

“We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996”

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves”: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996 addresses the questions of mothering and survival from a queer, diasporic literary perspective, arguing that the literary practices of Black feminists Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alexis De Veaux and Barbara Smith enable a counternarrative to a neoliberal logic that criminalizes Black mothering and the survival of Black people outside and after their utility to capital. Treating Audre Lorde and June Jordan as primary theorists of mothering and survival, and Alexis De Veaux and Barbara Smith as key literary historical figures in the queer manifestation of Black feminist modes of literary production, this dissertation uses previously unavailable archival material, and queer of color critique and critical Black diasporic theoretical approaches to create an intergenerative reading practice. An intergenerative reading practice interrupts the social reproduction of meaning and value across time, and places untimely literary moments and products in poetic relationship to each other in order to reveal the possibility of another meaning of life. Ultimately this dissertation functions as a sample narrative towards the alternate meaning of life that the poetic breaks of Black feminist literary production in the queer spaces of counter-cultural markets, classrooms, autonomous publishing collectives make possible, concluding that mothering is indeed a reflexive and queer way of reading the present in the service of a substantively different future in which our outlawed love survives.

Dedication

To my mother

Pauline Ann McKenzie-Day

always, always.

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Prologue: For Those of Us Who Live at the Shoreline

*For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours.*

-from Litany for Survival by Audre Lorde

This is spiritual and stolen work. We are the dream-children caressing doorways, looking for what breadcrumbs were left here. Teacher-poet-visionaries Audre Lorde and June Jordan did (not) survive their lifetimes. Writer-publisher-renegades Alexis De Veaux and Barbara Smith sacrificed wealth, health, and stability to (almost) leave a legacy in print. I am a dreamchild, crucial but nevermore alone, searching basements, independent under-funded archives, and e-bay for evidence. Lest our dreams reflect the death of theirs. This is for us, at once before and after, seeking another kind of now.

For those of us who live at the shoreline...

This is for those of us who live at the shoreline, and those of us who live on the deadline, hustling to make a living off ever more glamorous analyses of systematic death. Driven by the intellectual marketability of the paradox: Though life is all we can theorize, some lives remain incomprehensible. Though death is the limit of theory, some deaths are so predictable as to seem understandable. We are the purveyors of the horizon,

approaches to sensibility that continue to recede, because life escapes us, and death prevails. For those of us who live on the shifting edge of the world, close or brave or stupid enough to sell the details of the line we walk, to guess the conversation between sea, sand and air...for those of us who know the truth of erosion and bet against it. This is for us. This project is for those of us who create theory, pedagogy and lifetimes, not out of thin air, but out of lines walked, impossible futures lived, mothering survival.

In the work of reading this, you are mothering the idea of survival on queer terms, your engagement with these words is a chapter in the survival of the experiments, counternarratives, and poetic interventions of the theorists and practitioners under review not only in a recuperative sense, but in a transformative modality. We are the dreamed of children, who pretend to afford the passing dreams of choice, and choose each other. June Jordan already said it. We are the ones we have been waiting for, finally outgrowing the vanity of our waiting.

Critical Black Diaspora Theorists, I'm calling you. Queer Futurists I'm calling you. This is for those of us who live here, at the shoreline. And though critical scholars of the "Black diaspora" are sometimes adequately queer in their approaches, and though queer theorists are sometimes anti-racist and transnational in their critiques, rarely do we stand together for the same role call, or inhabit the same body of texts. Sometimes we kill each other off into irrelevance for the sake of our own cohesion. Limits appear to provide clarity, even when it means amputating the barely living bodies whose sacrificial status make our inquiry necessary. We are neighbors, if not housemates, if not soulmates sharing organs. (See? We were never meant to survive.)

But we want each other. Drawing on Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic, this dissertation is located at the point of a desired rendezvous, the desire for our differently

named and positioned analytics for each other. The excellence, the fullness of our critical practice comes, I think, from our willingness to live in this meeting space. You are an audience that I *want* (to exist). But lest my lust for the possibility of you blind my practice, this dissertation is a space of challenge and clarification. We were never meant to survive, so what do we mean instead?

For those of us who are practicing a different kind of mothering, in childcare collectives and non-patriarchal families, as radical doulas and midwives, the period of experimentation between 1968-1996 by anti-capitalist anti-imperialist Black feminists offers alternative theories of home through the anthology *Home Girls*, and June Jordan's anti-imperialist collections of poetry *Living Room*; alternative theories of domesticated labor through June Jordan and Alexis DeVeaux's elaboration of "poetry as housework," in *Essence*; alternative ideas of family through Audre Lorde's articles on "lesbian parenting" and "mothering ourselves" and each other, especially relevant in a time period of economic shift when, similar to the Reagan era, funding for community services like housing, welfare, healthcare and education are declared bankrupt while massive amounts of state money goes towards military invasions and private sector bailouts.

For those of us who are organizing to end violence against women of color in the face of mass media vilification of survivors, the forgotten strategies of these Black feminists, who organized against police brutality, rape, domestic violence and womanslaughter are important to remember as we too stand on the constant edges of decision built by legal practices designed to criminalize self-defense by oppressed people while downplaying the severity of crimes that draw on the logics of racial violence like

noose-hangings, gang rapes, truck draggings and the kidnapping and torture of women of color.¹

For those of us determined to teach the world open, to instigate the unlearning of oppression and nurture the growth of livable, loving logics, the pedagogical experimentation and faith of these Black feminist professors, and community workshop facilitators can impact what, how and if we teach in university classrooms and in our communities in the age of what radical feminists of color are now calling the Academic Industrial Complex.²

For those of us who write, read and live the poetic as a radical practice of collaborative creation³, these Black feminist poets offer an intergenerational archive with which to engage as readers and practitioners of poetry, generating a definition of poetry that turns the (re)production of language into life itself and an intervention into the practice of form that offers alternative forms of sociality and possibility for all of us.

¹ On the Jena Six case when Black children were charged with attempted murder in a schoolyard fight instigated by the hanging of nooses from a tree on public school property: <http://colorofchange.org/jena/message.html> accessed January 25, 2010. On the New Jersey 4 case when young Black lesbians were charged with attempted murder after defending themselves from a racist and homophobic attacker: http://www.racewire.org/archives/2007/06/black_lesbians_in_nyc_get_11_y_1.html accessed January 25, 2010. On the Megan Williams case where a young Black woman was held captive and tortured for weeks by 6 white assailants: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/09/11/woman.tortured/index.html> accessed January, 25th 2010. On the 1998 Texas truck dragging lynching: <http://www.cnn.com/US/9807/06/dragging.death.02/index.html> accessed January 25, 2010 and a similar more recent lynching in Paris, Texas in 2008: <http://jessemuhammad.blogs.finalcall.com/2008/10/jasper-style-lynching-reporting-on.html> accessed January, 25th, 2010.

² For example see the language of the Campus Lockdown: Women of Color and the Academic Industrial Complex Conference at University of Michigan. (woclockdown.org—site expired, referenced at <http://greaterdetroit.wordpress.com/2008/02/29/campus-lockdown-tenure-for-andrea-smith/> viewed January 25th 2010)

³ Here I depend on Sylvia Wynter's definition of the poetic as that which creates new relationships between human beings, each other and their environment by seeking (and failing) to describe what those relationships could be, beyond objectification, in a manner that is disruptive of the product to product relationship of capitalism in "Ethno or Socio Peetic" in *Alcheringa...*

For those of us who hold out foolish hope that our borrowed time in universities need neither kill our spirits nor tame our vision, I offer this critical literary work itself as a model of intergenerational practice, a method of engagement and survival full of faith, love and poetic falling apart as an intervention into what we mean by scholarship and where that ship should take us. This is spiritual work, an offering made of love. For all of us.

Which means this is critical in more ways than one.

(We were never meant to survive.)

*And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in morning.
-from Litany for Survival*

And for this reason (we were never meant to survive) this critical work of love is also filled with fear. Fear is the primary text. Fear is the instigator of this archive. Every word examined here was born in a context of fear. Fear that the violence would never stop, fear that the resistance would be forgotten, fear that words would never be enough. But they decided it was better to speak. And to write.

Fear is legible in the starts, spaces and premature endings all over this document. Fear wakes me up, puts me to sleep and tugs at my typing fingers. There must be more emails to check. There must be something else to do right now. I am afraid to write this, to right this wrong. I am afraid to be this intimate with the death that surrounds me, afraid to be accountable to the sacrifices that enable me to live a life that includes a project and a process like this. I am afraid of the uses and co-optations these words will

undergo once turned over to an academic industrial complex that has killed and dispossessed so many of my loved ones already. Fear is readable, a shadow document present with every word. And the writer is haunted.

I am here in this text as an initiate in a practice that should be obsolete. I am here in this text as a reader, practicing an intergenerative reading practice in front of you, where generation means love across time and the rubbing together of contradictions to create alternative power sources. I am here in this text as a writer, poetically repeating and transforming terms that are being paid to mean something else, asking you to read my words with your eye for repetition and difference. I am here in the text as a portal to forgotten meetings, words and attempts, which means I am not the only one here. And you are here as a traveler living in the jungle of my not-so-parsed words, discovering what survival means for yourself.

This project bears the weight of announcing a previously unavailable archive, while also demonstrating and arguing for a queer reading practice in relationship to that archive at the same time, and theorizing the meaning of the survival of that same body of work. And I want you (to exist). So I do not want to lose you. Follow me through the twists and turns of this journey. I wrote this dissertation for you, because despite everything you are here thinking the impossible and reading the barely sayable.

I wrote this dissertation at home, at the shoreline, a place that I define as a queer place, a diasporic site of knowledge production, theft and sale, a place that helps us learn about survival. Survival, here, is the name for the intervention, the shared need that brings a Black feminist use of critical Black diaspora theory and queer theory together in

this dissertation.⁴ The structure of the dissertation follows the shape of the shoreline. The chapters examine the edges of Black feminist literary historiography and criticism by tracing the implications, the tidal significance, the disappearance and re-emergence of Black feminism as a queer practice dispersed through space and time.

The Shoreline: Critical Black Diaspora Studies

As Brent Hayes Edwards elaborates in his essay “The Uses of Diaspora,” Traditional African Diaspora Study traces “survivals” or ways that pre-transatlantic, pre-colonial Africa “survives” in the cultural practices of new world Africans.⁵ Etymologically loyal, African Diaspora is not necessarily very queer. Diaspora, from the Greek, meaning the scattering of seed or sperm is classically patriarchal, and impossibly patrilineal. Diaspora is the name for an assumption that despite the disruption of a desired linearity, *Africa survives*. The study of the African Diaspora, conceived within a pan-african political movement, is the pursuit of an impossible lineage.⁶ While the search for Africanisms, or African survivals in diaspora seeks to create a natural Blackness, I would suggest that this is a contradiction. For Africa to survive at all in the Americas is a queer thing.

⁴ The word “Black” though often repeated is never quite redundant in this essay. The feminist practice of this dissertation is always modified by the word “Black” in honor of the self-identified Black feminist theorists who are featured in this dissertation and who make this work possible. Because of the political tension which remains within and around the discourse of feminism, feminism does not stand alone.

⁵ On *african survivals*: George Shepperson, “Pan-Africanism and pan-Africanism: Some Historical Notes,” *Phylon* 23 (winter 1962); 346-58 and George Shepperson “The African Abroad or the African Diaspora,” in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. T.O. Ranger. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968. Kamau Braithwaite. *Roots*. Havana: Casa de las Americas Ediciones, 1986. Sterling Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

On African Survivals in Language Practice: Lorenzo Dow Turner. *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949. And Beryl Bailey. *Jamaican Creole Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

⁶ Brent Edwards “The Uses of Diaspora.” *Social Text* 66, Vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 2001. Edwards is also in conversation with James Clifford. “Diasporas” in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, August, 1994), 302-338.

As Critical Black Diaspora theorists such as Saidiya Hartman, point out, in order to study the events in the trajectory of the so-called African Diaspora one must inhabit a catalogue of literal and social death.⁷ *Black* diaspora studies as a critical departure from African diaspora studies, notices that something called “Blackness” exists, but every description of Black in this context translates into the opposite of survival.⁸ Like the Jewish diaspora, Black diasporicity is a series of dispossessions, displacements and attempted and successful mass murders. As I understand it, diaspora is the expendability of a people, an unpeopling of a population, an enforced likelihood of not only social, but cultural death.⁹ Critical Black Diaspora Theorists (like feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick and feminist historian Tina Camp) use diaspora as the name of a rival space and time in which (we hope) the imposition of Blackness in a western lexicon as the space and time of death, can be undone.¹⁰ I interpret Critical Black Diaspora studies as a litany for survival, queerly undoing and redoing the meanings of space and time towards this instant and this triumph.

Centering the lives of Black women and responding to the embodied, economic, violence that is diaspora, the ongoing life of slavery. is not a simple act within the

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Transatlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

⁸ Sharon Holland. *Raising the Dead: Readings in Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

⁹ Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. See also Alexis Pauline Gumbs. “Dear Ma..Comère: A Blue Airmail Letter” in *MacComere* 8 (2006) 21-34. In order to make this almost sleek can I refer to the definition of diaspora that I set forth in *MacComere* or at least in the later chapter on diasporic reports. I distinguish here between “diaspora” in the Black and Jewish cases and not in the nation vs. transnational (Ghanaian diaspora for example which traces back to a specific place). In this sense...Palestinian and North American populations can be understood to be diasporic to the extent that imposed nationalisms (the State of Israel and the United States of America) have displaced them on their own land masses through the violence of settler colonialism.

¹⁰ Katherine McKittrick. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Tina Camp. “The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation,” in *Radical History Review* Issue 82 (Spring 2002): 94-113.

discourse of diaspora theory. Whereas much contemporary critical Black diaspora theory starts from Paul Gilroy's heuristic of the Black Atlantic, which centers a masculine narrative of mobility and modernity, I center the stillness, entrapment and tradition often imposed on the bodies and labor of Black women with the counter-heuristic the Black Feminine Domestic.¹¹ Whereas Gilroy emphasizes a fluid geography, over which men and ideas move, it is the actual bodily fluids, blood, sweat and embryonic fluids that ground what I call the discourse of the Black feminine domestic in a violent economy. In fact the messy implications of sexual and reproductive labor mark the limits of Gilroy's heuristic and his argument in *The Black Atlantic*. In his characterization of slavery, Gilroy chooses to elaborate on the case of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who was jailed for killing her own baby daughter when slave catchers came to return the family to slavery. This is a complicated story, a bloody story, and Garner and her abolitionist supporter Lucy Stone suggest that is the knowledge that under slavery her daughter would inevitably be vulnerable to rape that influences her decision to kill her baby girl. Gilroy points out "These stories raise complex questions about the mediating role of gender categories in racial politics and in particular about the psychological structures of identification facilitated by the idea of maternity. It is impossible to explore these important matters here."¹² It is telling that it would take Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* to fully explore this historical event because Black women writers, have used fiction as a strategy to represent the missing subject position that inspires my articulation of the Black Feminine Domestic. It is not until *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture*

¹¹ See also Alexis Pauline Gumbs. "The Black Feminine Domestic: A Counter-Heuristic Exercise in Falling Apart." in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 13.2, October 2009, 1-26.

¹² Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, 68.

Beyond the Color Line that Gilroy explicitly examines the role of gender in the production of the nation, at the point where he intends to transcend not only nation, but also race. “Gender differences become extremely important in nation-building activity because they are a sign of an irresistible natural hierarchy that belongs at the center of civic life,” he explains. And he goes on to assert that “The integrity of a nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity. In fact, it can be a nation only if the correct version of gender hierarchy has been established and reproduced.”¹³ However the same gender hierarchies, demonstrated by priority and exclusion, characterize Gilroy’s intervention to the extent that his critique depends on his own reproduction of modernity. For example, in *Against Race* Gilroy argues that the rise of the genomic age has made the embodied reproduction of race irrelevant, again moving away from the messy bodily fluids and the relationship between “blood” and race to create an increasingly fluid idea of race (or the lack thereof). This celebration of the genomic as a disembodiment of the race category depends on the elision of the racialized woman as a site of reproduction of both the embodiment and the idea of race. Arguing that because DNA has made the body of Black figures such as Michael Jordan “infinitely penetrable” due the modern technology of the genome and photoshop race is not longer living in the body, Gilroy forgets that actually racial domination and reproduction already functions through the violence of penetration on feminized body.¹⁴ I would argue that Saartje Baartman, kidnapped and transformed into the Venus Hottentott, whose genitals were examined during and after her short life, during their shelf life in a jar in a French museum, was already “infinitely

¹³ Paul Gilroy. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, 127.

