in which Barbara Smith was communicating with Lorde as a participant in the Combahee River Collective retreats and June Jordan as the moderator of the on the Feminism and Black Women's Writing Panel at Howard University, Barbara Smith defined lesbian as what Ferguson calls a "negation," as anything that fundamentally challenged heteronormativity. Therefore, Ferguson argues, lesbian was not an identifier but rather an alarm, pointing to the violence of existing identity frameworks and calling for a critical difference. I align with Ferguson's assertion that one genealogy for the contemporary use of term "queer" in queer theory is Smith's non-identarian use of "lesbian."

11 Another generative site for "queer" is June Jordan's 1992 essay "A New Politics of Sexuality" in which she uses bisexuality as an intervention into predictive sexuality to create a space for freedom. This critical use of bisexuality prefigures the use of the word "queer" to describe a politics of sexuality that is not based on a specific sexual practice, but rather a critical relationship to existing sexual and social norms. Jordan uses a proclamation of her own bisexuality as a hinge to articulate her own contradictory multiplicity: "I am Black and I am female and I am a mother and I am bisexual and I am a nationalist and I am an antinationalist." (132) Here bisexuality, not as an identity but as an intervention, a refusal of a particular choice, connects Jordan's anti-imperialist politics which cause her to fight for the national sovereignty of Nicaragua while challenging the norms of nationalism itself with her identification with the impossible subjectivity of black motherhood in the United States. Through her articulation of bisexuality, Jordan answers both the queer dystopians and the gay and lesbian assimilationists writing 15 years after the publication of her essay. For Jordan, bisexuality requires a particular definition of survival: "But a struggle to survive cannot lead

⁷ Roderick Ferguson. *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 127.

to suicide: suicide is the opposite of survival. And so we must not conceal/assimilate/integrate into the would-be dominant culture and political system that despises us. Our survival requires that we alter our environment so we can live..." (135) Jordan's definition of a sexual politics of survival seeks to generate a future that does not reproduce the present. Accordingly I will use the term queer (here) to signal a similar call for critical difference that disrupts narratives of heteropatriarchal family and capitalist development and as a modifier that causes the terms that follow to exceed what they have named. For example, a "queer black maternity" would not only invoke the additive complexity of multiple interpolation, it would also place the procreative inheritance of blackness and patriarchally defined motherhood under investigation.

Black

12 Black feminism in the seventies and eighties emerged within and co-produced a broader "third world women's movement." Often this complicated mix of subject positions was called forth at once, for example, when "black and other third world women" would create "special issues" of otherwise white feminist periodicals. This overlap between "black" and "third world" women's production was complicated by at least two historical dynamics. First, non-white feminists in the United States were in almost constant communication with "Black feminists" in Britain who were using the term "Black" to claim solidarity between women of Asian and African descent who had shared experiences of colonialism at "home" and racism in England. "Black feminists" in Britain and the US reviewed each other's special issues and anthologies and wrote letters of support to each other's editorial collectives. Even still, "black" and "third world" were never commensurate terms on either side of the Atlantic. Indeed "blackness" itself was incommensurable even in the Americas, signifying differently in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean, but the term was used to facilitate translation of different black experiences across national contexts. "Third World" a term used to describe women who would most likely be called "women of color" from today's vantage point was an intentional term used by non-white women in the United States in order to enable solidarity between groups experiencing different manifestations of racism AND to link US liberation movements to a wider set of decolonization struggles in which women were responding to the encroachment of economic empire. In "Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other," a special issue of the New York based feminist art journal *Heresies*, a special editorial collective of self-identified U.S. based Third World Women explains the salience of the term "Third World" as it's an invocation of an "other" way to be created by those "other" than the

dominant white male ruling class.⁸ While many contemporary transnational feminist activists argue that the term "Third World" erases women who are actually living in developing countries when it is claimed by U.S. women of color, Chandra Mohanty insists that to invoke "third world" as a particular way of being feminist is to remember the spirit of the Bandung conference of non-aligned countries which insisted that another world could be created.⁹ The specific iteration of "black feminism" that we are concerned with here could only have emerged within and alongside this discourse of "third world" feminism which was both anti-capitalist and internationalist.

13 However, while the production I will characterize here is firmly grounded in what was called the 'Third World Women's Movement' in the United States (conversely called the "First World Women's Movement" in English-speaking Canada), I will be focusing on the work of feminists who explicitly identified as "black." While attacks on the bodies of women of color and their potential to create are widespread, the narratives applied by colonialist, racist, orientalist enactors of sexual violence and reproductive injustices have been historically specific and deserve in-depth attention. My focus on the term "black" here signals my emphasis on the queer feminist possibility of transforming the maternal trace of slavery into a mode of co-production that responds to the persistent commodification of flesh. I am not arguing that the narratives of pathologization to be intervened in here are specific to "people of African descent," nor am I seeking to reserve the term black for the descendents of enslaved people to the exclusion of black people in Africa and other parts of the non-Atlantic world. Rather I am interested in a narrative through which blackness has come to stand in for expendability and non-humanity and the modes of poetic practice through which radical black feminist literary practice threatened this perceived truth.

Mothering

14 In her groundbreaking text "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: A New American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers emphasizes the difference between "motherhood" which is reproduced as the role of white women through the violent exclusion of the bodies of black women from the definition of the human and the reproduction of "mothering" which is the labor that black women have still been compelled to perform despite their exclusion from the domain of proper "motherhood." This was a crucial intervention for Spillers to make in 1987

⁸ "The Politics of Being Other: Third World Women." *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Vol. 2 No. 4, 1979, 1.

⁹ Chandra Mohanty, Conference Presentation "Transnational Feminisms" at Mellon-Mays Summer Conference, June 14th 2006.

when both black nationalist invocations of black motherhood as a subservient role for the reproduction of a patriarchal black nation and white feminist reifications of domestic labor made black women's sexuality and subjectivity unspeakable. In her 1989 essay "But What Do We Think We're Doing: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History," Barbara Christian describes the resistance she encountered when she attempted to publish her monograph *Black Women Novelists* thusly:

"[...] practically all academic presses as well as trade presses commented that my subject was not important-that people were not interested in black women writers. Couldn't I write a book on the social problems of black women? Affected by the rhetoric a la Moynihan, most of these presses could hardly believe black women were artists."

Christian's dilemma points to the discursive moment during which black feminist criticism struggled to emerge. The intersection of narrow social movement priorities and a dominant rhetoric of black maternal pathologies made it difficult to argue that black women were capable of literary production or creative expression; the name 'black woman' had become synonymous with 'social problems', in state policy, academic discourses, and progressive social movements. In order to produce subjectivities in which black women could be imagined to create, black feminist critics generated a critical use of maternity that they distinguished from patriarchal and capitalist definitions of motherhood and appropriations of "mothering."

15 Spillers explains that both the state of motherhood and the labor of mothering are reproduced through ideological and legal acts of naming that dehumanize black women and transform their bodies into flesh and their offspring into slaves. Fred Moten builds on Spiller's analysis by emphasizing the shared root *mater* in the words "maternity" and "materiality" explaining that the trace through which we understand black people as material objects is a maternal trace. In a 2006 discussion of "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe," Spillers elaborates that her intention in the essay was to create a new vocabulary wherein the history of black subjection in the United States could seriously destabilize functions of gender and family. This creation of a new vocabulary, and indeed a new grammar, required the radical reassessment of the terms mother and mothering. I will invoke the term "mothering" modified by queer and black to describe the material intervention through what I understand to be a queer appropriation of the production of difference wherein difference, instead of becoming a dehumanizing mark, enables the co-production of a radically different future.

16 My use of the term "mothering" uses the modifiers queer and black in order to disrupt the normative incorporation of maternity into a narrative of patriarchal family. It is clear from

the political discourse on black maternity in the United States that "black maternity" is seen as disruptive to the patriarchal order of family and to the model of "democracy" that the patriarchal family functions to reproduce. By keeping the terms "black" and "mothering" together I hope to retain this threat born in the moment Spillers invokes. Black maternity has always been about production (in this American Grammar Book), or more explicitly the reproduction of abjection, instead of family, but as Spillers elaborates in a later essay the law that the child would follow the condition of the mother "did nothing to establish the maternal prerogative for the African female." By adding the term queer, I am suggesting that a focus on the black queer maternal enables the production of an intersubjective future that does not reproduce ownership of or through bodies but rather reimagines connection, accountability and the production of a livable world.

"To Mother Ourselves"

17 In 1983, Audre Lorde published an article in *Essence Magazine* entitled "Black Women and Anger," later republished in her 1984 volume of essays *Sister Outsider* as "Eye to Eye: Black Women Hatred, and Anger." Lorde's 'Eye to Eye' appeared alongside an article entitled 'Sister Love' in which Alexis De Veaux outlined a politics of loving other black women that included but also exceeded romantic love. The explicitly diasporic tone of De Veaux's companion piece brings Lorde's diasporic vision into context. De Veaux opens her piece with a quintessentially diasporic statement: "I am a Daughter of Africa." In order to include her sexuality, class and gender within this primary identification with Africa, De Veaux explains that she must "dress myself in my own words." Similarly Lorde, writing a piece that approaches the issue from another angle, the internalized hatred and anger that makes sisterhood between black women difficult, agrees with De Veaux that the articulation of love and partnership between black women is a radical and poetic act of translation.

18 The main argument of Lorde's article is that as black women "we can learn to mother ourselves." This statement comes after a section in which Lorde explains that black daughters often believe that no other person will be able to provide them with the love and understanding that they have learned to expect from their mothers. Lorde wants to counter the belief that only black women socialized into a mother/daughter relationship with each other can provide the mothering that healing and community building requires. But it is significant that Lorde does not say "we can learn to mother each other." She says instead "we can learn to mother ourselves" which relies on an intersubjective production of a rival maternity, that does not reproduce familial relations, but rather disperses the labor of mothering. Lorde argues that

black women "eye to eye" reflect the defense and hatred that we feel for ourselves onto each other such that answering the hatred that we have learned to metabolize after being forced to consume routine ideological, physical and sexual violence is a coproductive process that requires women "who will not turn away" from each other.

19 My argument is that this combination of a queer vision of the future and an anti-capitalist relation in the present is a key concept for reading the literary productivity of black feminists during the late 20th century which is marked by discursive interventions into the potential of mothering. How else do we understand why a figure as publicly resistant to domestic models of normalcy as June Jordan entitled her collection of anti-imperialist love poems, *Living Room?* Why would a collective of black lesbian feminists founding a publishing company for third world women decide to call it "Kitchen Table Press"? Black feminist literary producers during the late 20th century were actively engaged in appropriating and transforming discourses of home, reimagining nurturing to create space for a radically different future.

20 The structures, practices and ideas expressed by these publishing collectives in the 1980's enacted the co-productive pedagogy of "learn(ing) to mother ourselves" at the levels of labor, content and form. The individual articulations of writers such as Jordan and Lorde were not only sustained by their continued communication with each other during this period (during which they also decided both decided to end their editorial participation at the mostly white publication *Chrysalis* due to racism),¹⁰ but was also indicative of a larger scene in which the transformations they imagined were validated. In the late 1970's June Jordan participated in a collective called "The Sisterhood" which also included Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Veve Clark, Renita Weems and others who intended to create something called Kizzy Enterprises, which they envisioned as a periodical, publishing initiative and clearing house to be stationed at Shange's home and funded on a not-for-profit basis to reach a mass of working black and third world people and to keep important black texts in print. This collective was in communication with possible chapters in Atlanta and in the Bay Area, met monthly in the homes of writers scholars and publishers and envisioned a transformed literary impact generated by their relationships to each other. Though it seems that Kizzy Enterprises never officially emerged, in November 1980, the women who had participated over the years in the Black Feminist Retreats hosted by the Combahee River Collective gathered in response to a phone conversation between Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde to create Kitchen Table Press. The gathering, which consisted almost exclusively of