¹⁴ Ibid, 23.

penetrable” without the aid of genomic and computer-age technology. But Gilroy must obscure this earlier penetration in order to make an argument that is “new.” And I characterize my analysis as following Gilroy, and embracing Gilroy because even Gilroy sees the limits of the construct of the Black Atlantic and what he can do within it. The work of examining maternity, and gender dynamics is “impossible to do here” which may be a statement of geographic failure, or may be the hailing of a different type of critical subject. Even Brent Edwards, in his critique of the gendered limitations of the construction of diaspora studies admits:

Unfortunately, even in scholarship whose specific goal is to sketch a “Black Atlantic” imaginary, there is little attempt to consider not just the way Black women travel, but more important, the ways the ideological uses and abuses of gender always undergird any articulation of diaspora—the ways evocations of Black populations elsewhere are always shaped by the representation of reproduction.

Brent Edwards leaves the examination he marks as an unreachable edge, the receding unstable shoreline.¹⁵ An extended elsewhere. But I say, this is a place to stand. This dissertation’s examination of the implications of Black mothering as authority operate in this rival landscape, the deep dark Black feminine domestic required by a nightmare Atlantic.

The Shoreline: Queer Futurism

Queer Theory, like Critical Black Diaspora studies is increasingly anti-

¹⁵ Brent Edwards. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 133.

identitarian. But whereas diaspora becomes more the study of an ontological condition than a geographic framework, queerness, Elizabeth Povinelli and Judith Halberstam insist, is anti-ontological.¹⁶ My demarcation of Queer Futurism as a shoreline is in part provoked by Lee Edelman's argument that the appropriate queer stance is one in which there is "No Future." Essentially Edelman encourages us to acquiesce to the "cover story" (Wahneema Lubiano's term) that equates queer behavior with death and destruction in much the same ways that the "cover stories" we will investigate in Chapter 1: The Danger of Black Maternity equate Black maternity with death and destruction. My intention is to discover whether there might be an intergenerationality that interrupts the naturalization of both procreative and social reproduction. Queer theorists of color such as Jose Munoz argue against Edelman that queer politics must be radically futurist because of the dire unacceptability of the present political situation, especially for queer people of color. But even these queer utopianists (or anti-anti-utopianists as Judith Halberstam says) shy away from the complexities of birth and the presumed heteronormativity of intergenerationality.¹⁷ I am interested in looking at two rhetorically impossible claims "Black maternity" and "queer intergenerationality" together because they offer a rival model of production, interrupting a development timeline with the possibility for a radically transformed society that their respective "cover stories" would beg us forget.

The Black feminist literary practitioners that inspire this project were at once included in, excluded from and amputated by Black cultural nationalist and white

¹⁶ cite the public talk by halberstam and Povinelli

¹⁷ José Muñoz. "Crusing the Toilet: Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity." GLQ 13:2-3, 353-368.

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. These particular literary producers were not committed to recuperating the patronymic patriarchal family structure that Black nationalism invested in, nor were they properly invested in the category of “woman” as a universal property on which the feminism of the time relied. Because of their inability or refusal to reproduce properly (to reproduce the properties of race and gender), these Black feminist literary producers engaged in a critical revision of family, a radical anti-imperialism and a socialist experimentalism. And as Cathy Cohen has argued in the context of the neoliberal dismantling of welfare, the position of the pathologized Black mother must be seen as a queer positionality:

As we stand on the verge of watching those in power dismantle the welfare system through a process of demonizing the poor and young—primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom have existed for their entire lives outside the white, middle-class heterosexual norm—we have to ask if these women do not fit into society’s categories of marginal, deviant, and “queer.”¹⁸

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 used the same progress narrative to 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 *property* reveals a dangerous desire for something different. She who refuses to reproduce *properly* bears the mark of the alternative, the mark of the criminal, the mark

¹⁸ Cathy Cohen. “Bulldaggers, Punks and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly Vol. 3 Issue 4 1997.

of the terrorist. She who refuses to reproduce property must be busy teaching us something else. 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.¹⁹ 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 word, a dyke body that could not be domesticized by middle class american aspirations.”²⁰ In the language provided by Moraga as well as Jose Munoz, Judith Halberstam and Carla Freccero, I am proposing that the invocation of Black maternity as an alternative to genocide in the period between 1968-1996 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.²¹

Like Muñoz, in order to queer temporality, I look to the work of Judith Halberstam, as I examine the queer times and spaces of the queer Black mothering in Black feminist literary practice. According to Halberstam in her 2005 *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, queer time is what happens outside of the reproductive capitalist form of time organized through the inheritance of property

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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” b(forthcoming).

and the assumption of patriarchal reproduction, and physical longevity.²² Focusing on the literary work of Black lesbian and bisexual feminist literary actors who had no access to inherited property or stable jobs, raised children outside of patriarchal structures, and faced terminal illnesses which banished their assumptions of their own longevity, this dissertation needs a queer understanding of time, measuring the lives of the remains of these actors past their biological death and the other forms of death (out of print books, lost initiatives) that would place them out of time. Halberstam goes on to argue that queer temporality brings queer spatiality with it, pointing out that one can see the existence of queer time in queer spaces. Queer spaces are produced by queer practices and the existence of queer subcultures and alternative publics.²³ I argue that the classrooms, publishing initiatives and texts of these Black feminist literary practitioners were queer spaces that they created in order to project their energy, views and concerns past their “here and now” despite the fact that neither they nor their literary projects had direct access to longevity. Their behavior in these spaces was diasporic, built on a concept that transcended the concepts of nationalism and embracing the scattered ontologies of their lives and their political concerns. Therefore these figures also engaged in the queer practice of articulating Black feminist diasporic solidarity at an untimely moment of US imperialism and in unlikely spaces like *Essence*, a mainstream Black women’s fashion magazine. The factors of space and time are therefore crucial to the queer practice of this dissertation, requiring the invocation of Lorde’s “shoreline” a

²² Judith Halberstam. *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press, 2005, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*

queer time and place which gathers and hails those who “cannot afford the passing dreams of choice.”

The Shoreline: Is Not an Intersection

The shoreline is an organizing metaphor in this dissertation, which describes the spatial and temporal position of the subject matter as well as the approach I will use to engage the topic of Black feminist literary historiography. The shoreline is a queer place, more than marginal, the shoreline erodes, it is the contested limit of the nation-state, the place where the refugee stands, where the land erodes, where elements live, where the wind howls the loudest. The shoreline also reveals a queer and repetitive time, lunar and recurring with difference and cycles, but no clear progression. The shoreline, useful as a metaphor that signifies the shifting ground of identification and political practice, is useful to contemporary activists who address multiple issues. I choose to follow Lorde’s invocation of the shoreline, instead of the spatial categories of the margin or the intersection because of the queer diasporic beckoning of the shore, the Caribbeanist motivation of my study of Jordan and Lorde in particular and because using the shoreline as a heuristic allows me to think critically about the legacies and limitations of the categories of intersection and margin that have been so instructive in anti-oppressive theoretical work.

Sebastian Margaret, a genderqueer disability activist who organizes around access and power, critiques the way that intersectionality is usually framed as some collection of “Tupperware boxes” and instead argues for an understanding of multiplicity that resembles the tide, particular issues move to the foreground and others move to the background depending on the particular facet of oppression a multiply oppressed person

is experiencing or responding to proactively.²⁴ In other words, the ground that we stand on shifts, which is also a diasporic concern, highlighting the way that displacement, the violence of dispersal and queer relationships to the hegemony of the nation make the boundaries of political units and identities unstable.

I argue that here, at the shoreline, where space and time are stolen, we are in need of a robust and transformative redefinition of survival. This dissertation inhabits the dead, live and haunting remains of Black lesbian and bisexual feminists Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alexis DeVeaux and Barbara Smith for all of us, this instant, and this triumph.

*For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line at the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
-from Litany for Survival*

If fear can be “imprinted” on our bodies, marking our danger and our deviance in languages of race, queerness and terror, there must be such a thing as embodied writing. In this project I revise a tendency in African American literary theory and the spoken word poetry movement to reconnect abject bodies to the potential of the word through a reclamation of orality. I argue that the body is not only spoken. It is also written. This project has been nurtured and fed by conversations, interviews and spoken advice and invokes poems, speeches and lesson-plans that were sometimes written to be spoken. Further, I have read almost every text discussed here out-loud passionately to or with

²⁴ Sebastian Margaret at “Intertwined” a workshop sponsored by Southerners on New Ground, April 22, 2009, Durham, North Carolina.

someone. However, this project also depends on texts that only survive in out-of-print books, notes for projects that no one remembers, and letters written by dead speakers who couldn't afford their telephone bills while they were alive.²⁵ I insist in this project that the words left and found that make up the archive of this project are bodily remains even if they lived only in the pressure of hands on pens and typewriters, even if they never inhabited a mouth.

The danger of the words studied here is that they are bodily, they live, produce and disrupt. One danger of these words is that they might be spoken, shaking the lies that silence them in the moment, but the further danger of these words is that they might *survive*, they might re-member and be remembered. They might become intergenerational. The further danger is that I might have access to those words and use them now. We were never meant to survive. Memory is the last(ing) danger. And when these dangerous words survive, they survive in writing. These four Black feminists and many more, under attack, wrote to survive.

A Black feminist reading of *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida's theory of writing, shows us that writing is the specter of deviance in language. Derrida examines Sassure's privileging of the spoken word as the true language, superior to the written word and attributes Sassure's evaluation to a desire for autoproduktivity and complete authority. If language is divine it must be pure, in the air. Pure language must be free from the danger of materiality. Writing, the bodily, formed, dark reflection of the spoken

²⁵ June Jordan Manuscript Archives. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University: Box 85 Folder 1, Dec 15th 1977 letter from *Chrysalis* about not being able to reach Jordan by phone. Box 85, Folder 2 August 2nd 1978 letter from Alexis De Veaux about not being able to reach Jordan by phone. Box 86, Folder 7, February 7th 1975 letter from New York Telephone about reconnecting her phone which was disconnected for failure of payment.

word, for Sassure, must always be derivative. Just like Thomas Jefferson's belief that Phillis Wheatley cannot be a poet, only a parrot, Sassure believes that writing can only mimic the purity of spoken language.²⁶ To be clear, I am not attributing Sassure's anxiety about the purity of language to a racialized panic, but I am developing a Black feminist theory of writing in which, as Hortense Spillers explains, oppression is inscribed and engendered on the flesh of enslaved Africans in America.²⁷ If the body itself becomes an inscription, writing, in its dangerous materiality, can be imagined to be linked to that most dangerous of bodies in the American lexicon, the deviant Black(ened) feminized/masculinized body, imagined to produce further Blackness that must be tamed and cannot be.

One could say that Sassure, in his theory of pure language, wants the word to have a dependable father, a stable lineage, towards the dream of one author, who could be pointed to as the owner of his speech. Writing is dangerous because it is Black, deviant, bodily, unpredictable, diasporic. Who knows what will happen with those words once they materialize, when they can travel so far from the father-speaker. They could mean anything. Black feminist anti-capitalist anti-imperialist writing is a further danger in Sassure's proto-dream of extreme intellectual property, because Black women are not supposed to have authority to begin with.²⁸ Derrida's definition of writing insists that language is not stable, neither in production nor in circulation, but is unpredictably (re)produced in play, coproduced in social use, surviving and remaking itself through the

²⁶ See Jefferson's famous declaration in his 1781 text *Notes on the State of Virginia* that "religion could produce a Phillis Wheatley but it could not produce a poet."

²⁷ See Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in Winson Napier ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

²⁸ See chapter 2 on Black Maternity and Authority for an extended historicization of racial and gendered meanings of authority and maternity from 1666 to 1970.

necessary tension of difference. In the hands of these diasporic Black feminist theorists of difference, intergenerationality and futurity, Sassure's desire for pure language is as impossible and useless as Moynihan's desire for a Black patriarchal imitation. Mama's baby, Papa's maybe. In their work as writers, teachers and anti-capitalist publishers Lorde, Jordan, DeVeaux and Smith show us that language is not owned, it is not even inheritable, though the desire of power will continue to pretend that it is, and will continue to buy and sell it. So dark. So deviant. Write it down: Language is co-mothered, shaped and reshaped in community, a constant reminder that the transition from the maternal to the material, from person into property is never fully successful, and assimilation is not achievable. Writing is visible, Black waves against white context. Language is necessary only because difference persists and writing is the reminder, here, at the shoreline.

And that is the scary thing. I did not inherit, cannot own, cannot master the archive over which I am expected to demonstrate mastery in this dissertation. To pretend to do so is a lie, complicit with the narrative of power and destructive of the poetic definition of survival Lorde, Jordan, DeVeaux and Smith demand. Who is this Black mother and how does she survive? Where is she waiting in the fears reproduced and imposed on my body? *Learning to be afraid with our mother's milk*. What are her demands on me? What is the fate of my desire towards her? This archive is not a possession. It is a jealous and demanding mother, queer goddess. And I am possessed.

This work is for those of us who reject self-mastery and risk the radical dispossession that is possession.²⁹

The material I am working with here is a maternal trace (not an inherited property) that scares me to death. And has made me obsessed with the deaths of people like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Claudia Jones, Barbara Christian, Nellie McKay, Elizabeth Amelia Hadley, Octavia Butler, Gloria Anzaldua and more. The relationship between the maternal and the material here is more complex than the fact that my period of study centers the year of my birth or that I have found my birth mother hidden where I wasn't looking for her in the first generation of Black Women's Studies courses on college campuses and on the staff of *Essence Magazine*. The relationship between the maternal and the material for me is a question about why and how everything that Black women create is criminalized, even by white feminists, even by Black nationalists, even by mainstream Black media outlets and an answer that says everything Black women create is intentionally and unintentionally queer. The relationship between the maternal and the material for me is a question about how and why I was produced, by a series of given and chosen mothers and by a society that refuses my existence anyway. I am that thing, made by and of and as Black woman that was never meant to survive. Black feminist literary, scholarly and social production is a doomed materialism. The materials that make this study possible are literally barely salvaged from trashcans, archived by herculean efforts that almost didn't happen. The materialism of this project is intimate with death, not merely because half of the figures featured here died early, but more importantly because the dominant narratives of the publishing industry, the

²⁹ This recasting of "possession" depends on M. Jacqui Alexander's work in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, discussed in detail at the end of this essay.

academic machine and the neoliberal state are designed to kill their products and erase the possibility of the rival mode of production that mothered this work. This project takes the myth of the crack baby as a literary question and examines how, when and if it is possible to be produced as an incompatible subject, incapable of survival, and what memory of that melancholic production remains. A deadly maternal trace. Thus the fear and the urgency and hyperbole of this project. This project takes seriously the ability of a powerful fictional narrative to compel belief despite contradiction. In the contemporary moment a government that claims to not have enough money to respond to natural disasters or fund education programs produces 700 billion dollars to bail out private banks. The neoliberal state is a fiction that compels our belief, because capitalism is the primary social teacher for how to understand the contemporary world. Instead of a counternarrative, this project seeks to reveal a poetic and pedagogical intervention. What happens when the object(ified) lesson, the queer(ed)Black mother, becomes the teacher? What happens if we inhabit the questions and experiments of these maligned and dangerous teachers? What can we learn about the social reproduction of racism and capitalism through the excluded, or tokenized work of those troublemaking teachers, poets and interdependent publishers who sought to produce something else? This dissertation asserts that dominant narratives reproduce our social world everyday, but we will remake it by remembering, and enacting the queer survival of a poetic difference in our reading.

This project is haunted. There is birth somewhere here. There is ink and blood and halted breathing all up in here waiting. There is a history to be invented and time to be stolen. There are ghosts reading this over my shoulder. There is death somewhere, here. I hope the reader is a little bit afraid right now to even be in this queer diasporic

unwieldy audience of people who may or may not buy books but who certainly steal breaths that none of us have been promised.

We were never meant to survive.

Welcome home.

Introduction: Never Meant to Survive

1979

*...as Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will **ever** be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive...*

-“I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978” in Conditions Four, 1979

Living in Boston, we worked on CONDITIONS: FIVE this year under yet more stringent and draining circumstances. As we did all the things mentioned above, twelve Black women were being murdered in Boston’s Third World communities between January 29 and May 28, 1979. While we were working to create a place for celebration of Black women’s lives, our sisters were dying.

-“Introduction” Conditions Five: The Black Women’s Issue, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel

Quiet as its kept, 1979 was an apocalyptic year. The world ended in small, significant and brutal ways. And another world was born. In 1968 Black Feminism had dared to name itself; by 1981 every Black feminist organization in the United States had fallen apart, but in 1979 enough was lost and enough was gained to shift the context through which Black feminism could survive.