¹⁰ "Correspondence with *Chrysalis*." Box 85, Folder 1. Radcliffe Library: Harvard University.

women of African American and Afro-Caribbean identification, agreed in that first meeting that the press would be for all third world women and women of color, not just black women and not just lesbians, though the Press did intend to combat the under-representation of lesbians of color on the literary landscape. At that first meeting the group also decided on the name "Kitchen Table Press" which they chose because it referred to alternative modes of invalidated production that women of color had depended on for their self-expression and survival. The press itself ran as a community-supported initiative, which at a significant financial burden kept all of its titles in print for its entire lifetime, regardless of sales.¹¹ Women who had participated in the Combahee River Collective and the Salsa Soul Sisters, a lesbian of color organization based in New York City, also formed the Azalea Collective, which hosted the first 3rd World Lesbian Writers conference and which produced a literary and visual arts publication with a rare editorial process of including all submissions from lesbians of color and rotating editorial responsibilities so that no one's labor became specialized, or taken for granted.¹² The publishing apparatus developed by these black feminists sought to create rival spaces of nurturing in the anthologies they produced. Most explicitly, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* attempts to serve as a surrogate home for black feminists and lesbians who are rejected from black communities because of their refusal to reproduce a gendered status quo. In the introduction Barbara Smith explains her intentions to respond to the phenomena that "so many Black people who are threatened by feminism have argued that by being a Black feminist (especially if you are also a lesbian) you have left the race, are no longer a part of the black community, in short, no longer have a home." Smith explicitly reveals the mission of *Home Girls* as the creation of collective nurturing by and for black feminists who have rejected other models of home due to their commitment to a transformed future. Home in *Home Girls* becomes a process of alternative nurturing, responding to the patriarchal forms of home that text like Amiri Baraka's collection of essays entitled *Home* enforced. Learning to "mother ourselves," in the sense in which Lorde will express in *Essence* around the same time, is a call for the production of a rival sustainability, providing a system to produce a livable world.

"that dark rich land we wanted to wander through..."

21 While much of this essay has focused on a look at the activist and literary discourse of mothering generated by black feminists in the Northeastern United States, it is important to

¹¹ Barbara Smith. "Memorial Address for Audre Lorde." Box 101, Folder 4. June Jordan Archives. Radcliffe Library: Harvard University.

¹² "Note" in *Azalea*, front matter. Vol.1 No. 2.

remember that the black feminists in this region were intentionally in communication not only with black feminists and writers in other regions of the United States but with self-identified black feminist all over the world. The black feminist literary scene was transnational in the late 20th century, but this was not a novelty of the avowed anti-imperialism of black feminists in this era. At the cusp of the previous century, black women writer and publisher Ida B. Wells founded the first international anti-lynching organizations during her travel to England, tracing a path that abolitionist and formerly enslaved woman had traveled before her. Black women from the Caribbean and the United States attended the graduation of Anna Julia Cooper from the Sorbonne in Paris. While researching and writing about these precedents, black feminist literary producers also nurtured a collective movement generated between the differences of their national contexts by reviewing each other's individual books and anthologies periodicals and writing letters of support and subscription to the wide variety of black feminist publications that emerged in the United States, Canada and Great Britain during the late 20th century. The pathologization of black maternity through political rhetoric and social policies in the United Kingdom and Canada led black feminists in these sites to critically engage social production and the language of mothering as well. As we contextualize a movement of black feminist publishing it is important to note the alternative modes of generation that black feminist collectives modeled. Elsewhere I catalog a number of the models to counter the dominant influence of capitalist markets on our historiography of black women's writing. The preponderance of anti-capitalist autonomous literary institutions created and sustained by black women writing in predominantly white national literary markets presents a trajectory through which to reread the contours of black feminist literary practice. My intention in this essay is to point out the queered genealogies of black mothering and to suggest that the figure of the mother in the ignored histories of black feminist anti-capitalist publishing in neocolonialist sites of power such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States could play the role that Michelle Wright suggests this figure plays in the theorization of diaspora. Production becomes visible, as does the violent reproduction of a status quo.

22 A black feminist transnational genealogy for the production of queer sociality and critique clarifies the intersections between reproductive rights, state sponsored narratives of pathology and the queered subjectivities of black women writers within hostile publishing markets and academic institutions. The articulation of queer contexts for mothering enables a theorization of queer intergenerationality, disrupting the oppositional positioning of queer critique and futurity, while maintaining a critique of heteropatriarchal reproduction.

Meanwhile a look at the complicity between reproductive coherence and the brief publishing boon of "black women writers" encourages us to look at the dangerous, unmarketable publishing practices that black feminists (many of whom were at the same time working for capitalist publishing institutions) sustained across space and age. While the flows publishing capital sought to reproduce the presence of a few black women writer superstars across the English speaking first world (Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and to a lesser extent Audre Lorde and June Jordan), and to ignore indigenous black feminists movements with specific demands against the state structures of the United Kingdom, Canada and the third world feminist movement in the U.S, attention to the anti-capitalist publishing alternatives that black women nurtured in these sites reveals another geography of articulation and translation. The critique of reproductive futurity that a position centering black motherhood and queer subjectivity requires, illuminates the contours of a body of black feminist literary production that very reproductive force of a market economy as made invisible. But the exclusion of these important text need not be reproduced. Audre Lorde did not simply say "We can mother ourselves." She wrote, "We can *learn* to mother ourselves." This is one effort to enact that pedagogical process, such that a the reproduction of oppression loses its inevitability, such that the body of work that we call "black women writers" is deepened by our criticism of capitalist market limitations, such that we can present ourselves with alternate futures, and revised histories, and *not turn away*.