On November 19th 1979 Audre Lorde wrote in her journal “*We have been sad long enough to make this earth either weep or grow fertile. I am an anachronism, a sport, like the bee that was never meant to fly. Science said so. I am not supposed to exist. I carry death around in my body like a condemnation. But I do live. The bee flies. There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it.*”¹

¹ Audre Lorde. *The Cancer Journals*. San Francisco: Spinster’s Ink/Aunt Lute, 1980, 13.

In November 1979 Audre Lorde wrote this in her journal. “*I am not supposed to exist. I carry death around in my body....*” November 1979 was not just any time to have written this statement about how death and life live here in our bodies. Lorde, individually, was healing from her radical mastectomy when she wrote this, fighting cancer day by day, but the death she was holding in her body was not merely individual. The meaning of a body, or even a singular life, cannot be individual. As Lorde said during the same time period, “the enormity of our task, to turn the world around. It feels like turning my life around, inside out.”² And it was Barbara Smith’s 1976 question in her talk on the plenary at the conference of the Modern Language Association “Is it possible to be a Black lesbian writer and to live to tell about it?” that had inspired Lorde to begin what she saw as the collective work of documenting the mythological significance of her life in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. “*I am not supposed to exist.*”³ Lorde and Smith and the communities they were accountable to could understand how this observation had a social meaning.

From January to May in 1979, twelve Black women are murdered in the streets of Roxbury and Dorchester in Boston.⁴ An ending the Combahee River Collective describes as the enduring result of a world shaped by racism and sexism.⁵ Twelve Black women show up dead in the streets, like a plague or a revelation. When the police are not blaming the victims for being out late at night, or suggesting the value of their lives was insignificant because they *must* have been sex workers, they chalk the killings up to

² Ibid.

³ Lorde and Smith recall this in a conversation recorded in Jennifer Abod. *The Edges of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde*. Women Make Movies, 2002.

⁴ See Alonzo Speight. *The People United*. Boston: Third World Newsreel, 2008.

⁵ See Combahee River Collective. “Eleven Women: Why Did They Die?” self-published pamphlet, 1979.

Black on Black crime which they had never been convened to prevent. *I carry death around in my body, like a condemnation.* The media was silent when it was not cruel. Twelve Black women dead one after the other, day after day, week after week for months. Who cares? This was a cruel consensus expressing itself. They were never meant to survive.

And after summer break the lesson starts again. Fall 1979. This time in Atlanta. Black child after Black child disappears on the way home from school, on the way to the skating rink. Again and again, the children disappear. Small bodies appear in ravines and in nightmares. Rumors suggest that sometimes the kidnappers wear police uniforms. In police stations Black mothers are blamed unsympathetically for losing track of their children.⁶ *I carry death around in my body, like a condemnation.* How can they expect to recover this worthless and problematic form of lost property, when they as mothers are so hopelessly improper? Eventually, when someone, a Black man, and organizer of the neighborhood response organization, is blamed by the state for the murder of so many Black sons (in order to kill the dangerous neighborhood watches self-organized in Black communities, some say), no one is charged with any crime related to those little girls.⁷ The murders and disappearances of the little girls don't count. Even more than their little boy counterparts, doomed creations of careless Black mothers, the little girls, potential creators of even more worthlessness, were never meant to survive.

On November 3rd 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina, the grim lesson continues. The Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi party open fire at a crowd gathered at a rally

⁶ Toni Cade Bambara. *Those Bones are Not My Child.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

⁷ Cara Page. "The Evidence of Things Seen: The Black Feminist Tradition of Witnessing." Presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference November, 2009.

organized by the Communist party where demands for economic justice supported by the majority Black community of Greensboro are being presented. Later known as the Greensboro Massacre, and declared a human rights violation by a Human Rights Commission in 2008, this act of extreme hate violence was never punished as such. In fact, a number of the survivors of the shooting were arrested.⁸ Lesson? Advocating for economic justice in the United States is a criminal act. Preaching Nazism and shooting unarmed people gathered in a public place is not. During the McCarthy era, being a Black woman who dared to organize for economic justice in the United States gained radical Black writer and thinker Claudia Jones imprisonment and eventual deportation.⁹ In Greensboro in 1979 it meant the law didn't care if you were murdered in broad daylight in front of hundreds of witnesses.

In her poem "Greensboro: North Carolina" June Jordan protests the legal protection of the hateful violence of the Ku Klux Klan and demonstrates the necessity for a poetics of survival which interrupts and recontextualizes the narrative of violence that 1979 printed on the bodies of Black people. Questioning the law she begins

We
studying the rule
you can
not say death to the Klan
you can
not say death to the Klan
 death to the Klan
you can
not say death to the Klan¹⁰

⁸ See Greensboro Truth and Justice Commission: http://www.greensborotrc.org/hear_statements.php (accessed January 26th, 2010.)

⁹ Carole Boyce Davies. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ June Jordan, *Living Room: New Poems*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1985, 35.

Here Jordan uses repetition and spacing to disrupt the relationship between what can and cannot be said. Setting apart “you can” she gives permission for another narrative and her spacing allows her to describe the norm while deviating from it, repeating the unspeakable: “death to the Klan/death to the Klan.” Tying the ability to speak about the destruction of the Klan to the survival of Black people she goes on:

you can
not say a glass of water
to a thirsty Black man
you cannot
say
a glass of water
you cannot
say
death to the Klan

death to the Klan¹¹

Through juxtaposition Jordan makes the argument that the abolition of the Ku Klux Klan is as necessary to the survival of Black people as is water. Actualizing the implication of the split she has imposed on the word “cannot” through her earlier line breaks, Jordan lets her statement stand alone. *Death to the Klan*. And although the androcentric figure she uses for the poem is “the Black man” as juxtaposed to “the white man” who refuses to give either water or legal protection to “the Black man,” the poem is dedicated to Constance Evans, who from my investigation of several “Black World” newsletters from June Jordan’s time teaching at SUNY Stonybrook, was an afro-centrally involved singer, and artist who was a student of Jordan’s at Stonybrook.¹² It would seem then that this poem came out of a conversation with this student about what

¹¹ Ibid, p 36.

¹² Black World Vol. 12d, Iss. 8, December 1983 p8, and Black World Vol. 12f, Iss. 1, 1984 p8

it is possible for the Black artist, a Black female artist and growing intellectual to say on behalf of the survival of her communities.

Meanwhile Black women who helped organize the rally and who dared to continue living in Greensboro experienced decades of punishment for speaking up on behalf of their communities. For example Willena Cannon, a key organizer of the rally, who chose to remain in Greensboro was targeted and followed by the police. Years later when her son Kwame was charged with a petty felony he was sentenced to the extreme (20 years for a petty robbery). She believes that he was punished not for his small crime, but for the larger crime of being her son.¹³ Organized radicals, disrupting racist southern hierarchies, were never meant to survive.

So how does one survive a year like 1979? How does one expect to survive a year like 1979 when young Black women and everything they create are killed with impunity? 1979 is a year that reads like a threat to those who two years earlier proclaimed the doomed and heretical belief clearly stated in the Combahee River Collective Statement that “Black women are inherently valuable...our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.”¹⁴

How could a Black feminism survive that believed not only that Black women should *be* but also that they should be free? Survival, in 1979 required an ideological intervention into the meaning of life. And in order to imagine and argue for an alternative to the normalization of Black expendability, Black feminists in 1979 needed a

¹³ Personal communication, Nego Crossen, advocate for Willena Cannon and Kwame Cannon, August 11th 2008. Willena Cannon continues to work for economic justice at the Greensboro Housing Coalition.

¹⁴ Combahee River Collective. “Combahee River Collective Statement” in Barbara Smith ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 266. (Originally published in Zillah R. Eisenstein ed. *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979.)

literature of survival. The Boston Murders and the nationwide murders of Black women in Black communities were the occasion for fighting words that refused to accept the temporality of repeated violence. Ntozake Shange reclaimed the present in her poem “With No Immediate Cause” repeating the refrain

every three minutes
every five minutes
every ten minutes
every day¹⁵

reframing statistics about the routine rape, murder and abuse of women into an action call. Every three minutes, she insists, there is cause to respond. Appropriating the “immediate cause” that the law requires for acts of self-defense, Shange seeks to “establish immediate cause” describing responsiveness to covered up violence against women within their own communities as way of being present, a form of radical immediacy renewed in response to the media and the state’s complicity in the devaluation of Black women’s lives. The form of the poem models an interventionist, survivalist relationship to time. The protest of the poem, the poet’s description of her day and her encounters with the specter of hidden violence, interrupts the timekeeping of the violence itself in the refrain, and the linear time of the refrain interrupts the trajectory of the poet’s experience. The members of the Combahee River Collective used Shange’s poem in the pamphlet “6 Women: Why Did They Die” which they published for their organizing and awareness raising effort in Boston.¹⁶ In her own response to the Atlanta Child murders, Nikky Finney, a southern Black lesbian poet whom June Jordan

¹⁵ Ntozake Shange. “With No Immediate Cause,” in *Nappy Edges*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972, 114.

¹⁶ Shange also has a poem about the Atlanta child murders called “About Atlanta” in her 1983 collection *A Daughter’s Geography*, to further protest a political economy in which the lives of Black children are seen as worthless, and their absence leaves no sign.

mentored, also sought to reclaim time: the future time stolen through the silence and complicity around the murders of so many children from Black communities in Atlanta. Whereas Shange appropriates the language of the law to create a counterpoetics that interrupts and contradicts the narrative of the law, Finney appropriates the language of debt to intervene into an economic narrative that characterizes the lives of Black children as void of any social value. In her poem “For the Next One Thousand Years” which she offers “*for the children whose lives we claim and whose deaths now claim us,*” Finney counteracts the narrative of perpetual debt attached to communities of color internally within an anti-welfare state and globally within a neoliberal empire;

in full we are paid
we owe nothing
on a bill that’s never existed
the final payment is in
and for the next one thousand years
we are paid in full¹⁷

The loss of the lives of these Black children, Finney insists, is a violation of the social contract, of a balance in the relationship between life and death. She insists

and world
don’t ever come to us again
heart in hand
hoof in mouth
ancient eyes in full bloom
don’t even look this way
asking to be replenished
to be restocked
we are paid in full
for this
and for the next millenniums¹⁸

¹⁷ Nikky Finney. “For the Next One Thousand Years” in *On Wings Made of Gauze*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 41.

It is telling that Finney's poem does not seek accountability from units like the Atlanta Police Department or the Mayor's office or even from the unknown murderers and kidnappers. Finney addresses the Chattahoochee River, in which some of the bodies of the children were found, representing the natural world itself, demanding a definition of survival resonant with the life cycles of the planet. She refuses the social devaluation of the lives of Black children by turning not to the state, but to the *place*, the rivers, which she reminds us, precede and trump the state, to account for the loss of these children. 1979 was an apocalyptic year. Finney insists in the penultimate stanza:

incensed enough we are
until this world ends
and something else begins
paid up we are¹⁹

Survival by this definition is the claim for an existence and a relationship beyond the current world. The survival of those left, claimed by the deaths of these children, requires the end of a particular type of world. Finney projects a wronged "we" into a future past the system in which "we" have been wronged. Finney uses her poetic structure to intervene against the death sentence levied on Black children. In the first stanza "in full we are paid" becomes "we are paid in full." In the penultimate stanza she uses the counter-colloquial structure: "incensed enough we are" and "paid up we are." The "we are" coming at the end of these two lines is the projected survival after the killing relation. Sylvia Wynter defines the poetic as the production of an impossible relation that interrupts the narrative of capitalism by describing, creating and modeling

¹⁹ Ibid.

an alternate relationship.²⁰ The poetry created by Black feminists in this moment insists on a relationship that goes past the brutal reality they have witnessed.

In her poem “The Test of Atlanta 1979----“ June Jordan questions the relationship of Black communities to their own children, using poetic form to dare readers into an intergenerational accountability that reframes the question of 1979, by focusing on intra-racial intergenerational relationships. Asking,

What kind of a people will lay down its
life for the lives of our children?

What kind of a people are we?²¹

Jordan answers Wynter’s mandate for the poetic as a means of production towards a desired relation that does not yet exist. With this definition of the poetic in mind, I argue that the intervention into the narrative of gendered Black expendability and worthlessness required an intentional poetics of survival which functioned both in the written poetry and the creative forms of living practiced by radical Black feminists through which they reclaimed the present and became partners the impossible future we are living.

1979 called for a redefinition of survival.

To survive 1979 you would have to reject the limits of time. Because the lifetime of one body is shorter and shorter and shorter. Because the immortality of the archive will deny that you ever existed. Because time, the only resource you have, is being stolen and resold in an uneven labor market and the price of the ticket too high. Survival in

²⁰ Sylvia Wynter “Ethno or Socio Poetics” in *Alcheringa* Vol. 2 No.2 1976, 87.

²¹ June Jordan. “The Test of Atlanta 1979” in *Living Room*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1985, 122.

the face of 1979 means inventing a way to connect bodies across time, to leave traces and notes and warnings. Survival in 1979 requires a belief that an unlikely future can be created in the present out of language, relationship and desire.

To survive 1979 requires a radical relationship to space, a problematization of a national context from the seat of empire where the same laws that characterize Black and especially female life as sacrificial, justify an imperialist relationship to land, called rape only because of what they have already done to our bodies. In 1979 Black feminists in the United States imagined, remembered or decided that the socialist revolution in Grenada was related to the lives, lost and waiting in Roxbury and Atlanta and Greensboro. Black feminists in the United States imagined that there was a third world, and a Black internationalism that did not have to replicate the unsurvivable patriarchal forms they knew. This dissertation asserts that radical relationships to time and space are evident in the practices of time and space that Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Barbara Smith and Alexis DeVeaux, among other radical Black anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feminists, practiced. But none of this was ever meant to survive, and the most dangerous work of these feminists was not reproduced, passed on or translated, neither projected across time, nor over space. The time and space of survival is a retroactive reading practice that I am engaged in now. While the temporalities and spatialities of a queer Black diasporic feminism are descriptive of this archive, these descriptions and the archive itself are also recuperative. This time and space is in the making now. Towards their survival and ours.

At Once Before and After: The Queer Time of Survival

Terror. Knowing from moment to moment that who I am is on all counts hated. Black, woman, Lesbian. my breathing from moment to moment inevitable fear...

*That my most appropriate fate here in white-boy patriarchy is to be beaten beyond recognition. **Beyond recognition.***

-Barbara Smith, Journal Entry June 26, 1979²²

I want my name off the mast-head of Chrysalis as poetry editor, and I am quite prepared to take legal action to see that this is done.

-Audre Lorde, (unpublished) Letter to the Editors of Chrysalis, July 20, 1979²³

Two weeks ago, myself and another Black woman poet and another Black woman artist came with 18 inches of losing our lives inside an unbridled police riot in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our crime: To be Black and breathing on the streets of the 79th precinct. Tell me/show me how your hopelessly academic, psuedo-historical, incestuous, and profoundly optional profoundly trifling profoundly upper middle-class attic white publication can presume to represent our women's culture: the very tissue of our ongoing, tenuous, embattled experience....

As you have traded now, for years, on the presence of my name among your "Editors", I trust you understand that I entirely expect that you will print this last word which is my last contribution to Chrysalis, in fact.

-June Jordan, (unpublished) Letter to the Editors of Chrysalis, September 10, 1979²⁴

Martin Luther King Jr. is still dead

-June Jordan "Memoranda Toward the Spring of Seventy-Nine"²⁵

This dissertation examines the radical relationships to publishing, teaching and poetics developed by these Black lesbian and bisexual feminists in response to violence as part of a queer transtemporal process of survival against the odds. This survival is queer because it contradicts the social reproduction of abjection for racialized communities. This is the temporal shoreline, where time erodes and life is short, where

²² Barbara Smith. "Black woman, Lesbian, my breathing from moment to moment inevitable fear," in Margo Culley ed. *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985, 309.

²³ Audre Lorde. July 20th 1979 letter to the editors of Chrysalis. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 85, Folder 1. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁴ June Jordan. September 10th 1979 letter to the editors of Chrysalis. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 85, Folder . Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁵ June Jordan. "Memoranda Toward the Spring of Seventy-Nine," in *Directed by Desire*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 302. (Originally published in *Passion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1980.

the lives of children disappear, or are intentionally prevented. Where Black lesbian and bisexual feminists face the end of their lives, the co-optation of their words and the indifference of the archive. Where survival is a queer thing. This survival is diasporic because it calls for and draws on a poetics of self-determination for people of color transnationally....Survival, for those who did and did not live through 1979 required the invention of queer times and spaces of possibility.

Barbara Smith's diary entries during the Boston Murders are a key artifact in the 1979 redefinition of survival. In 1978 Barbara and Beverly Smith had introduced their collection of "letters from Black feminists" in the journal *Conditions* with the words "There is no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now."²⁶ Months later as the new year opened with the wave of murders, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel were both living in Boston and compiling the (dangerously) historical collection of writing that made up *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* and which eventually became *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* published by Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, an initiative envisioned and made real by Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith and other former participants in the Combahee River Collective Black Feminist Retreats in 1981. The Black women who witnessed the nation's apathy towards blatant attacks on the lives of Black women who were believed to be deviant and expendable clearly believed that their survival, if possible, would happen in print. They printed copy after copy of the pamphlet "6 women. Why did they die?" as an organizing tool, crossing out and changing the number as more and more women turned up dead.

²⁶ Barbara and Beverly Smith. "'I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand': Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978." *Conditions* Four.4.1, 1979. 62-77

But physical, gendered and economic violence also forced these women to think beyond their own threatened lifetimes. Like Black women in Britain who were also living in the midst of violence against women in Black and immigrant communities and unanswered acts of racial violence (such as the South Hall Massacre) some Black women, and Black lesbian and bisexual anti-imperialist radical women in particular, decided to archive their existence and presence in print.

Barbara Smith published an excerpt from her diary during the Boston Murders in Margo Culley's edited volume, *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. Tellingly, her diary entry starts with a nightmare, not about facing murder in the street, but about the appropriation of Black women's work by white feminists in the print movement, an act that Smith viewed as violence. Smith's published diary meditations end with writing as well, when in the wake of her 24 hour a day response to the violence that was around her in Boston, Smith is able to go on a writers retreat, she wonders what it means for a Black woman to have time to think, write, or to live and breathe at all. (In "Chapter 5: Publishing and Survival," I will provide a close examination of the demise of the *Chrysalis* collective and will elaborate on how Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Barbara Smith characterized the racism within the feminist publishing scene as racist violence, akin to police brutality and imperialism.) For Smith and other "mothers" of the Black feminist publishing movement, the climate of extreme violence that characterized 1979 (and the time before, and the time after) the threat that they could neither protect themselves, the children of their communities nor

their words was often conflated. June Jordan accused Susan Griffin²⁷ of being complicit with police brutality due to her disregard for her and Audre Lorde's critique of the disrespect for poetry and Black women in the operations of *Chrysalis* a feminist literary magazine. After demanding that her name be removed from the contributing editors list of *Chrysalis* in the context of Lorde's resignation and the police brutality that she experienced, Jordan writes a further letter elaborating that "*Chrysalis* and its allies do not fail Black and Third World peoples by accident: It is a failure guaranteed by a concept of identity that excludes my own, in the broad sense of my own."²⁸ Jordan then goes on to describe her experience of listening to the radio on the way home to a newscast about "yet another white police murder of an unarmed, young Black man" and fearing that this time it was her son. Clarifying her stance against the underlying racism of *Chrysalis* she adds, "I am ready and working to defend my own right to life and the right to life of my son and the right to life of my people and the right to life of all Third World Peoples. Such a person as Susan Griffin who responds to me as she has, in this Third World context of non-theoretical urgencies persistently not addressed by *Chrysalis* as well as by S.G., I do regard as someone plainly prepared to let me, and my own, be destroyed."²⁹ How is it that violence against the words of Black feminist poets *does* constitute an attack on Black children and a stand against the survival of communities of color?

²⁷ (possibly the same Susan _____ named in Smith's diary entry as someone who in a nightmare published an article about Smith's family without crediting or sharing the proceeds with Smith)

²⁸ June Jordan. November 16th 1979 Letter to Adrienne Rich. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 85, Folder 1, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁹ Ibid.

This dissertation agrees with Jordan's accusation, arguing that poetic practice, print and teaching are crucial elements of survival for oppressed communities, because they were never *meant* to survive. And survival is a function of meaning. Jordan's analysis in this series of angry letters to and about the *Chrysalis* collective (in addition to her important essays on children's literature and teaching) makes an explicit connection between the means of production for print publication and the biopolitical production or suppression of life in racialized communities. As I will discuss in "Chapter 1: Survival: An Intervention in Meaning," Jordan had already advanced a definition of survival in her work on children's literature that tied the production of literary possibility to the possibility of an intervention against the racist implications of capitalism, which she understood to be the literal and social deaths of Black children. This dissertation continues that quarrel. The phrase *never meant to survive* emphasizes the importance of *meaning* to survival. Survival, is the practice of asserting a meaning for criminalized forms of life in print and in the social world that contradicts a dominant narrative which insists that certain lives are expendable. The use of the means of print publication to spread an alternative meaning of Black life was a primary preoccupation of self-defined Black feminists.

The 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement explicitly points out publication as a primary strategy of Black feminism,

We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing and publishing makes us want to carry out these

kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.³⁰

Life in print proved extremely important to Smith, who hustled to get the Combahee River Collective Statement published in as many venues as possible and who created the anthology *Home Girls* to ensure that *Conditions Five*, which sold more than four times as many copies as any other issue of the journal *Conditions*, would not go out of print. Indeed, during the lifetime of Kitchen Table Press, *Home Girls* and every other title they published remained in print whether or not copies were selling. While she describes the activism that she engaged in response to the Boston Murders as the “most nightmarish yet dramatically transforming political work” in her life, Smith describes Black Women’s Studies, the process of publishing and teaching that ensures that these stories survive over time, as her “legacy.”³¹

1979 was the beginning of the dissolution of Black feminist organizations including the Third World Women’s Alliance (formerly the Black Women’s Alliance), The National Black Feminist Organization, Black Women United for Action and the Combahee River Collective.³² But it was also the beginning of a period of sustained autonomous Black feminist publishing, marking an important transition in the manifestation of Black feminism. I argue that the violence of 1979 and the political and social conservatism that institutionalized this violence demanded a strategic shift on the

³⁰ Combahee River Collective. “Combahee River Collective Statement,” in Barbara Smith ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 272.

³¹ Barbara Smith. “Foreword” in *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties: Freedom Organizing Series #1*. New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1986, 5. Barbara Smith. “Building Black Women’s Studies,” in Florence Howe ed. *The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers*. New York: The Feminist Press, 2000, 194-203.

³² Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

part of radical anti-capitalist feminists. In some ways the Black feminist print movement was and is the afterlife of Black feminist organizing in the United States. Through radical publishing and teaching, Black feminists like Barbara Smith insisted on the relevance of their shifting present and projected their visions and lessons into the future. These queer visions and lessons about how the world could be would not be sustained by literary markets, or even academic departments. The radical world that these Black feminists believed in exists only in the words and lessons they left and in our contemporary relationship to them, when and if we find them.

While some argue that Black feminism died or became tame or impotent when Black feminist theory moved out of the streets and into the academy, I would counter that the key theorists of a feminist anti-capitalist diasporic vision never accepted the amputation that would have made the academy or the mainstream literary market a homespace for them.³³ While I concede that after 1979 some Black feminists agreed to market themselves within academic and literary markets and made sacrifices to so, the queerest of these, also retained an anti-capitalist approach. Alexis DeVeaux and Barbara Smith especially demonstrate a model of Black feminist survival in the way they straddled community organizing, autonomous publishing, commercial journalism and the academy in order to make queer spaces of critique, passing on traces despite the designs of institutions that would never endorse their survival. Barbara Smith, as the anchor for Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was also supportive of a number of other autonomous literary ventures by women of color. As one of the organizers of the Third World Lesbian Writers Conference and the first financial and in-kind contributor

³³ Ibid.

to *Between Ourselves* a women of color created newspaper published for a short time out of Washington D.C., Smith also made sure that the Combahee River Collective Statement was present in number of special issues created by women of color intervening into predominantly white feminist publications and wrote letters of support for women of color controlled periodical ventures in England and Canada as well. Alexis DeVeaux's is also an example of the critical production of experimental autonomous women of color led spaces for meaning making. Maintaining a critical stance towards the means of literary production, after publishing collections of poetry and children's books with a number of mainstream publishers, DeVeaux published an experimental anti-imperialist folder of poems called *Blue Heat* with her self-invented *Diva Publishing Enterprises* which she dedicated "to self-publishing."³⁴ She also ran a workshop for women of the Black diaspora in her apartment in Brooklyn. This collective, called the Gaptooth Girlfriends, self-published 3 anthologies of their poetry. Along with her partner at the time, Black feminist artist Gwendolyn Hardwick, she founded a group called the Flamboyant Ladies who used the living room to hold Black feminist literary salons, craft radical performances, design t-shirts and even plan a day-long event on the impact of the nuclear crisis on the survival of Black communities. At the same time DeVeaux, with the partnership of her sister-comrade Cheryll Greene intervened in the pages of *Essence Magazine* a fashion and beauty magazine owned by Black men, to expose the largest reading audience of Black women in the United States to a Black diasporic political perspective before the term diaspora was in circulation. I argue that books, pamphlets, periodicals, classrooms and living rooms became strategic spaces of survival for Black

³⁴ Alexis DeVeaux. *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings*. New York: Diva Publishing Enterprises, 1985.

anti-capitalist feminists under attack, allowing them to reach past the conservatism of the 1980's towards an impossible future: this instant and this triumph. A queer diasporic relationship to time, self, community and survival. Quilted secrets, hidden inner pockets, nail scraped passageways, found.

Looking Inward and Outward: the Queer Space of Survival

What a bad example, a dangerous precedent, an independent Grenada would be for the peoples of Color in the Caribbean, in Central America, for those of us here in the United States.

-Audre Lorde, Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report³⁵

Black painter and poet June Beer...quietly she asks me, "Do you think I have a future? Do we (Nicaraguans) have one? Some days I think maybe-maybe not."³⁶

*Compared with barefoot David standing up to Goliath, we, Black Americans, are so very rich and so very powerful. But when will we believe it? When will we emulate the spirit of the visions of the Sandinistas? **When will we seize the world around us with our freedom?***

-June Jordan, January 1984 "Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There"³⁷

In her poem "Memoranda Towards the Spring of Seventy-Nine," June Jordan presents the deadly banality of the US mass media's representation of global and political events. "There must be something else on television," the speaker complains. "Martin Luther King Jr., is still dead," she reminds us.³⁸ Citing an MLK memorial sponsored by "The National Boat Show," The Daily News personal interest coverage of

³⁵ Audre Lorde. "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 179.

³⁶ June Jordan. "Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There," in *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 72.

³⁷ Ibid, 75.

³⁸ from June Jordan, *Passion: New Poems, 1977-1980*, Beacon Press, 1980. Anthologized in June Jordan, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 302.

the overthrow of the Iranian Shah, an instruction booklet for cooking with a Chinese Wok, Channel Eleven's TV movie about Adolf Hitler, Kaptain Kangaroo and Woody Woodpecker and a Dear Abby Letter, Jordan transmutes the irresponsible representation of international relations, especially in the Middle East, into a continued assault (or assassination) against racial justice in the United States. In *Living Room*, Jordan's anti-imperialist collection of poems, Jordan connects the Atlanta Child Murders and the Greensboro Massacre of 1979 to the revolution in Nicaragua and the Israeli imperialist action against Lebanon by writing about each of these sites of violence within the same text, using the domestic language of the "Living Room" to highlight the resonance between the racism of US domestic policy and foreign intervention, while suggesting a livable alternative.

How does one live here, on the shoreline, where civil rights recede with the haste of backlash, where a neoliberal economic colonization of the hemisphere undercuts the revolutionary struggles in the Caribbean and in southern Africa. Survival, in 1979 in a political scene characterized by backlash in the form of Ronald Reagan's rise to electoral victory, Jerry Falwell's founding of the "Moral Majority," the election of Margeret Thatcher and a conservative parliament in England, some of those who were never meant to survive emphasized a diasporic relationship to race, space and gender. In Atlanta, Toni Cade Bambara and other Black feminist mothers who survived the Atlanta Murders were in the midst of a radical health movement that envisioned the well-being of Black women in political terms, as holistic self-determination in community. The Black Women's Health Project, founded by Byllye Avery and based in Atlanta, offered a transnational vision of Black women's health sustained by methods from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and organized delegations to these regions to create an

expansive vision of health. At the same time, in New York in the unlikely pages of *Essence* Magazine, Alexis DeVeaux and Cheryl Greene in collaboration with Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde and others were engaged in a mission to expand the political vocabulary of US based Black women to include the freedom struggles that Black women were engaged in across the Caribbean and Africa in Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Grenada and elsewhere.³⁹

In 1979, after the age of anti-colonial revolutions abroad and civil rights and Black power visibility in the United States, the US state sought to reassert itself with conservative domestic policies and imperialist foreign policy towards the hegemony of capitalism. In 1979, Black feminists based in the US (many of whom like Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux and June Jordan were of Caribbean ancestry), aligned themselves with the socialist revolutions in Latin America and the Caribbean that threatened the United States' aim of hemispheric capitalist hegemony. 1979 was a revolutionary year. In July 1979, a group of young people, called Sandinistas, many of whom were women and poets, achieved a socialist revolution in Nicaragua. The student-led socialist New Jewel Movement in Grenada came to power in the same year.

Writers such as Audre Lorde (of Grenadian ancestry, based in the US) Dionne Brand (Trinidadian, based in Canada) and Merle Hodge (based in Jamaica) and many others traveled to Grenada to participate in and witness the revolutionary process, claiming the first socialist revolution in a majority Black country as an achievement that required but also exceeded Grenadian national sovereignty. June Jordan traveled to Nicaragua to meet with fellow poets and women revolutionaries, writing an important

³⁹ More on this in Chapter 2: The Danger of (Queer) Black Maternity

article for *Essence* magazine that depicted the dangerous revolutionary situation of the Afro-Caribbean community in Bluefields, Nicaragua who knew they were facing imminent violence from an imperialist U.S. state that would not tolerate sustainable living outside of capitalism anywhere in the western hemisphere. Afro-Caribbean Nicaraguan poet and painter June Beer, wondered aloud to June Jordan whether she would live to grow old. Black feminists based in the US acknowledged the transnational scope of their political situation and aligned themselves with revolutions that, in the context of US military aggression and threat, were also never meant to survive.

Not surprisingly, the Black feminist writers and teachers that aligned themselves with these short-lived socialist revolutions highlighted the important roles of literature and literacy in these movements. Audre Lorde emphasized the “each one teach one” methodology in Grenada, an intergenerational process through which schoolchildren taught illiterate elders to read, while the elders taught the schoolchildren the lessons they had learned from life. June Jordan emphasized the role of poets as leaders of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, celebrating the fact that one of the first actions the revolutionary government took was to outlaw the exploitation of women in advertising and reporting that the Nicaraguan revolutionaries expressed a strong identification with Black revolutionaries in the United States such as Malcolm X. With these diasporic reports, radical Black feminists in the United States took a clear stance against capitalism and imperialism and argued that poetry and teaching were revolutionary acts, placing their local poetic and pedagogical work in a broader revolutionary context.

In her recent work on the life and intellectual contribution of Black communist Claudia Jones, Carol Boyce-Davies, also an Afro-Caribbean feminist scholar based in the US, laments the US-centrism of Black feminist theory and advocates for a transnational

feminist historicization that challenges the violent construction of national borders, seeking to recuperate a radical Black feminist subject.⁴⁰ Arguing that Claudia Jones, who was deported in the 1950's for her communist activism in the United States, was effectively evacuated from the historical memory of Black, feminist, communist, and Caribbean scholars, Boyce-Davies asks for an approach that is leftist and transnational enough to center Jones's revolutionary life and work. In effect Jones, who died young of heart failure, and the legacy of her work were never meant to survive. Boyce-Davies can only describe Jones's position using Audre Lorde's term "sister outsider," she who (be)longs and yet is excluded, she who creates a radical relationship out of solidarity and love in the context of oppression and marginalization. I say that it is no coincidence that Boyce-Davies describes Jones's life through Audre Lorde's self-identification. This study of the radical anti-capitalist, anti-racist feminist work of Lorde, Jordan, Smith and De Veaux argues that there was indeed a Black transnational feminism that challenged capitalism directly. But it is no mere coincidence that Boyce-Davies describes it as a lack. Like Jones, this particular form of Black feminism is often forgotten, because of course, it was never meant to survive.