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Sisterly (Inter)Actions: Audre Lorde and the Development of Afro-German Women's Communities

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Abstract:

Audre Lorde and her work as writer-activist have had a strong influence on the development of Afro-German women's communities, especially with regard to fostering solidarity among these women and creating a distinct group identity. However, the interactions between the "warrior poet" and her "Black German sisters" have not been one-directionally influential. Rather, traces of her connection with and impressions of Germany and Afro-German women can be found in Lorde's work and call for a reading of her writings in this context. The women she connected with personally or via her (literary) work have been transformed or at least affected by their mutual exchange(s) with her. This essay analyzes these transatlantic dialogues and interactions which are primarily based on gender and black solidarity and outlines Lorde's seminal role for Afro-German women as individuals and as an identifiable and visible group in German society. In the first part of this article, I, therefore, put Audre Lorde's works in the context of her relationship to Germany and particularly Afro-German women. The second part primarily focuses on Lorde's influence on Afro-German women's communities and the final part of this paper works towards an understanding of the overall conditions and consequences of this mutual exchange as well as its meaning within the context of the African Diaspora.

1 Audre Lorde first came to Germany in 1984 as a guest professor at the Free University of Berlin, where she taught a poetry workshop, a course on Black American women poets as well as a seminar entitled "The Poet as Outsider." Dagmar Schultz, who was teaching at the Free University at that time, had met the self-proclaimed "Black, Lesbian, Mother, Warrior, Poet"¹ at the 1980 World Conference on Women in Copenhagen, Denmark and had immediately invited Lorde to teach in Berlin (2000: 7). It took four years until Lorde finally arrived in Germany but during these years Schultz did not remain inactive in her efforts to introduce Lorde to German audiences. In 1981, she attended the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association entitled "Women Respond to Racism" and listened to Lorde's as well as Adrienne Rich's keynote lectures and this experience finally led to the publication of *Macht und Sinnlichkeit*² - a selection/collection of Rich's and Lorde's work in German (Schultz 1986: 6).³ Schultz describes her experience of and reaction to listening to

¹ As Marion Kraft states in her preface to *Die Quelle unserer Macht*, Audre Lorde usually introduced herself with the words "I am a Black, Lesbian, Mother, Warrior, Poet" to her international audiences (9).

² *Macht und Sinnlichkeit* was published in 1983 by sub rosa Verlag, Berlin and was not only the first German language publication of some of Lorde's writings but also, as Fatima El-Tayeb states, "the first German language publication on the US debate on racism within the feminist movement" (74).

³ Alexis de Veaux's account of these events differs slightly from Schultz's description. Lorde's biographer claims that Lorde and Schultz first met at the 1981 NWSA convention. Schultz was highly impressed and deeply moved; she wrote a letter to Lorde in which she invited her to teach at the Free University and asked her for permission to translate some of her works into German. Lorde did not answer this letter but a second one was

these two lectures in the following words:

I listened to their speeches with a renewed feeling of acuteness and own responsibility and decided to edit a book that would possibly stimulate discussions about racism and anti-Semitism more intensely among women. The problem of white racism in the USA, which is mentioned in some of these texts, might initially appear distant to German Women readers. However, if we turn towards our own field of experiences with anti-Semitism and the increasing xenophobia in our country we will not be able to reject the feeling of being appealed. (1986: 10, my translation)

This personal account is indicative of some crucial aspects that have shaped Audre Lorde's reception in Germany. First, her works as well as the way they have been published and marketed in Germany explicitly address a female audience. In fact, as we will see, gender solidarity along with black solidarity has been crucial to Lorde's interactions with Germans and her influence is greatest on feminist and Afro-German discourses, particularly at the intersection of these two where Afro-German women's communities stand. Also, it is decisive that Lorde was first introduced to German audiences together with a *white* woman author grouped by their identities as outspoken lesbian women writers marginalized by their respective ethnic affiliation. Lorde's work and activism demonstrate that she can - though she certainly not always does - easily cross the racial boundary potentially separating her from white audiences by addressing women in general and promoting sisterhood 'across the color line,' which none the less acknowledges and appreciates differences among women. Additionally, Lorde entered German (feminist) discourses about racism through her work as well as her activism, and proved Schultz right in her initial impression that the "warrior poet" had something to say to German women. A close and detailed examination of her influence on and reception in Germany requires excavating the different discourses that were shaped by and dealt with her work and activism and building an archive - in Foucault's sense - as a necessary basis for further analysis. The scope of this article allows merely for a cursory and eclectic overview of the first findings in this regard and some initial analytical approaches.⁴

2 Lorde herself generally defines a very broad audience for her work, when she states: "My audience is *every* single person who can use the work I do" (Kraft 1986: 152). However, Lorde also points out that women and above all black women are of particular importance for her and that she "[thinks] of [her] responsibility in terms of women because there are many

replied to in time and the author accepted the invitation and agreed to have some of her works published in German (265-66). Veaux also notes that financial considerations played a role in Lorde's and the University's decision about her guest professorship (327) - a fact that Schultz does not mention.

⁴ Audre Lorde's work and activism in Germany will constitute a central chapter of my dissertation and this article presents the current state of my research, namely gathering material and building an archive. An in-depth and detailed analysis of the material will be provided by my thesis and the first thoughts on the topic, which I present in this paper, are to be understood as work in progress.