The transnationalism of Black anti-capitalist feminists produces a rival definition of survival contemporaneous with the pan-africanist idea of diasporic cultural "survivals" that arose during the anti-colonial period of the 1960's and early 1970's. In contrast to the concept of African "survivals" in the cultural practices of Black people in the Americas, heavily drawn upon by Black cultural nationalists who insisted that the most seemingly patriarchal African traditions should be reproduced in Black American

⁴⁰ Carole Boyce-Davies. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

communities, or the “global sisterhood” approach to feminism which suggested that a specific form of western feminism should apply to all of the women in the world, the form of survival and connection that radical Black feminist argued for was strategic. While Audre Lorde was a diasporic Grenadian, she acknowledged that in the context of the Grenadian revolution and the subsequent US invasion she was merely a distant “relative” and she emphasized the privilege the US Blacks had in the seat of empire and their responsibility to challenge the global racism practiced by the government they supported with their tax dollars. Similarly Alexis DeVeaux in her diasporic reports on US complicity in the suffering of Black people in Haiti and South Africa, stressed the responsibility Black citizens of the United States had to act in solidarity and identification with Black people who were differentially suffering from the racism of the US State. The Black feminism articulated by Lorde, DeVeaux and others in the 1980’s was transnational feminism anticipating the definition that M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty provide in their key introduction to *Feminist Ideologies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*;

1. “a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in *different* geographical spaces, rather than as *all* women across the world
2. “an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than a set of traits embodied in all non-US citizens (particularly because of the racist heterosexist definitions of US citizenship)
3. “a consideration of the term ‘international’ in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes which foreground the operations of race and capitalism⁴¹

In *The Edges of Each Other’s Battles* a film documenting the 1990 “I Am Your Sister” Conference that Alexander, Angela Bowen and others created to celebrate the

⁴¹ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty “Introduction” in *Feminist Ideologies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge 1997.

work of Audre Lorde, Alexander explains Lorde's contribution to the understanding of differential feminisms and transnational solidarity. "Feminism is not a scarce resource," Alexander reminds us, "but we cannot use one measure of feminism to the struggles of women all over the world."⁴² According to Alexander, it was Lorde's development of a philosophy of "sisterhood as survival" in theory and practice that provided the necessary critique to the homogenizing narrative that "sisterhood is global."⁴³

The theories of difference and the development of feminist Black internationalism developed by Lorde, Jordan and De Veaux especially in the early 1980's demonstrate how the survival of Black feminism was a transnational process that was not quite nationalist, but explicitly anti-imperialist. My argument is that what we understand as transnational feminism today depends on a theoretical project of redefining survival that Jordan and Lorde theorized in production and in poetics, discussed in detail in Chapter 1: "Survival an Intervention into Meaning" which offers a close textual reading of the queer uses of the term survival that Jordan and Lorde developed in the mid-1980's. The section that follows investigates how a queer intergenerational reading practice can allow these theories to survive in the present.

Queer Intergenerationality

Hurricane Hugo was a terrible natural disaster, but nature heals herself. It is what we inject into her like tumors that fester and grow loathsome without constant attention, refusing to self-destruct, because out of our twisted wisdom—some fantasy of bloodless immortality—we have created them as if they would last 1,000 years. *But wind is our teacher.*"

⁴³ *The Edges of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde*. Jennifer Abod, 2002. Alexander is using Robin Morgan's phrase "Sisterhood is Global" to stand in for a broader imperialist project of universalizing engaged in by white western feminists.

-Audre Lorde, from “Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter” (1989 emphasis added)⁴⁴

I read Pat Parker’s two earlier books with appreciation, sometimes worrying about whether or not she’d/we’d survive. (Which for Black/Poet/Women is synonymous with grow.)

-Audre Lorde *Introduction* to Pat Parker’s *Movement in Black*, (1989)⁴⁵

The children remain
like blades of grass over the earth and
all the children are singing
louder than mourning.

-Audre Lorde, from “Prologue” (1971)⁴⁶

If queer theory is meant to challenge the “reproductive narrative” as it emerges in social institutions, then queer theorists must disrupt the reproduction of a racist narrative that criminalizes the birth and mothering of Black life. The seeming contradiction between mothering and queer intervention overlooks the fact that, as Cathy Cohen argues in “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Black mothers are queer threats to the social order.⁴⁷ This dissertation argues that Black mothering queerly disrupts a reproductive narrative about what (whose) life is worth, a narrative that says that Black life is worth less and that life itself can be valued and used differentially based on race, economic status, gender etc. When queer theory argues against the child, and criminalizes mothering as an inevitable consent to the reproduction of the status quo, queer theory PARTICIPATES in a

⁴⁴ Audre Lorde. “Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter,” *Callaloo* Vol. 14 no 1 (Winter 1991) 72-82.

⁴⁵ Audre Lorde. “Introduction: Pat Parker: Movement in Black” in Rudolph Byrd, Johentta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall eds. *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 158.

⁴⁶ Audre Lorde. “Prologue” in *From a Land Where Other People Live*. Chicago: Broadside Press, 1973, 45.

⁴⁷ Cathy Cohen. “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson eds. *Black Queer Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 21-50.

reproductive narrative that denies the agencies of mother, particularly poor and racialized mothers, in order to reproduce the differential use values of marked bodies in a capitalist system that turns difference into profit through violence.

If we reground our queer intervention in a queer of color critique, which was in a large part developed by the Black feminists under discussion in this dissertation (Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Barbara Smith, Alexis DeVeaux), who were explicitly invested in mothering and the domestic as sites of intellectual and political production of an alternative social value for life itself, we will be able to actually intervene in the narrative that is reproducing our oppression. There is a reason that the centrist state effectively makes same-sex parenting illegal, and that the religious right tries to ban queer teachers from schools. The pedagogical work of mothering is exactly the site where a narrative will either be reproduced or interrupted. The work of Black mothering, the teaching of a set of social values that challenge a social logic which believes that we, the children of Black mothers, the queer, the deviant, should not exist, is queer work. Therefore, as a queer theorist I theorize that work.

I am both pointing out the complicity of a “race-neutral” (i.e. white) queer construction AND critique of the reproductive narrative in the REPRODUCTION of the project of differential life value through the criminalization and targeting of racialized mothers, as well as arguing the importance of an genealogy of queer theory, which as argued by Roderick Ferguson among others, starts with Barbara Smith’s “Towards A Black Feminist Literary Criticism” and the “Combahee River Collective Statement.” Building on the work of Ferguson, Munoz, Evelyn Hammonds and others, assert that a

queer of color critique illuminates and *queers the reproductive narrative through which queer theory has constructed its own genealogy*.⁴⁸

As Michael Warner makes clear in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, a definitive text for the queer theory's project of critiquing the subsumption of gay and lesbian subjects into a normative paradigm, feminist social theory and the critiques of the family found within socialist feminism are the precedent through which he articulates queer theory's intervention into gay and lesbian studies.⁴⁹

At the beginning of his introduction Warner points out that most forms of social theory have made sexuality a peripheral concern, while "feminism has made gender a primary category of the social in a way that makes queer theory newly imaginable." (viii)⁵⁰ And after his analysis of the intergalactic cartoon, made to communicate to possible life forms in another star system, the anecdote from which he gains the title of the collection of essays, we find the genealogical moment:

Much of the work of feminist social theory has consisted of showing that basic conceptualizations—ways of opposing home and economy, the political and the personal or system and lifeworld—presuppose and reinforce a paradigmatically male position. Queer theory is beginning to be in a position to make similar critiques.⁵¹

The maturation of queer theory, due to the convergences of other forms of social theory, the concern with gender and the need to complicate an increasingly centrist

⁴⁸ Roderick Ferguson. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Jose Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Evelyn, Hammonds. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2-3 (1994):126-145.Reprinted in African American Literary Theory, ed. Winston Napier, (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Michael Warner. "Introduction" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

⁵⁰ Ibid, viii.

⁵¹ Ibid.

mode within gay and lesbian studies allows it to follow in the footsteps of what almost becomes a parental precedent: feminist social theory.

Focusing on *The Anti-Social Family*, a key text in the analysis of the political function of the family form on/in contradiction with the contemporary left we will get a sense of the teleological trajectory within queer theory that would allow us to arrive, through the space made by *Fear of a Queer Planet* to a polemic like Edelman's *No Future* and at the common sense understanding within the dominant (read white-centered) mode within queer theory that any talk of mothering, or intergenerationality must automatically be a non-queer act of consent to the normative narrative of reproductive futurity.⁵²

Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh's *The Anti-social Family* (1982) critiques the "familialism" of both the right wing and the left, arguing that because feminist socialists, and socialists at large have not come to a consensus about the function of the family, especially in regards to the unpaid labor of women, the left in both the United States and Britain have succumbed to trying to fit their demands into a family values rhetorical frame. (14)⁵³ Early in the preface, the authors admit that their argument is about the implications of the function of the family for a white audience. While they suggest that the analysis they develop could probably be extrapolated to the diverse ethnic populations in Britain, they shy away from actually applying their analysis to the experiences of ethnic "minorities" because as white feminists it is not their place to do so. Interestingly, the other absence that the authors apologize for is the absence of any discussion of sexual preference. Their critique is of the function of the heterosexual

⁵² Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

⁵³ Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh. *The Anti-social Family*. London: NLB, 1982, 14.

white family in relation to heterosexual white citizens. Queer theory will later take up their wholesale critique of the function of the family to develop a critical stance that also decenters the specifics of gay or lesbian identity, but will also be influenced by the tentative grounding of this theory in a whiteness that self-effacingly claims possible universality without staking a claim, inheriting (and I use that word intentionally) a not so queer relationship to racial difference.

While the authors try to avoid race and the possibility of their own racism in their analysis, it is clear that the political value of the unit of the family is already about race. Opening the first chapter by citing the sensational proclamations of the European Parliament, which decries that “the falling birthrate, which is now approaching or even falling below the rate required for the (European) population to renew itself” cannot be separated from the fact that this cry to revive the family and to reproduce, comes at a moment during which the racialized people of the British colonial world have been steadily immigrating to the UK, and a time during which the former colonies continue to have high birthrates. The call for the revival of the family is already a racialized call, fueled by anxiety about the fate of the white British population in addition to the concerns about gender roles that the authors center. The authors go on to distinguish their argument about the reproductive function of the family from aberrations where populations are “reproduced by recruitment,” most notably in the case of the transatlantic slave trade.⁵⁴ The reproduction of a family is a privilege, the authors points out, and not all groups have equal access to it. But nonetheless, despite these exceptions, their argument continues, the reproduction of the family serves to reproduce class

⁵⁴ Ibid, 44.

divisions and the society that requires them. There is no further examination of the potentially different function of reproduction in these liminal groups.

The feminism of this argument hinges on the tyranny of motherhood. Motherhood, is the hyper-exploited labor of women, compelled not only by the assumed naturalness of the gendered division of labor, but also because of an anti-social political form, exemplified by Thatcherism and Reaganism, within which the rhetoric of individualism and the emphasis on family networks justifies the state defunding of social services, and undercuts any thought that food, housing, education and other basic needs might be community concerns, and not merely individual choices. The labor that the state refuses and projects onto the family necessarily falls onto women because of this gendered division of labor.⁵⁵ This leads the authors to argue for the funding of social services, to protest the decrease of welfare, positions that Black feminists, especially self-identified Black socialist feminists would agree with across the board.

However, the concept of the tyranny of motherhood, when motherhood is deracialized, does not address the complexity of the labor or potential of mothering for racialized mothers. As Hortense Spillers clarifies in her essay “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe,” motherhood (the tyrannical force imposed on white mothers) and *mothering* are not the same thing. Motherhood denotes a certain privileged relationship of authority (though limited) through which a mother relates to her “own” child. In the situation of American Slavery however, Spillers points out that *motherhood* is not imposed on enslaved women. Instead mothering, the labor of nurturing they are compelled to perform is directed towards children they cannot “own,” both in the cases

⁵⁵ Ibid, 61.

of their biological offspring, or kin they would choose by affinity or in the case of the master's children who they "mother" as well.⁵⁶ In the situation of slavery, the situation which is exceptional to the argument of the Anti-Social family, the labor of the mother does not only function within a nuclear normative family, it also functions to reproduce slave status, while severing biological and social bonds. This different function of the labor of mothering through which slavery was reproduced and through which racial difference and the exploited labor of racialized mothers both in the homes, kitchens, hotel laundry rooms of the privileged and in the social narrative that reproduces race, leads to a different analytical function for the term mother.

During the early 1980's, at the same time that Barrett and McIntosh wrote and published *The Anti-Social Family*, Black feminist theorists including June Jordan and Audre Lorde drew on the split between motherhood as a subject position and the flexible labor of mothering to arrive at queer definitions of mothering that were not linked to the reproduction of a heteropatriarchal family unit. Lorde as a lesbian mother raising her children in an interracial lesbian partnership, and Jordan as a divorced bisexual Black mother to a biracial child challenged the link between the work of mothering and the reproduction of patriarchal family, the idea of race purity or the social values of a capitalist society. In fact Lorde's queer proposition that "We can learn to mother ourselves," wrenches the labor of mothering away from the reproductive narrative within which Barrett and McIntosh use it to the extent that mothering itself, the labor of

⁵⁶ See Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in Winson Napier ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

mothering directed differently can be the most dangerous disruptive force the reproductive narrative has ever seen.⁵⁷

A queer of color critique that centers the work of these feminists, who actually center the work of mothering and the internal geography of the domestic sphere (the living room, the kitchen table) provides us with a form of mothering that is a deviant energy for counternarrative and poetic interruptions that not only threaten the reproduction of the narrative of heteropatriarchal capitalism, but also offer something else in its place.

However, the Anti-Social family and the tendency of white social feminists to assume the coherence of the category of motherhood, pass on a tyrannical motherhood to queer theorists via Warner in which the term mother must be the anti-queer. In Warner's introduction, queerness is most importantly a critique of the family structure, as a response to the gay and lesbian's movements move towards desired inclusion in the narrative of reproductive family. Warner insists that queer culture is different from other cultures in that is not rooted in a place, nor is it diasporic, offering a position that reminds us of the way Barrett and McIntosh shy away from race in their analysis of the family.⁵⁸ Warner's insistence that queer culture cannot be described using the same metaphors that racial and ethnic cultures describe themselves, allows him to continue

⁵⁷ Audre Lorde. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 173.

⁵⁸ The theorists and organizers at Southerners on New Ground would also disagree with Warner's statement that queerness is not diasporic. Even if one ignores the experiences of people who are both queer and displaced because of racial or ethnic factors, SONG argues that because so many queer southern and rural people (and working class people and people of color) are forced to leave home or kicked out of their homes due to their sexuality, this displacement, during which people are often compelled to move to relative queer-friendly cities, constitutes a queer diaspora. Even though queer people are obviously not from one central location, the majority of queer people are working-class and they are often forced to leave every place. See www.southernersonnewground.org accessed January, 25th 2010.

with his argument as if those practicing queer culture are not raced or at best as if race is an exception. After defining “queer culture” in opposition to other cultural forms, and in opposition to the “emphasis on reproductive continuity” in African American culture in particular, Warner explains that the use of the language of family, in particular the word “mother” to describe the role of the leader of an African American “house” in ball culture, must be ironic.⁵⁹ It is outside of Warner’s understanding of queerness that the word “mother” might actually be descriptive of the intergenerational role that a particular queen performs in the structure of the house. The term “mother” can only function in the way Warner’s polemic functions: to critique the family. The rest of this foundational collection of essays follows suit. Even in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s article “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” parents are oddly obscured by the primary relationship between the normative psychoanalyst (who is trying to ‘cure’ queer youth) and the patient/child. The possibility of a queer parent or any parent who parents queerly is outside of the imaginary of the essay.⁶⁰ Cathy Griggers talks about lesbian maternity in her chapter “Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)mechanical Reproduction” but only to suggest that the fact that lesbians bodies can be maternal bodies prove that lesbians not only challenge but also participate in the status quo. Griggers also briefly mentions Audre Lorde’s *Zami* in order to make a point about states of hybridity, or the instability of minority bodies but unlike the texts that she mentions alongside *Zami* she provides no example from the text, and it remains unclear what use the mention serves,

⁵⁹ Michael Warner. “Introduction” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

⁶⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” in Michael Warner ed. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 69-81.

besides the tokenistic diversification of Griggers's archive.⁶¹ Phillip Brian Harper does mention intergenerational queerness, but only as an aside when he contrasts openly gay singer Sylvester's obituary with the obituary of newscaster Max Robinson. Sylvester happens to mention that he enjoyed sex with an adult evangelist as a child. Harper mentions that Sylvester's quotation about childhood intergenerational sex, which appears in his obituary raises issues about "sex between adults and children" as he passes on to discuss the portrayal of Robinson in the media and the Black nationalist homophobia that frames this reception which is the real point of his essay. (250) This however is the most attention a queer intergenerational relationship gets in this text. Predictably, the essays fall in line with the parameters Warner sets in the introduction.

I am interested in a queer deployment of the term mother that, in addition to critiquing the heteropatriarchal family, can also generate an alternative intergenerational sociality through which the violent narratives of patriarchy and capitalism can be replaced by dynamic forms of community accountability, desire and transformation. I assert that a queer of color critique that centers the work of lesbian feminists of color can grant us this alternative possibility, because it takes as a starting point a more complicated relationship to the patriarchal institution of the family and because it can offer more queer, less linear relationship to the connection between history, futurity and presence.

Roderick Ferguson is widely credited for offering an alternative trajectory for queer theory called a "queer of color critique" that takes the work of Barbara Smith and other radical lesbian feminists of color as a starting point in his 2004 work of

⁶¹ Cathy Grieger. "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)mechanical Reproduction" in Michael Warner ed. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 186.

sociological and literary critique *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. Later, in his essay “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality,” he extends his assertion of “women of color feminism as inspiration for intersectional analyses of nonheteronormative racial formations” to add that “women of color feminism also invites us to consider how we might reconsider the issue of sexuality’s deployment in an effort to assess queer studies’ management of that category and to usher queer studies into its full critical potential.”⁶²

At the same time Ferguson problematizes the reproductive narrative through which theory grows out of disciplines in a linear matter. Unlike Warner’s queer theory, which imagines itself as a descendent of other forms of social theory, Ferguson emphasizes the fact that the “women of color feminism” that he cites as a source for a queer of color critique was located “in the interstices” of different academic fields and social movements. Instead of a “an object that belongs to one field or inquiry” Ferguson reframes sexuality within the context of women of color feminism as “a network of relations that constitute knowledge and sociality.”⁶³ In contrast to Warner’s assertion that queer culture is different than other “cultures” because sexuality cannot be understood through the same terms as race or nationality, Ferguson clarifies that “Sexuality is not extraneous to other modes of difference. Sexuality is intersectional. It is constitutive of and constituted by racialized gender and class formations.”⁶⁴ Starting here, at the intersection of women of color feminism’s critical concerns and accountabilities, sexuality as an engine of critique does not have to make (or colonize) a

⁶² Roderick Ferguson. “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality.” *Social Text* 2005 23(3-4 84-85):85-100

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 86..

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 88.

new space in order to exist. Despite Warner, this planet is already a rather queer planet without appropriating the language of the hip-hop group NWA.

The queer critique that I want to mobilize in this project draws on this trajectory, where neither queerness nor the family operate in a universal realm outside of racial difference, but rather offer a queer intervention into the engendering of racism through the recontextualizing of the term “mother” which is a sexualized, gendered and racialized term in its social function. In *Aberrations* Ferguson explains that term “lesbian,” as deployed by Barbara Smith and other self-identified “third world lesbians” functions not as a descriptive identity but as a “negation of identity,” a way to interrupt the reproduction of identity. “Lesbian” as a critical form of reading in Smith’s proto-queer essay “Towards a Black Feminist Critique” troubled the process of identification itself. Over and over again Smith responded to charges that she was identifying Toni Morrison as a lesbian, with clarifications that she was instead offering a lesbian reading of Morrison’s novel *Sula*, and that the practice of a lesbian reading was not about identifying anyone, not the characters, not the author, not even the readers as “lesbians,” but rather to point to the ways that a particular critical practice could disrupt the reproductive narrative of patriarchal family providing, in Morrison’s words, adopted by Ferguson “something else to be.”⁶⁵

My argument is that an equally intersectional understanding of the term “mother” can provide us with not only “something else to be,” but another **way** to be where “mother” points to and critiques a mode of reproduction and generates alternative possibilities. I argue that instead of reincorporating modes of literary, historical and

⁶⁵ Ferguson, *Aberrations*, 110-137.

activist production into a patriarchal narrative, the use of the term “mother” and the languages of domestic space and the labor of nurturing invoked by lesbian and bisexual feminists of color spotlights and negates that reproduction, queering it for the production of alternative and criminalized social forms.

Focusing on the queer potential of the term “mother” also foregrounds the question of temporality because it invokes and then questions the process or transmission of property (capital) or properties (the racialization of enslavement) across generations. By implying more than one generation, the queering of the term mother raises the question of futurity. In direct opposition to the presentist temporality of Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future*, Jose Esteban Munoz engages the Marxist theories of Ernst Bloch to talk about temporalities of hope towards a revised queer historiography (the no-longer-conscious) and futurity (the not-yet-conscious). Pointing out that “The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes and “rational” expectations.”⁶⁶ Instead of settling for the present and foreclosing the future, Munoz argues that queerness, unlike the contemporary invocations of gay and lesbian, but much like Barbara Smith’s project of lesbian reading is “not an identarian formulation but, instead, the invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence.”⁶⁷

The theoretical and practical redefinitions of mothering that I explore in this dissertation draw on the queer potential of an outlawed future, explored and enacted by

⁶⁶ Jose Muñoz. “Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism” in *Crusing Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2010, 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 12-13.

Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alexis De Veaux and Barbara Smith, who activated Black literary production as a queer intergenerational act of radical mothering.

Queer Intergenerationality Defined:

The reclamation of the practice of Black mothering is a queer act because it disrupts the devaluation of Black life, and by extension the differential value of life in general. I argue that the literary production of queer Black feminists who invoked the labor of mothering in their work is an intervention against the social reproduction of capitalism, which places differential values on life and labor. So while a normative reading of mothering seems to reify a reproductive narrative, within a system that uses the expendability of racialized mothers to reaffirm patriarchal forms of sociality, the work of Black mothering is queer. It offers a critique of the presence of capitalist dehumanization offers the production of an alternative future instead of the reproduction of the same violence.

The queer temporality of production without reproduction and relationality without the production of normativity is what I want to call queer intergenerationality. The reading practice of this dissertation is *intergenerative* in that it opens itself to the ghosts of desires too queer to survive in a literary time circumscribed by market values. This queer use of “intergenerationality” describes what Audre Lorde would call “the creative power of difference” and what Hortense Spillers calls the “intervening narrative.”⁶⁸ The basic premise of this deployment of a queer form of

⁶⁸ See Audre Lorde. “Age, Race, Sex and Class: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 114-123. Hortense Spillers. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in Winson Napier ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

intergenerationality outside of the narrative of familial reproduction is that there is something present between us that exceeds the time and space within which we (don't) encounter each other. There is something produced that cannot be narrated and that does not survive except that it does. There is something between us that persists because of and despite the fact that we want it.

The normative use of the adjective “intergenerational” refers to something that occurs “between generations” as they are normatively conceived. For example when a young girl speaks with her grandmother they are having an *intergenerational* conversation. But for the purpose of this project, I will be engaging in a radical redefinition of both “between” and “generation.” The prefix “inter,” meaning “between” usually acts as a boundary, suggesting through its presence the existence of difference and an agreed upon barrier demarcating categories. For example, a conversation between the girl and the grandmother is intergenerational because they are assumed to belong to different generations. However the gap that “inter” invokes can be more complicated than a mere line or hinge. My use of what I will call an intergenerative reading practice reveals the queerness in intergenerationality invoking the term “interstice” as used by Spillers to mark a void in articulability. Spillers, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s use of the figure of female genitalia to “decenter and deconstruct the text,”⁶⁹ uses the term “interstices” to reveal the existence of a “Black hole” as a symbolic rupture (that which has no sign...only hype and hysteria) in the feminist and African-Americanist discourse about Black women’s sexuality.⁷⁰ Evelyn Hammonds builds on this figure of

⁶⁹ Hortense Spillers. “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Black White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 133, 156.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

the Black (w)hole to suggest that queer Black female sexuality is a generative site for the expression of Black female desire (and Black feminist discourse). For Hammonds, Lorde's work on the erotic is an example of the way that Black lesbian sexuality "reclaims the despised Black female body."⁷¹ And this impossible desire, because it comes from the Black hole of a foreclosed sexuality, has an impact. It reframes the Black female body as an object and subject of Black female desire. This relationship is not reproductive, but rather reveals the *production* of silence around Black women's sexuality. Likewise the practice of Black maternity as name for the desire for and fear of criminalized Black sociality reveals the silencing function of the narratives that demonize it. Rather than perpetuate the ideological link between Black female sexuality and reproductivity (i.e. the reproduction of slave status, the reproduction of a culture of poverty), I intend for "inter" and "generation" to coproduce a possibility that Black women can actually "generate" desire, speech, narrative, critique and social relationships, a production silenced by the reproduction of these desires as pathologies in the dominant narratives.

This brings us to my recontextualization of the term "generation" which is fueled by my intention to make visible an intersubjective Black feminist theory of production or *generation* in the sense of the active verb "to generate." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "the action of generating" is actually the primary definition of the term "generation," but "generating" in this case directly reflects the heteronormativity latent in the root "genre" which signifies gender as naturalized difference in type and appropriates "generation" into the reproduction of that difference through a primary association with human procreation and classification, the ideological engines for both "gender" and

⁷¹ Hammonds, 126.

“race.” The second definition of “generation” is synonymous with “production” as in John Clarke’s passage in Rohault’s *Natural Philosophy* (1729) “The Production of Something which before was not, we call Generation.” The evocations of “generation” that I want to focus on occur as subsets to this second definition of the word describing the production of electricity, or the generator as an energy source and the linguistic use of the term which describes the derivation of grammatical sequence from a constituting basis. Both of these uses of the term generation are implicit in Audre Lorde’s “Of Generators and Survival.” Lorde invokes generators, commonplace on islands with frequent power outages and crucial in the post-Hugo weeks, as an unreliable, threatened, makeshift energy source that survivors of the hurricane had to become intimate with. They learned the language of generators. At anytime during conversation, work or sleep they could hear and interpret the sputter of change in rhythm of the generator. This post-Hugo relationship to generators in St. Croix is a metaphor for the reading practice enacted here, the texts that are available, which barely made it through a literary market do not have the force of dominance, or the sustained reliability of the dominant narrative, but they are crucial for the unlikely survival of Black feminist literary production, and therefore I must become attuned to the stops and starts, the changes in tense, and the tensions of these artifacts of literary production. Survivors of a hurricane depend upon generators, but they also have to partner with those generators, being pushed far past the uses they were marketed towards in order to facilitate the conversations, labor, sleep that they deserve. The generator therefore becomes an interactive energy source, the sputters and starts call for attention in the co-produced energetic status of our time.

My use of the term generation highlights these valences of the term which invoke

production, energy and action at the base of the speakable, while pushing on that very basis, the root “genr” to activate a *different* theory of difference, where difference is not reproductive of capital and inequity, but rather dialogically productive of ethical accountability between Black feminists and the political figures they reached back and forwards towards across death. I am using the term “intergenerational” primarily to mark co-production between people of different chronological ages, but also to activate the radical productivity of difference that emerges in the spaces of collaborative making. It takes an intergenerative reading practice to queer the function of intergenerationality.

For example, in “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” Hortense Spillers makes an “intergenerational” statement in all of the senses in which I am deploying the term. This essay, which opens with an excerpt from Audre Lorde’s poem “A Song for Many Movements,” is the practical debut of the vocabulary “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe” made a space for (in fact in 2006 Spillers mentioned that she wrote the earlier essay because she knew she had to give a talk at Barnard College for the Scholar and the Feminist Conference and she didn’t have a way of saying what she needed to say).⁷² In “Interstices,” Spillers refers back to and summarizes the project of “Mama’s Baby” in a language enabled by the possibility of that reference. By drawing on this passage I am hoping to exemplify (through this action and through the example itself) “intergenerational” critique by investigating the productive space between Spiller’s different instances of articulation.

In “Interstices” Spillers explains the predicament of Black women thusly: “Their

⁷² Hortense Spillers, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Saidiya Hartman, Shelley Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan. ‘Whatcha Gonna Do?’: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe:’ An American Grammar Book.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* Vol. 35 No. ½ (Spring-Summer, 2007) 299-309.

enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome.”⁷³ This is the main argument of “Mama’s Baby” in a nutshell, but this contemporaneous invocation is an intergenerational statement on a number of levels. First, this sentence is more expansive than the present. By referring to enslavement as “the marketplace of the flesh,” Spillers sonically invokes the “marketplace of ideas” represented by the Barnard College⁷⁴ lectern from which she speaks “even now.” She is presencing enslavement, reminding us that slavery is present. This is an intergenerative move. More obviously, Spillers invokes the intergenerational by referring to “daughters,” but this statement is queerly intergenerational in the critical sense because Spillers does not naturalize the link between enslaved women and “the daughters” by using the phrase “their daughters.” “The daughters” have no explicit link to any mothers in this passage (indeed there are no “mothers” here), and even if they did have a biological link, the mothers would remain bereft of any proprietary claim to the daughters. Their relationship to the earlier women is produced entirely by Spillers’s association of daughters with the commodification that continues to be used to commodify Black women. It is this racist reproduction of Black women as abject objects that insists that the “condition of the mother” continue through “the daughters,” not the biological or social reproduction of affinity. The interchangeability of the mother and the daughter is a result of the social reproduction of slave status, “even now.” Whereas in “Mama’s Baby” Spillers describes the grammar through which Black bodies become flesh narrated into the reproduction of abjection, in

⁷³ Spillers, *Interstices* 155

⁷⁴ Barnard College would be (a generation later) the place where the author of this chapter would begin to labor in the marketplace of ideas/flesh.

“Interstices” she is able to delink or create space between Black women’s bodies and the reproductive narrative that automatically implies. Presencing the history, and describing the narrative does not necessarily reproduce the limits in this instance. Spillers’ intergenerative move here is not merely the production of a “daughter” subjectivity; she invokes intergenerationality to denaturalize the work of the reproductive work of the marketplace(s) to dehumanize Black women. Likewise, my use of an intergenerative reading practice in this project is not towards a lineage of Black feminist foremothers (though I am presencing earlier actors) it is rather an exercise in faith. I believe that the space in between these earlier Black feminist actors and this moment of Black feminist articulation enables a collaboration through which the reproduction of objectification can be made visible *and* the dangerous possibilities that this objectification covers over can be activated.

On Generators and Survival

1989 was an apocalyptic year too. In St. Croix, Audre Lorde survived the severity of hurricane Hugo, a storm so severe she says, “the land almost gave up her name.”⁷⁵ This description is poignant, because it is not only the violence and wind of rain that threatened St. Croix’s existence, but also the colonial relationship of the United States and the militaristic and belated response to the storm that turned a natural storm into a social disaster for Black residents of St. Croix. Lorde warns:

We are a territory of the most powerful country on earth, supposed to be. Why are there almost 700 families still homeless? If we do not learn the lessons of Hurricane Hugo, we are doomed to repeat them.

⁷⁵ Audre Lorde. “Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter.” *Callaloo*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1991, 72.

I would argue that by 2005 the lessons were repeated. From inflated gas prices, to misrepresentation of survivors as looters by a racist media, to the prioritization of tourist and affluent white leisure rebuilding over social institutions like hospitals and schools, to the deployment of troops to protect private property and threaten the lives of criminalized Black survivors, to the arbitrary splitting apart of families in the relocation process, to the rejection of support from other places in the Caribbean and the ventures of disaster-capitalist contractors from elsewhere, the US response to Hurricane Hugo in St. Croix prefigures the more recent social disaster of Hurricane Katrina in the United States Gulf Coast. Wind is our teacher, but only if we can learn the key lesson of how neocolonialism within neoliberal capitalism permeates (while exceeding) the US empire.

Jacqui Alexander uses the idea of palimpsestic time to point us to the echoes of colonialism and other forms of oppression in the contemporary moment, and also to argue that spiritual, cultural and political forms of response and creation echo across time as well.⁷⁶ I place Audre Lorde's "Hugo Letter" in this context. The social responses to Hurricane Hugo and Hurricane Katrina are not the same, they occurred in different places and at different political moments, however Lorde's pedagogical prophecy stands. There is something to learn here. Lorde's text, "Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter" is actually what the generation that would (fail in the) face (of) the predictable U.S. Government response to Katrina and Rita would have needed to know.

Generators are not completely reliable sources of energy and are even more limited since they depend on gasoline. They are fragile. They don't last long. But in this case when everything we need has been washed away, when there is nothing to inherit,

⁷⁶ M. Jacqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

we need some energy source. Maybe this (reading practice) is the best we have. Lorde makes her argument for this intergenerational pedagogical engagement where wind is a teacher and there are key structural and symbolic lessons to be learned in the form of both a letter and a diary, private forms of communication made public through an autonomous publishing initiative called Winds of Change Press. The fact that Lorde and her partner Gloria Joseph had to create their own publishing company⁷⁷ in order to make these lessons publicly available is a sign of their intentionality. Though this form of anti-capitalist critique of a neocolonial common sense was, from the view of the dominant narrative of the hurricane and the empire, never meant to survive, Joseph and Lorde clearly meant for these words to survive.

At the same time that Lorde and Josephs documented their individual and communal experience of Hugo, Lorde also began a process of critical revision of her entire poetic body of work after salvaging copies of her own poetry books out of the hurricane wreckage. In the introduction to *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised* Lorde explains that this process of intervention into the lives of her poems was a survival experience, directly impacted by seeing her “whole way of life” transformed by the hurricane and the violent government (non)response.⁷⁸ In this very last publication of her lifetime, Lorde expresses her concern with the “lasting power of a poem.”⁷⁹ However instead of going back and correcting all of her youthful poetic mistakes from

⁷⁷ Winds of Change Press, founded in St. Croix in the aftermath of Hugo in order to produce *Hell Under God's Orders: Hurricane Hugo in St. Croix—Disaster and Survival*, an anthology that Gloria Josephs created to document community experiences and responses to the storm and the social aftermath, is still in existence. Joseph's plans to reprint the anthology (and of course I plan to teach it.)