voices for men" (Tate 104). Though Lorde sought to empower herself by speaking out and breaking silences, she always expected people and particularly women not only to listen to but also to answer her call.⁵ She did not address women as a passive audience but always sought the dialogue with her 'sisters' and tried to encourage them to raise their voices, which also bears witness to the fact that her art and social activism are inextricably intertwined. She decidedly speaks out against any notion of "art for art's sake." Her writings are not only strongly tied to her own experiences but also to her activist goals and visions. Believing in the power of language and the empowering potential of speaking out, she definitely wanted women to respond to her ideas and she had a "need to hear their reaction to her work" (J. Hall ix). Lorde was highly interested in meeting women of the African Diaspora and she claims that when she came to Berlin in 1984, it was decidedly "one of [her] aims [...] to meet Black German women" (1991: 67). Meeting these women did not only "[serve] as a catalyst for events that would radically change Afro-German history" and the development of Afro-German women's communities (El-Tayeb 74), but also made a strong impression on Audre Lorde herself. As she explains in her journal which has been published as "A Burst of Light," she enjoyed her stay in Berlin,⁶ was excited by meeting black German women and especially happy that her classes attracted a growing number of Black women. Lorde decisively mentions the pleasure she gained from working with Afro-German women and observing their development of self-awareness, collective identity, and group membership. This process of developing Afro-German women's communities had just begun in 1984 and, of course, took much longer than Lorde's first three-month visit to Berlin, but the connection between the writer-activist and Germany, (Afro-)German women, as well as other Afro-Europeans had already been well established. Her trip through Europe, meeting Afro-European, and especially Afro-German women was central to Lorde's appraisal and development of her own work and thinking. Her journal entry on June 10, 1984, when she was still in Berlin, reads: "For the first time I really feel that my writing has a substance and stature that will survive me. I have done good work" (61). Her connections with and interest in Afro-German women in general, personal friendships as well as the biological cancer treatment which she underwent in Berlin kept Lorde coming back to Germany every year until her death in 1992 and set up the framework for dialogues and mutual exchanges.

⁵ For her, this might also entail proving her wrong. She states: "I really feel if what I have to say is wrong, then there will be some woman who will stand up and say Audre Lorde was in error. But my words will be there, something for her to bounce off, something to incite thought, activity" (Evans 263). This proposition also underlines the fact that women were her primary concern and audience.

⁶ As Alexis de Veaux writes, the trip to Germany was also important for Lorde, who had been diagnosed with a liver tumor, on a very personal basis, since it helped her "to allay her depression," in which she feared to slide at that time (340).

3 Germany and Afro-German women remained a vital issue for Lorde and became part of her writing, activism, and thinking. Some of her poetry deals more or less explicitly with her personal experiences in and impressions of Germany, e.g. "This Urn Contains Earth from German Concentration Camps," or the situation of Blacks in Germany, e.g. "Berlin is Hard on Colored Girls." In her poem "East Berlin," which is collected in the posthumously published book *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*, the voice explicitly states that "[i]t feels dangerous now to be Black in Berlin" and mentions an "Afro-German woman stomped to death / by skinheads in Alexanderplatz" (50). The poem demonstrates not only the author's familiarity with the political and social developments in Germany, which experienced a growth of violent racist excesses after its reunification, but also her special concern with Afro-German women and their situation. Beyond her reflections on these issues in her poetry, she documented her experiences in Germany in "A Burst of Light" and several other lectures and publications and also actively got involved with German discourses and activism on racism and feminism. Two examples particularly attest to this involvement: First, Lorde immediately noticed the isolation in which most Afro-German women lived in the early 1980s and, in consequence, actively encouraged, supported, and mentored their growing communities. It was particularly important for Afro-German women who were not only isolated but hardly noticed in a country which repressed its colonial past and - at best - ignored the existence of a Black population. Audre Lorde was at that time older than most of the Afro-German women who became active in building a community and due to her political and activist experience Lorde could take on the role as mentor and guide. Second, while spending her last summer in Germany in 1992, Lorde together with her partner Gloria Joseph wrote a protest letter, which was published in several German newspapers, to Chancellor Helmut Kohl in response to the pogrom in Rostock. They explicitly question the meaning of these developments in Germany for the international community of "people of color" and point towards the damage that this incident might have inflicted on the public image of Germany (Schultz 1994: 172). Her concern for people of African descent in Germany (and the world) and her anger about this racist act proved to be more important to her in this situation than the fact that she had to continue her struggle against cancer (of which she died the same year).

4 Lorde tried not to allow her illness to interfere with her political activism, and this attitude certainly contributed to the respect and appreciation with which (Afro-German) women viewed her and her work as well as her crucial mentor position for Afro-German (women's) communities. However, just as the voice of her above-mentioned poem, Lorde

herself did no longer feel safe in Germany. In 1990, she wrote about a poetry reading in Dresden, where she also spoke out against racism: "For the first time in six years I am afraid as I read my poetry in Germany" (1991: 71). This shows her sensitivity to the political and social situation and attests once more to the fact that she was influenced by the political and social conditions and changes which she met in Germany. In her contribution to the 1992 edition of *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, Lorde explains her concern about these developments but also her vision of a "global feminism" and a changed German nation at the center of Europe, in which Afro-Germans play a central role:

Geographically and politically, Germany stands at the center of Europe. Reunified, it will once again represent a powerful force in European affairs. Historically, this force has not always been a peaceful one. A new Germany's potential power, and their relative part in influencing its direction, are part of the destiny of African-Germans, as the political positions of the United States are part of the destiny of African-Americans (235).⁷

In this paragraph, she also draws a parallel between Afro-Americans and Afro-Germans indicating that there are issues to which both groups can relate and by which they are connected. Recognizing such global connections constitutes, for Lorde, the necessary prerequisite for the global feminism she envisions and she decidedly calls for American and Afro-American women alike to realize that "[they] are not alone in [their] world situation" (1991: 71). Lorde herself developed "deep bonds with Afro-German women and with other women's communities in Germany" and encouraged the transatlantic dialogue between women in general and women of African descent in particular (Hall xv). Her own connections with Afro-European women certainly played a crucial role for "the globalization of her consciousness of women of color" and contributed to her continuing role as an advocate for gender and black solidarity across national boundaries (Veaux 340). With regard to Afro-German women, their history, and situation, Lorde states that clearly "[their] war is the same" and positions them within an "international community of people of color" (1991: 68; 69).