⁷⁸ Audre Lorde. “Introduction” in *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, xiv.

the perspective of her older wiser self, she seeks to create a loving intergenerational relationship with herself, similar to her relationship to the students she mentored. Speaking of “the girl and young woman I was when these poems were written” she says she “marveled at what she knew as well as what she did not know and how she learned to put both together into a working poem.”⁸⁰ Wind is the teacher. Reminding Lorde about the impermanence of manmade structures and the transformational survival of the human spirit, Lorde was inspired to engage her own poetry and her former selves through a loving intergenerational practice, preparing her poems for another generation of readers.

The intentions, in action and language, that compelled Josephs and Lorde to create a new publishing apparatus and to revise old poems calls for an intergenerative reading practice from those of us living here in the predictable future of unlearned lessons repeated. Lorde’s Hugo Letter to exemplifies queer intergenerationality as a crucial relationship to Black feminist literary production in the period under review. Queer intergenerationality, is revealed by the intergenerative practice of being present to what can be generated and then shared between moments in times and encounters, that is not necessarily linked to generations in the patriarchal familial sense. However in this dissertation references to mothering and daughterhood are important markers for the fraught work of writing relationships that do not reproduce social death across time through bodies inscribed for exactly that purpose. In this case, while comparing the military response to Hugo to the 1983 US invasion of Grenada (Lorde’s complicated mother/land) Lorde draws on an familiar image in the lexicon of literature by and about

⁸⁰ Ibid, xv.

Black women, the image of a mother and child being torn apart by an uncaring set of oppressive forces. A rare dramatized moment in Lorde's "Hugo Letter" set off by an introductory sentence fragment, this scene points to the reproduction of oppression over time, enacted on the bodies of Black women.

Drawn guns in the hospital lot. A U.S. military M-16 shoved into her face *stops* my friend as she *tried* to go to her aged and disoriented mother, who *is* crying out for one scrap of familiarity, dignity, or help as she *is being* abruptly rushed into a military ambulance for evacuation to who *knew* where. She calls to her daughter, who cannot run to comfort her because of the M-16 barring her way.⁸¹

I have added emphasis to some of the verbs in this passage to draw attention to the tension between the tenses in this dramatization. Lorde is writing about the recent past, but the present tense continues to emerge in the passage. Almost alternating between the present indicative and the simple past tense, this passage resists temporalization. Why does the present tense insist on recurring while the use of the simple past (friend tried, who knew where) reveals an intention to place the event in a chronological narrative of events in Lorde's diary of the event? *M-16 stops, mother is being rushed, she calls*. Like the discussion of a literary event, this scene takes place in the present, and the presence of the scene *is* tense and exceeds the narrative linearity that grammatical tenses would imply. This scene, in which mother and child are torn apart not only flashes forward to the post-Katrina moments when family members were sorted onto trucks for relocation based on arbitrary categories, like age, which resulted in the separation of biological and chosen family members who had survived the floods together, but it also refers back to the countless scenes in literature of and about

⁸¹ *ibid*, 79.

enslaved Black women in which a mother and child are violently separated through sale in slavery. The temporality of the scene Lorde recounts is traumatic and one of the symptoms of trauma is an inability to apply linearity to memory.⁸² The narrative says, this is what happening. The poetics of trauma says, this is still happening. The temporality of trauma, enacted through tense here, is a critique. It says that this has happened before, and look, it is happening again. The event neither starts nor ends during the scene itself. The reproductive labor of caring for the aged mother, the possibility of chosen continuity, affinity and relationship is trumped the by the reproduction of a social narrative in which the bodies of Black women are expendable, and can be placed anywhere without consent, to serve the needs of an ordering narrative of violence.

Lorde's "Hugo Letter" in the post-Katrina US, is a reminder of the painful consequences of a lesson unlearned, the traumatic repetition of a capitalist relation that Lorde, poignantly in the first epigraph of this section, calls cancerous. Audre Lorde wrote this letter, transformed from her diary entries in May 1990, less than two years before she herself died of cancer. Her lament of a social system that injects tumors into the natural landscape, refusing to accept wind as a teacher, is not merely metaphorical. It is prophetic. The social relations that we (were never meant to) survive, also live in our bodies painfully, and Audre Lorde is not here to remind us of this lesson herself, except in as much that she is present in the pedagogical wind. *But wind is our teacher.* Lorde reminds us, consciously or unconsciously invoking Oya the goddess, mother, teacher said to move in the world and through our bodies as a spiritual wind, both

⁸² Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

creative and destructive. Unless we radicalize our understanding of nature and our approach to reading the social and literal texts that Lorde and others left, we are doomed to repeat the same lessons. This dissertation practices queer intergenerationality because time is palimpsestic. Twenty years after the Reagan Era we are once again surviving a US empire that uses neoliberal economics to intervene and occupy while draining social resources within the United States in order to direct public money to private corporations. I say, the lessons are there in the literary products of Lorde, Jordan, Smith, DeVaux and many others. What we need is a way of looking back that does not consent to the reproduction of the systems that have obscured those lessons to begin with, a reading and teaching practice that embodies the transient, pedagogical wind of change.

In 1990 towards the end of a long battle with breast cancer, Audre Lorde compares the arrogance of a neocolonial capitalist relationship to St. Croix to tumors, “some fantasy of bloodless immortality,” and offers a rival pedagogy, wind teaching the future she describes in her poem “Prologue”⁸³ where the children are grass, singing past mourning. Audre Lorde, never meant to survive, and refusing to impose a bloodless immortality, calls us to imagine a different relationship across time.

The queer experiences of Lorde, Jordan, De Veaux and Smith who are ultimately the key theorists in this project were and are urgent and embodied. This project practices queer intergenerationality, an intergenerationality under stress, where queer means a relationship to time that is not the reproduction of the same, where queer means a violent disjuncture between how our bodies are interpreted by the outside world and

⁸³ I discuss this in detail in chapter 1 “Survival: An Intervention into Meaning”

how we feel inside them, where queer means “I am not supposed to exist,” but I do. In that sense, most of the Black people on this planet are having a queer experience right now. Listen to the way Audre Lorde describes the experience of anesthesia just following her surgery: “Being ‘out’ really means only that you can’t answer back or protect yourself from what you are absorbing through your ears and other senses.” Listen to the way she describes her body as she heals: “I feel always tender in the wrong places.” The surgical experience, the experience of dealing with a body that is understood to be “diseased” is a queer experience. We are tender in what are thought to be the wrong places. And again this is not simply to say individuals who experience extreme health difficulties are queer as individuals, it is to say that our whole relationship to death and living as Black folks, as folks who are called sexually deviant, as folks creating family out of struggle, is a queer relationship. We think that we are over death, but we are not. We are “always tender in the wrong places.” We can’t answer back. We can’t protect ourselves.

And we are always tender in the wrong places because we are interconnected; we are always touching. And while reading and knowing of Audre Lorde’s battle with breast cancer that eventually metastasized is devastating, alongside, or actually inside the story of that loss is the story of the network. In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde describes the network of chosen family that “sprung into gear” to help her and her family with healing. Later in 1992 when her cancer finally spread everywhere, former student asha bandele told me how she was there, organizing, comforting, planning with Audre Lorde and her companion and her children, while she transitioned. While painstakingly reading through June Jordan’s medical records I was shocked by the pain and deterioration she experienced and by what seemed like cruelty on the part of insurance officials and medical providers towards the end of Jordan’s life. But I was also struck by the network

of former students, friends and colleagues who gathered to take care of Jordan. To watch after her pets, to deal with her plants and her papers, to battle the University of California which it seemed almost needed proof that she was dead to grant her medical leave. People took shifts and worked around the clock to make it clear that the process of living, the process of transition for Jordan was not an individual situation, it was a community activity.

Always, Always

*We ate
A family tremulous but fortified
by turnips/okras/handpicked
like the lilies*

*filled to the very living
full*

-June Jordan "1977: Poem for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer:"⁸⁴

*And then breast cancer came to claim your life with suffering
and with terror and, at last, with death
So have our lives converged, again, as I must battle now against
that same dread, difficult intruder.
And I look to you, my Sister, with a full and trembling heart;*

-June Jordan "For Audre" February 1993⁸⁵

It means you are terrified of love. This is what June Jordan said about living with her 40% prognosis of survival with breast cancer. This, in an essay written almost twenty years after her mentor Fannie Lou Hamer died of breast cancer at age 69, almost four years after her peer Audre Lorde died from breast cancer that spread at age 58. *It*

⁸⁴ June Jordan. "1977: Poem for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 276-277.

⁸⁵ June Jordan. "For Audre. February 1993. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 101, Folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

means you are terrified of love. It means all references to future time leave you feeling/ignored or irrelevant or both. It means death is always always/blurring your vision with tears. Only six years after June Jordan died from breast cancer at age 65, I looked at June Jordan's original handwritten drafts of this speech, the Keynote for the Mayor's Summit on Breast Cancer in San Francisco in November 1996.⁸⁶ I wanted to see if she had revised it, if maybe she had described it that way on second thought. I was hoping that maybe she didn't really feel that way, not on the top of her head, not in the memory of her hand. I sat in the archive hoping that "always always" was a revision, a performative poetic effect for the audience, if not a typo. But there it was, and this time my vision was blurred. In somewhat shaky cursive, in blue ink on legal paper and then again in both typewritten versions. *It means death is always always blurring your vision with tears.*

This is not about wordplay. This is not about figures of speech. This is about people I love, who are living and people who I love who are here even though they are not living. I think this is about someone who you still love too. This is about what it means that death is always, always blurring our vision with tears. That our chances of survival are less than half. The radical *presence* of June Jordan and Audre Lorde in this work is a response to the predicament of forms of life and knowledge that were never meant to survive.

A Poetics of Repetition

How do we approach death and systematic, repetitive threats to survival, poetically? What relationship can we afford to consent to in our reading practices across

⁸⁶ June Jordan. "Besting a Worst Case Scenario," in *Affirmative Acts*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, 157-169.

and against death? The repetitive incidence of cancer in the lives of middle aged Black feminist theorists calls for both a social and a theoretical response. In order to be accountable to the cultural workers that this dissertation features, this project must deal with the question of whether and how death and disease shift textual meanings and what reading practice is appropriate in the face of the seemingly shortened life span of Black feminist theorists and the struggle so many have had, and are having with cancer. The first section of this introduction lists but a few of the contemporary Black feminist thinkers who are dead due to cancer at this very moment. It would take pages to list all of the Black feminist theorists who are struggling with cancerous growth, fibroids and pre-cancerous masses right now. Almost every queer Black feminist I know who is over the age of 35 has already begun to confront these health issues. As I write this, I myself, at the age of 26, am recovering from a minor surgical procedure related to a growth in my left breast. It would be irresponsible to assert that these health problems are either mere coincidence, or immaterial to the process of literary and theoretical production. We must find a way to read historical repetition poetically, so that we can create a transformed relationship to the patterns inscribed upon our bodies, and the embodied connections that link the meanings of our lives together.

In an article that she wrote about her process of writing a biography of Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux describes being initiated in to a queer Black feminist textual tradition comprised of post-operative scars. Describing one of the few times that she and Lorde spoke, while sunbathing on a roof De Veaux writes:

I think she meant for me to see her scarification, which was like a written text. She meant for me to know that the scar from my own surgery a year before-and

the multiple fibroid tumors I was now free of—bound me to a history of “texts” written upon women’s bodies.⁸⁷

In some ways, the work of this dissertation is in conversation with the history of these “texts,” the urgency written upon the bodies of so many queer Black feminists marking spaces where a rejection of stable employment, lack of access to healthcare, the stress of exclusion from multiple communities of support and the dance of constant, teaching, writing and thinking about and against violence intersect and manifest. If the work of queer Black feminist mothering produces rival significations of the Black body, that work and its unlikely survival also exists in the scars and missing places in the bodies of the workers, and the missing members of this intergenerational movement. The meaning of my body is dialogical, produced both by and in spite of the imagining and intention I am engaged in along with ancestor mothers, elder mothers, the youngest among us and the unborn. If we are working to assert that our bodies are sites for the manifestation of spirit remembrance, we must also take seriously the dismemberment that capitalism writes on us, both as motivation and punishment for our dangerous creativity.

And this circulation of scars, disease and healing works in multiple directions. In a letter across death to her mentor Toni Cade Bambara a Black feminist artist and thinker who also died of breast cancer, Black lesbian filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons writes of her own experience with painful fibroid tumors and references *The Salt Eaters* a novel by Toni Cade Bambara as the text that she needed to read in order to

⁸⁷ Alexis De Veaux. “Searching for Audre Lorde” *Callaloo* 23.1, 2000, 64-65.

become proactive about her own healing.⁸⁸ Toni Cade Bambara herself, at age 42, wrote a letter to June Jordan commiserating with her struggle to quit smoking, admitting that the only period of her adult life when she had been able to abstain from cigarette use was when she had also abstained from writing. Ultimately she chose to keep writing, and continued smoking, but she lit a candle and said prayers towards June Jordan's clean lungs in a letter exchange where the two writers also mourned the early death (at age 57) of their mutual friend, the scholar Hoyt Fuller.⁸⁹ Ultimately, while biographical research into the lives of Black feminists, and queer Black feminists in particular confronts us with specters of disease, this literary project cannot and would not create an epidemiology of Black feminism or a theory on the impact that Black feminist literary production has on physical health. Instead, taking into account the urgency that my research subjects, my intimate audience and I face due to the prevalence of these health problems, I seek to activate queer intergenerationality as an ethical temporality through which to practice our reading of queer Black feminist texts (or our queer reading of Black feminist texts).

Audre Lorde's influential work in the *Cancer Journals* to articulate a theory of life and death evocative of a politics of radical expression and embodied feminism is among Lorde's most studied contributions to feminist theory. However Jordan's writing on and in response to breast cancer is rarely featured or highlighted. In the paragraphs that follow, I will pay close attention to the imagistic repetition in Jordan's poetic

⁸⁸ Aishah Shadidah Simmons. "For Toni" in *Letters to Black Feminist Ancestors* ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Make/Shift Magazine*, issue 5, Spring/Summer 2009.

⁸⁹ Toni Cade Bambara. Letter to June Jordan (undated) 1981, in June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 28 Folder 12, Schlsinger Library, Harvard University.

tributes to Hamer and Lorde, and in order to elaborate her expression of “death always always blurring (y)our vision with tears” into a temporality of reading.

Jordan’s poetic tributes to Hamer and Lorde both draw on images of fullness and trembling. In Jordan’s poem for Fannie Lou Hamer she writes

*We ate
A family tremulous but fortified
by turnips/okras/handpicked
like the lilies*

*fulled to the very living
full*

A decade and a half later in “For Audre” she writes

And I look to you, my Sister, with a full and trembling heart.

This repetition of the transformed imagery of fullness and trembling has something to teach us about a possible mode of response to loss and a form of mourning that is not specifically “Black feminist mourning” but is however informed by, and infused in the practice Black feminist literary production as a survival intervention. In Jordan’s tribute to Hamer, she maternalizes her mentor. Early in the poem she quotes Hamer insisting that when Jordan comes to Mississippi she must stay at “home” with Hamer. This home is a space that has fed Jordan, not only with a theory of the significance of land rights in Black communities and food sustainability, and literarily with the seeds of a novel on Mississippi and land reform that she never wrote, but also literally in the form of turnips and okra. Mothering for Jordan, as this dissertation will argue and elaborate on is work that fulfills “a hungering for” within people, for food in one sense, but in another sense a hungering for connection and home spaces despite the violence of the racist capitalist sexist context in which life takes place. Hamer speaks to

this conflated hunger for food and sustainable community under dire circumstances when Jordan quotes her in the poem yelling

BULLETS OR NO BULLETS!

THE FOOD IS COOKED

AN' GETTING COLD!

Despite the impact of the racial violence of the south Hamer created a chosen “family tremulous but fortified.” Mothering, explained by Jordan and exemplified by Hamer is the practice of making meaningful connection out of the possibility of home despite the persistence of forms of violence predicated on the meaninglessness of Black life. In this tribute to the life of Fannie Lou Hamer, the extraordinarily brave and outspoken political activist and strategist, Jordan emphasizes the work of mothering, and not through some fantasy about Mammy or a woman’s role. For Jordan, Fannie Lou Hamer’s ability to create “a homemade field/ of love,” to assert love on a practical level as a context for life against all odds is a political intervention worth honoring for the way it literally fills Jordan up.