5 By several strategies, Lorde's writing and activism reached out to German and Afro-German women and influenced German discourses on a variety of issues such as feminism, identity, ethnicity, sexuality, and racism. In order to exercise this influence, her cultural work had to cross language, cultural, national, and racial divides. Lorde's crossing of the Atlantic and actual presence in Germany certainly fostered this process and, according to testimonies by contemporary witnesses, meeting her personally constituted a significant and often fascinating event. Her students at the Free University were inspired to question their identity

⁷ This translation is taken from Lorde 1991: 70

and their approach to poetry because Lorde strongly encouraged them to move beyond close readings and structural analyses and to take the emotional potential of the works as well as their own reactions towards the poems into account. Dagmar Schultz states that she personally learned a lot from Audre Lorde and further describes that thousands of people throughout Europe were fascinated by Lorde's lectures and readings through her charisma as well as her poetry and political thinking (2000: 10; 8). For some aspects of Lorde's impact on German culture and society, her actual presence in the country was fundamental because it allowed for a direct and relatively unmediated dialogue and added weight to her messages and concerns. This is particularly true for her role in the development of Afro-German women's communities and their sense of self and a collective identity. Schultz, in this context, speaks about the importance of Lorde's *presence* rather than her work or her mediated images (2000: 8) and Stefanie Kron highlights Lorde's active involvement by crediting her as a major *initiator* of this movement (114). Though Lorde's lectures, readings, and personal meetings with her German audience were a vital part of her work, the publication of her writings in German was necessary for addressing a larger German public. However, examining the publication history also shows the intended primary audience of her works and allows for speculations about the discourses she in fact influenced most. Of course, as Marion Kraft states in her preface to *Die Quelle unserer Macht*, translating her writings culturally and linguistically is not an easy task (1994:12). Renate Stendhal would certainly agree with this notion and *Macht und Sinnlichkeit* also includes her "Anmerkungen der Übersetzerin" in order to sensitize the German readership for the problematics of translation.⁸ These processes of linguistic as well as cultural translation are difficult and there are several means by which the German publishers of Lorde's work tried to enhance its accessibility to a German audience and pave the way for a more general reception of Lorde's work in Germany. However, as West-Berlin author Traude Bührmann states:

Female authors like Audre Lorde [...] are, in fact, nominally known to many; however, it seems they are hardly ever read. That is they are virtually not sold at all over here. (qtd. in Morrien 10, my translation)

6 Focussing on gender solidarity was particularly important for marketing strategies of Lorde's works in Germany. Most of her writings were published by Orlanda (formerly sub rosa) Women's Press and primarily addressed a female audience. The publishing house not only perpetuated Lorde's focus on women and particularly Black women but also her

⁸ Stendhal primarily discusses the terms power and anger, for which German equivalents are particularly hard to find. In her notes, she also thanks Lorde for her anger and her impatience with which she pursued her educational work informing white female 'ignoramus' about racism (13).

activism. The first edition of *Auf Leben und Tod: Krebstagebuch*, the German version of Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, includes a contribution by a German woman who provides her personal record of dealing with breast cancer. Waltraut Ruf's essay supports the impression that Lorde's book is relevant for every woman regardless of nationality, sexuality, or ethnicity and she explicitly states that Lorde has found the words which speak to *every* woman (103). Also, the German edition includes a list of self-help and support groups and its readers are encouraged to contact the publishing house with the affirmation that every letter will be answered. Even those books by Lorde which have been taken up by a larger German publishing house (Fischer) have been marketed almost exclusively as women's literature. In Fischer's edition of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* the original subtitle has been substituted by *Ein Leben unter Frauen* ("A Life among Women"), emphasizing the aspect of women's communities over the personal account of Lorde. Moreover, the blurb asserts that "Audre Lorde's Autobiographie ist ein kämpferisches Zeugnis für die Sache der Frauen" ("Audre Lorde's autobiography is a warrior testimony for women's cause"). Additionally, with her *Cancer Journals*, Lorde opened up a forum for discussing breast cancer, a topic which had been completely silenced before. Schultz claims in her preface to the German edition that a book like the *Cancer Journals*, which explicitly and openly deals with breast cancer, did not exist before in Germany. (2000: 5) Ruf confirms this notion by writing that the issue of cancer has generally been off-limits and continues to be silenced (104).

7 Marion Kraft expresses the hope that Blacks, white women, *and* men would use Lorde's oeuvre to better understand themselves and their life conditions as well as the power of language, but in Germany, Lorde's works mainly circulated within feminist and Black discourses (1994: 13).⁹ She was most important where her work and activism could flow along lines of gender as well as black solidarity: especially putting racism on the feminist agenda was crucial for *Afro-German* women and their development of self-definitions, collective and individual identities, and communities as well as their position within and relation to feminist discourses. Together with Afro-German women, Lorde coined the term *Afro-German* in analogy to *Afro-American*. This moment was decisive, since though it "was not the birth of a black German consciousness," it "nevertheless symbolises the central role that US activism had for Afro-Germans" (El-Tayeb 66). The term was quickly established in different discourses and the editors of *Farbe bekennen* describe its meaning and their intention of employing it in the following words:

⁹ Lorde herself describes one of her German audiences at a reading in Dresden as consisting mainly of "white women, and young Afro-German men and women" (1991: 70) and Felicitas Hoppe in her much disputed article about Lorde's commemoration in Berlin emphasizes the fact that, in the end, even one man showed up (15).

By the term 'Afro-German' we mean all those who wish to refer to themselves as such, regardless of whether they have one or two black parents. Just as with the similar name 'Black Germans,' our intent is not to exclude on the basis of origin or skin color. [...] More important, we want to propose 'Afro-German' in opposition to more commonly used names like 'half-breed,' 'mulatto,' or 'colored,' as an attempt to define ourselves instead of being defined by others.¹⁰ (10)

This paragraph displays that using *Black German* or *Afro-German* does not only mean substituting older and rather negatively connoted terms with new ones but also symbolizes the growing agency of Afro-Germans and their claim to self-determination and self-definition. It demonstrates the power of language and breaking silences that Lorde generally propagated. Additionally, it is decisive and certainly suites Lorde's purposes, that it is women who take these important steps towards a conscious Black German identity and community. By speaking out, they empower themselves within the Afro-German community and take the lead towards a new self-understanding.

8 The book *Farbe bekennen* is particularly "linked to feminism in general and US black feminists in particular" (El-Tayeb 76). Its publication can certainly count as a milestone in Afro-German history. Working on the book for the Afro-German editors meant beginning to build a network, to establish contacts with other Afro-German women, and to discuss their experiences.¹¹ Before, as they state in their preface, these women were largely isolated and used to dealing with their heritage and their identity on their own, without being in touch with other Afro-Germans (9). Its publication extended the development of a network between Afro-German women and also meant a first appearance before the public - drawing attention to a long-ignored part of German history and present as well as the continuing issue of racism. This can also be seen as a first approach towards rewriting German history from the perspective of Black Germans and towards understanding the - at best - marginalized situation of Afro-Germans through historical, theoretical, as well as personal reflections. The project was based in Berlin but, as Fatima El-Tayeb points out, its effects did reach "beyond the Berlin group of black women, influencing the first national meeting of black Germans, which took place in Wiesbaden in 1985" (75). Audre Lorde's contribution to this development is acknowledged by the greeting which she wrote for the volume addressing Afro-German women as part of the African Diaspora and recognizing their important work. However, throughout *Farbe bekennen* Afro-German women speak for themselves. The multiple effects

¹⁰ This translation is taken from the 1992 English edition of *Farbe bekennen* which is entitled *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (see xxii-xxiii).

¹¹ As Afro-Germans, they share a common experience. Katharina Oguntoye and May Opitz very briefly delineate this experience in the following words: "Our essential commonality is that we are black and have experienced a major part of our socialization and in confrontation with West German society" (1992: xxii).

of the book can be seen on different discursive levels through the introduction of new terms, perspectives, and topics and through new participants (or discoursing subjects), namely Afro-German women entering public discourses. As part of the public debate about Afro-German identity it can also be read as part of a counter-discourse which challenges the dominant assumption that perceives of Afro-Germans as African despite their language and culture. Michelle Wright states: "As many authors in *Farbe bekennen* complain, too many white Germans are either resistant or incapable of imagining someone who is both Black and German" (2003: 298). The project *Farbe bekennen*, which was also Wrights first encounter with Afro-German history, had numerous, very practical effects for Afro-Germans. In the mid-1980s, the ISD (Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V.) as well as ADEFRA (Schwarze deutsche Frauen/Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland e.V.) were founded. They addressed a larger public through their respective publications *afro look* and *Afrekete* and established themselves in Germany. In 1992 several ISD-groups already existed in German cities (today, the ISD-Homepage lists more than ten active groups) and ADEFRA recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.¹²

9 The editors of *Farbe bekennen* retrospectively estimate the influence of their project as follows: May Opitz and Katharina Oguntoye point out that German social conditions have changed and *Farbe bekennen* has contributed to that change, however self-articulation and agency of Afro-Germans continue to be necessary (1992: 10;12) . In fact, Afro-Germans and particularly Afro-German women had become more visible and recognized in German society and Afro-German communities had already been developed. However, racism in its various open and subtle forms has continued and social recognition and integration still constitute major problems. Dagmar Schultz also addresses developments in the white women's movement because as Afro-German women confronted their white 'sisters' and dialogues across racial boundaries had been made possible, racism and anti-Semitism appeared on the feminist agenda (14). She additionally mentions the importance of Audre Lorde and her lectures and readings which white women could attend and thereby had the chance to discuss with the African-American author (14), who was and is perceived by the Afro-German communities as "one of their most inspiring leaders and organizers" (Wright 2004: 196). Lorde's input was definitely vital for the Afro-German movement and especially the development of Afro-German women's communities; however, Afro-German women's own

¹² For a more detailed account of the development of Afro-German communities in Germany see Part II in *TheBlackBook: Deutschlands Häutungen* published by AntiDiskriminierungsBüro Köln and cyberNomads.

initiative and the general zeitgeist were equally important factors.¹³ Ekpenyong Ani states in her sketch of the development of ADEFRA that many women followed Audre Lorde's call in *Farbe bekennen* and began to build up communities and networks of which ADEFRA was one of its first highly visible effects (145). In my opinion, her statement aptly describes Lorde's role for this movement: Her call reached Germany at a time when Black consciousness and feminist concerns were emerging and made it possible for her voice to be heard and to resonate with such far-reaching effects. And, in fact, feminist issues were very important for the Afro-German movement at that time. As El-Tayeb writes:

Lorde's reaching out to a black community that most African Americans assumed to be non-existent is indicative of the important role of women and feminist issues in the first decade of Afro-German activism. (66)

Audre Lorde's activism as well as the project *Farbe bekennen* have developed a continuing legacy in German and maybe even European discourses about ethnicity, race, and gender. For example, *TheBlackBook*, which assembles texts and essays dealing with the Afro-German past and present historically, theoretically, and practically, was published in 2004 and its editors explicitly locate it in the tradition of publications like *Farbe bekennen* (9). Also, Stefanie Kron claims that the book was her first encounter with Afro-German history and literature and influenced her view on and occupation with this topic, which resulted in the publication of her study on Afro-German women's writing (9). Her book as well as Jennifer Michels' essay "The Impact of Audre Lorde's Politics and Poetics on Afro-German Women Writers" point out that Afro-German women writers constitute a community which was especially influenced by Lorde's writings and activism. As Michels explains, Lorde "inspired May Ayim, Helga Emde, Ika Hügel-Marshall, and others to write" and her poetics "shaped the content and form chosen by Afro-German writers" (21; 30).

10 Lorde's impact on Afro-Germans and Afro-German women in particular has to be viewed against the background of her outspoken postulation of black and gender solidarity as well as her acknowledgment of "these women as part of a worldwide black Diaspora" (El-Tayeb 74). Marion Kraft even claims that Lorde's poetical oeuvre at large draws a picture of women of the African Diaspora, their oppression as well as their resistance and that Africa as a cultural center constitutes a major motif within her poems (1994: 12). Lorde's interactions with Afro-Germans have to be viewed within this larger context of the African Diaspora(s).

¹³ For example, in 1984, the year Lorde first visited Germany, Gisela Fremgen already published her book *...und wenn du dazu noch schwarz bist: Berichte schwarzer Frauen in der Bundesrepublik*. And even earlier, in 1973, Karin Thimm and Du Rell Echols had published *Schwarze in Deutschland: Protokolle*. This testifies to the fact that Lorde's influence met with an already emerging Black consciousness and was made possible largely by the surrounding conditions.

Lorde's vision of global sisterhood and black solidarity moves beyond national and nationalistic paradigms. Her relationship with Afro-German women constitutes one element of her work and activism and its circulation within the realm of the "black Atlantic," which, due to Germany's colonial past and its long-lasting repression of this history and continuing problems with racism, met with certain particular national and cultural circumstances but also exceeded them. In Paul Gilroy's words, "intermediate concepts" like the "idea of the diaspora" are important because "they break the dogmatic focus on discrete national dynamics which has characterised so much modern Euro-American cultural thought" (6). Lorde refers to her "Black German sisters" and thus acknowledges their nationality as a part of their identity and specificity within the African Diaspora. In turn, she also emphasizes their characteristics which allow for solidarity beyond national and cultural differences, namely gender and race/ethnicity. Her reaching out to and interacting with Black communities outside the United States also underlines that "the black Diaspora experience is not identical with the black presence in the Americas" and has to be viewed not only within the boundaries of one nation but also within at least the culture of the Black Atlantic (El-Tayeb 76). As Gilroy states, "[s]triving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness" (1). This statement reflects one aspect of Lorde's implicit understanding of the African Diaspora: The term *double consciousness* has been coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the problematic of being African-American but can equally be applied to Afro-Europeans without taking a homogenizing stand and assuming that their experiences necessarily resemble those of African-Americans.

11 Audre Lorde's and Afro-German women's activism has helped to make the experience of Blacks in Germany visible and to publicly discuss racism and the history of Black presence in Germany. In this sense, it has contributed to a growing awareness that German culture and society are affected by the African Diaspora and its implications. Additionally, Lorde calls for the different communities of the African Diaspora to recognize each other and to show solidarity while at the same time respecting and appreciating differences. Black internationalism and Black solidarity movements across national borders are certainly not a new phenomenon and have been studied extensively as, for example, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* or Brent Hayes Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora* demonstrate. However, Lorde's participation in the Atlantic cultural traffic and her seminal role for Afro-German women foregrounds an important aspect of the notion of the African Diaspora, which has received less theoretical and analytical attention: gender. As Sandra Gunning, Tera W. Hunter, and Michele Mitchell state in 2004:

[...] the use of gender as a category of analysis remains something of a challenge for African Diaspora studies. [...] too many studies past and present have addressed the experience of black masculinity as a collective identity without a self-conscious assessment of the continual transformation of gender roles and sexuality within a black diasporic framework. (2-3)

Lorde's transatlantic cultural work as well as the Afro-German movement which emerged during the 1980s both attest to the fact that the category of gender has to be taken into account when theorizing and analyzing African Diasporas. The rise of Afro-German communities and Lorde's contribution to this development have initially been shaped by and linked to feminism and feminist concerns. Afro-Germans entered intellectual and public discourses and became a visible and active group within a larger African diasporic community through the (often feminist) activism of women. In this regard, the German community of the African Diaspora intrinsically resists being conceptualized along the parameters of Black masculinity. The diasporic path of Audre Lorde, the Afro-German movement, and their interactions cannot be generalized towards a theory of African Diasporas at large, but since, as Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur remark, "[t]heorizations of diaspora need not, and should not, be divorced from historical and cultural specificity" this particular diasporic community can strengthen the focus on gender within discourses about African Diasporas (3). Obviously, the interactions between Lorde and Afro-German women cannot be viewed outside their specific historic socio-cultural framework but they also remind us that dialogues between different groups within the African Diaspora, which is itself fractured by nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, sexuality etc., also require translation and mediation.

12 In this particular case, "[t]he interactive relations between black communities worldwide are reflected in the profound influence that African decolonisation struggles and the US black liberation movement had on the development of an Afro-German sense of identity" (El-Tayeb 66). In this quote, another important aspect is mentioned for the dialogue between Afro-America and Afro-Germany, namely that it is also related to Africa and African issues and, in fact, often involves Africa as a reference point. However, this dialogue seems to privilege the common experiences of oppression, marginalization, and resistance over a historical or mythical point of origin or return. And it is this common diasporic experience which is decidedly understood as being shaped by race/ethnicity and gender alike. This focus, though it certainly is important, should not obscure the numerous other aspects like religion, sexuality, or nationality, which make the African Diaspora or rather African Diasporas a multi-faceted and heterogeneous group. Including Germany and the Afro-German (women's) movement into notions of what Claire Alexander and Caroline Knowles put forward as the

"other archetypal diaspora" alongside the Jewish (8), does not only help to create a more differentiated picture of the African Diaspora but also to understand Germany as a diasporic nation. This can make the Diaspora experience as Stuart Hall defines it - and as it certainly suits Lorde's vision - become part of German history and experience; for Hall, the Diaspora experience "is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (244). In a sense, this also holds true for the understanding and solidarity between women as Lorde postulates it. The author herself struggled to claim every part of her identity without denying any one and to live with the differences within herself - along these lines, she encouraged women of the African Diaspora to consciously deal with every part of identity and to recognize each other not despite but through their differences. Joan Wylie Hall situates Lorde's interactions with Afro-German women within the context of Lorde's "sense of responsibility toward the Black Diaspora" which "extended to women of African descent in Germany" (ix). In return, Lorde's conception of the Black Diaspora was shaped decisively by her meeting and discussing with Afro-European women. However, considering Lorde's vision of global sisterhood, one could also invert Hall's causality and state that Lorde's sense of responsibility towards feminist or womanist concerns extended to Black and white women in Germany. Just as she perceived of her own identity as fractured but whole, Lorde's notion of the African Diaspora and a global community of women never assumes homogeneity but rather celebrates difference and hybridity. Her 'sisterly (inter)actions' with Afro-German women exemplarily attest to the diversity of African diasporic experiences and draw attention to the fact that these experiences are also necessarily gendered.

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