Formally, the poem emphasizes the dialogical significance of this production of life as love. The poem starts with an intimate citation

You used to say, “June?”

Honey....

Interpreted after the fact by Jordan:

Meaning home

Hamer’s meaning, her ability to make home, is unlikely in the context:

*against the beer the shotguns and the
point of view of whitemen don’
never see Black anybodies without*

some violent itch start up.
The ones who
said, "No Niggas's Votin in This town..."

The racism of the city has a voice in this poem too, but beyond the brutality Hamer experiences while she fights for equal voting rights, she insists on love in the acts of making home. Jordan finds her in a laundromat "lion spine relaxed" and expressing bold insistence when it comes to dinnertime. It is this form of mothering that leaves Jordan

filled to the very living
full

because it is an intervention into meaning, which Jordan emphasizes with her use of repetition. In addition to filled and full, she repeats

one solid gospel
(sanctified)
one gospel
(peace)

and continues the dialogue with the parenthetical elaborations on the meaning of the gospels, which are themselves offerings towards the meaning of life. Ultimately Jordan honors Hamer for the work of mothering which is able to fill Jordan with faith in a loving meaning of Black life despite the violent evacuation of those loving meanings in the actions of racists. Though in this poem Jordan does not mention Hamer's experience of forced sterilization early in life, but she was well aware of this fact and it is clear that this knowledge impacts her depiction of Hamer's mothering labor. The attacks against Black mothering, especially in the South were pervasive, but the queer thing is that in collaboration with Hamer, Jordan illuminates a definition of mothering that does not depend on biological reproduction, because it is about the production of a context of

chosen and meaningful relationships. In the poem, Jordan both emphasizes Hamer's miraculous way of asserting these meanings in forms of mothering (laundry, dinner, hosting June during her visits) and Jordan asserts this meaning in a dialogic poetic form that acknowledges her coproduction of a "field of love" through which she can engage Fannie Lou Hamer past her death.

In 1977 days after Fannie Lou Hamer's death, June Jordan introduces Lorde as the first Black poet to be honored with a reading at the Donnell Library, and explicitly links Lorde's work to the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer. Lorde's daughter Elizabeth saved a signed copy of Jordan's introductory remarks, and after rereading it, Lorde wrote a draft of a thank you letter in her journal, detailing how much it meant to her to be recognized by Jordan, "isn't that what we all long for, a sister who says, yes I see you sister."⁹⁰

In early 1993, Jordan is moved to create a tribute past death for Audre Lorde, a peer, the imagery of fullness and trembling takes on a different feeling. Jordan faces Lorde's death with a "full and trembling heart" knowing that she too is facing the cancerous enemy that is responsible for Lorde's untimely demise. Jordan's heart may be full of love in this instance, as in the Hamer example, but it is also filled with fear at what it means to look at an age-mate across the chasm of death. It is again the queer and crucial labor of mothering that connects Jordan to Lorde across death. In this tribute, written in the form of a prose letter which breaks into poetic form immediately after Jordan's description of her "full and trembling heart," Jordan describes her first link to Lorde as their teaching labor of protesting students during the uprisings at City College,

⁹⁰ Audre Lorde, Journal 15, Spelman College Archives.

and explains the success of that labor, which they undertook in partnership with the students, as a result of mothering as the context of their own lives. Against the assumption that the needs of Black students would require a lowered set of academic standards she explains, conspiratorially with Lorde across death “We knew better. We had been Black children. And each of us had given birth to a Black child here, in America. So we knew the precious, imaginably deep music and the precious unimaginably complicated mathematics that our forbidden Black bodies enveloped.” We will discuss mothering and queer intergenerationality in the classroom more thoroughly in Chapter 3: Teaching Us Questions, but once again Jordan’s connection to Lorde leads her to describe mothering as access to an alternate meaning for Black life as infinitely precious and complex. This process of mothering is intergenerational as her further bond to Lorde before the details of their shared oppressions is their shared activity to make their own lives meaningful in the context of “the mystery of our own mother’s face.” This possessive “mother’s” is singular to indicate each mother, but also results in the possible meaning that Lorde and Jordan share a possessive mother, or are/were inhabited by a spiritual mother in the context outlined above through which they made their own labor of mothering themselves and others legible.

Jordan’s survival, and Lorde’s is caught up in the ability to create mothering as a practice that changes the meaning of life and creates a temporality that outlives the threatened bodies and the unfair means of literary production that each confronted. And their survival depends on our ability to read this theoretical practice of radical mothering in their work. There is birth somewhere here, in all this death. There is mothering happening as the meaning of your life shifts in these words. There is queer

survival in our opening towards each other. As June Jordan writes to Audre Lorde, I say to them both and the other ancestors that live here:

*Here is the flame of my faith
Here are my words that death
cannot spell or delete*

*Here is my tribute
Here is my love that I place
in your capable
hands
until we meet*

*again
face-to-face.*

-June Jordan's "For Audre" February, 18 1993

Here is my tribute that I place in your capable hands. As the prologue and this introduction insist this is sacred work where the praxis of an intergenerative reading practice reveals an queer intergenerationality and alternative future that depends on all of us. This is an act of faith, my faith that interrogating the functions and fissures of survival and reproduction as key terms in the work of four Black feminist literary producers will offer us tools to reread the present. Audre Lorde and June Jordan are the primary theorists of this dissertation, and while many more widely read theorists inform my interrogation of their work, they set the context and the terms for engagement. Their work does however intervene into and reframe several conversations about queer futurity, diaspora, bare life, haunting, and difference that are ongoing. Barbara Smith and Alexis DeVeaux's experimentations in the politics of publishing serve to provide the practical context for the implications of the language of survival and mothering that I read through Lorde and Jordan. This dissertation is more than anything a tribute because it is based on the premise that these four figures and the community they

worked to build, the discourses they sought to create and the audience they generated for the question of Black feminism were meaningful, even if their meaning was never meant to survive. If the work of these figures offers a poetic intervention into existing oppressive narratives of what survival and reproduction, or life over time can mean, this dissertation is one of the possible counter-narratives for which their interventions break a space. The reading practice that constitutes this dissertation is an example of what Sylvia Wynter would call the impossible relationship produced by the poetic act. In short this dissertation is survival. It is more than a linear argument, which means it exceeds and contradicts the time markers (1968-1996) I have used to frame it. It is queer intergenerationality in practice. And while you are reading this dissertation it is where and when you live.

Nonetheless this is a more than a melancholic meditation on what we have lost and how it haunts us. This is a specific echo engagement with the years between the end of the Civil Rights movement and the end of the welfare state that suggests not only that the transition between those two periods required a violent narrative starring racialized mothering, but also that the problematic poetics of survival and mothering and the production of difference can offer us a different story to live through.

In that vein, Chapter 1: “Survival an Intervention into Meaning” responds to Audre Lorde’s haunting proposition that “we were never meant to survive” with an intergenerative reading of the implications of “survival” as a key term in Jordan’s rarely discussed and unanthologized polemic work as a critic and theorist of children’s literature as an mode of intervention into the narratives of racism, imperialism, neoliberal economics and environmental degradation, aimed at a partnership with children in the production of an alternative future. I go on to read Lorde’s use of the

term survival at key instances in her poetic body of work in order to arrive at a structure of meaning across time (or a meaningful alternative relationship *to* time and space) implied by Lorde's own intergenerational, post-human and transnational poetics. This chapter seeks to disrupt the binary between experience and representation, investigating the epistemology of multiple levels of individual, communal and intergenerational survival as a revelation about and poetic intervention into the biopolitical narrative of capital.

Pointing to the figure of the Black mother and the criminalization of the act of unauthorized authority in the form of Black mothering as a key component of the narrative through which food, health, housing and education become individual concerns in an anti-communal economic shift, Chapter 2: "The Ante-Essence of Black Mothering" sets up the struggle between the "mothering ourselves" logic of a queer Black feminist production of meaning and the pejorative dominant "your mama" narrative that pathologizes and criminalizes poor black mothers in order to dismantle the welfare state and achieve a neoliberal global structure of capitalism. Tracking the emergence of the figure of the improper Black mother as disease-agent and villain in a variety of social texts including political campaigns, social movement proclamations, sociological theories, public health practices and legislative propositions, this chapter contextualizes Audre Lorde and June Jordan's queer appropriations of the language of mothering and nurturing as authority within the Black lesbian socialist movement's responses to sterilization abuse and Reaganomics.

Chapter 3: "Teaching Us Questions': The Urgency of Intergenerational Address," brings the language of the motherf*cker into the discourse literary through an examination of Jordan and Lorde's relationships to Black English and Black Studies in

the classroom. Focusing on the materialist significance of pedagogy in the disciplinary practices of the University and the Police Apparatus as repressive state institutions, this chapter examines the rival pedagogies practiced by June Jordan and Audre Lorde in their simultaneous work teaching and organizing in the New York public university system and protesting the brutality of the New York City Police Department. Each teacher found herself responding differently to the presence of the word “motherfucker” as she struggled to practice a poetics of desired relationship in order to produce an intergenerational relationship in a temporality narrowed by the status of racialized youth as targets (of the police *and* of the university system) and their own terminal illnesses.

Chapter 4: ‘Difficult Miracle’: June Jordan, Audre Lorde and the Poetics of Survival” historicizes the poetic publication trajectories of June Jordan and Audre Lorde within a dialogic relationship to a Black Arts literary market by pairing their most widely circulated poetic texts with their least embraced works: Jordan’s “In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr.” and “Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” and Lorde’s “Litany for Survival” and “Prologue”. Reinvoking “survival” as key term in the Jordan/Lorde lexicons through which to read the stakes and limits of their publishability, this chapter argues that their poems are theoretical spaces through which each poet produced a rival understanding of the time and space between lives and after death.

Finally in Chapter 5: “On Publishing and Survival: The Meanings of Production” I explore the unpublished and unpublishable angry Black feminist letter of protest as a genre that reveals and exceeds the limits of the publishing market within and against which black feminist literary production articulated itself and tracks the efforts black feminists made to create publishing initiatives in the NorthEastern United States including: Kizzy Enterprises, a phantom publishing initiative that June Jordan and

others envisioned but were never able to create; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press envisioned by Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith, and Alexis DeVeaux's Gap Tooth Girlfriends, Flamboyant Ladies, Diva Enterprises. The structural dynamics of these publishing initiatives practiced an alternative mode of production that challenged the status of the word as a commodity both by rejecting a profit motive for publishing and by privileging subversive and criminalized forms of black domestic production. At the same time the archival traces of publishing initiatives that were never born haunt the forms through which the successful if short-lived initiatives place mark the meanings of production, reproduction and the potential of survival. The queer survival of out of print books, and bankrupt publishing initiatives lives in the reading practice and the extent to which we are willing to be bad students and bad teachers, ready to learn something else.

1. Survival: An Intervention into Meaning

“I love the word survival, it always sounds to me like a promise. It makes me wonder sometimes though, how do I define the shape of my impact upon this earth?”

-Audre Lorde (parenthetical aside cut from an early version of Eye to Eye: Black Women Hatred and Anger)¹

Survival. The condition of bare life. The mythology of differential fitness. The continuity of property and properties. But survival is more than this. Survival, as it emerges as a key word in the theory and poetics of Audre Lorde and June Jordan is a poetic term. It provides the basis for the reconsideration of its own meaning, and the reconsideration of the meaning of “life,” that which “survival” queerly extends despite everything. Survival is a pedagogy: secret and forbidden knowledge that we pass on, educating each other into a set of skills and beliefs based on the queer premise that our lives are valuable in a way that the economization of our labor, and the price of our flesh in the market of racism deny. Survival is a mode of inquiry, providing a repertoire of critical insights, gained from discerning what approach to a political and economic framework we can afford from one moment to the next. Survival is an afterlife; by continuing to exist we challenge the processes that somehow failed to kill us this time. Survival is a performance, a set of aesthetic invocations that produce belief and resonance. Survival is a poetic intervention into the simplistic conclusion of the political narrative: we were never meant to survive.

The “we” that was never meant to survive is a challenge to the gospel of individualism. The content of that “we” is at stake because survival redefines who we

¹ Audre Lorde Papers, Box 22, Folder 29, Spelman College Archives.

are. For those of us who constitute the collection of people addressed by Audre Lorde's 'A Litany for Survival,' the meanings of our lives have been slandered within an economy that uses narratives of racial inferiority, gender determinism, and sexual subjectivity to devalue our bodies, our breathing, our time. If we are survivors, who "we" are is the question of survival, and whether we survive depends on the generation of a set of relationships that prioritizes who we are *to* each other through our queer acts of loving the possible collectivity represented in each of our bodies.² Survival is a queer act for oppressed communities because it interrupts the social reproduction of the sanctioned deaths of those who were never meant to survive.

In this chapter I argue that survival as a fact, a possibility, an act, a tactic and an approach, is a performative and poetic intervention into a meaning of life that the narrative of capitalism reproduces: the belief that a differential monetary value can be assigned to the very time of our lives and our labor based on stories about what race, gender, class, place, ability and family mean.³ Towards this argument I offer a theorization of how survival functions in the lives and work of June Jordan and Audre Lorde, who I privilege here as key theorists of the term, whose use of the term reframes a broader theoretical discourse on bare life and biopolitical racism. This theorization looks at biographical information about Jordan and Lorde as survivors of sexual violence and breast cancer and examines the pedagogy of survival as outlined in Jordan's polemics of children's literature and the poetics of survival through a close reading of the

² In other words, survival is what Black mothers do, teach and enable, and queer survival is what brings the wrath of the state and economics of family planning down on mothers of color. This is the subject of Chapter 3: The (Queer) Danger of Black Maternity.

³ See an earlier and inspiring intervention into this narrative contemporary with the Black feminist work I discuss here in Felix Guattari and Giles Deleuze. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. New York: Viking Press, 1977 (originally published in 1972).

term in Lorde's poetic work with attention to the performative afterlife of her poetry in the political work of self-identified "survivors."

*"To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?"*⁴

I did not want to write about interpersonal violence, sexual violence and domestic abuse against children in this chapter. But I will do it anyway. It matters that my primary relationship to survival is as a survivor of sexual violence. It matters that Audre Lorde and June Jordan were both survivors of rape and of childhood physical abuse. This is a process of defining survival created by survivors of both interpersonal and systemic forms of violence. And as Charlotte Pierce-Baker argues in *Surviving the Silence: Black Women's Stories of Rape*, silence is a form of systemic violence.⁵ I owe the symbols for my own survival to the bravery of these particular survivors and others who left their words as a route map to healing and transformation. I owe the symbols for my own survival to the spirit of resistance and unlikely self-love modeled by both of these theorists. I owe my survival beyond and despite what I have survived to a loving community of ancestors, elders, peers, lovers, collaborators, students, sisters, family members, children and reminders that expect my spirit to survive and manifest by any means necessary, through and beyond my body and my mind.

Survival is not only about the persistence of the body in the bare sense that Giorgio Agamben describes. In fact, in this dissertation my emphasis on the relationship between the queered reproductive labor of Black mothers and its interruption of a reproductive narrative about the meaning of life make Agamben's concern about the

⁴ Audre Lorde. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1982, 3.

⁵ Charlotte Pierce-Baker. *Surviving the Silence: Black Women's Stories of Rape*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. See also Tricia Rose. *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

relationship between zoe, bare life, which he also reminds us occurred to the ancient Greeks as “mere reproductive life” and political life (bios), relevant to my argument.⁶ If we reproduce the distinction between reproductive life, (or life without meaning) and political life (life with meaning), the *reproduction* of the political definition of life, or the narrative ellision of the political reproduction of racism through the criminalization of the Black mother is an example of a state of exception. This dissertation requires a feminist understanding of Agamben’s analysis of the imbrication of the person(al) in the political and his elaboration of Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “state of emergency” within his description of the state of exception. The racialized mother is exceptional to the narrative of the state, but in the imaginative act of survival she also reveals that the reproductive labor of Black mothering, in its exceptionality, is actually the work of emergency, both in the sense that the state codes Black mothering as a crisis, and in the sense that I read it here. The work of queer Black mothering to redefine survival allows a rival political and social life to emerge.

This survival refers not just to ideology but also to spirit. My interpretation of survival beyond the body has two implications in this chapter. First, it means that the (queer) survival of Black feminism exceeds the specific lifetimes of individual Black feminists and that (in contradiction to Foucault’s proclamation in *History of Sexuality*), death is *not* the limit of power. As I will elaborate in Chapter 2: “The Ante-Essence of Black Mothering,” Foucault’s definition of biopolitics is crucial to the project of this dissertation. Foucault explains that the mode of power has shifted from the threat of

⁶ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 1.

death to the management of life.⁷ The pathologization of the Black mother then, occurs in the context of a larger discourse wherein deviance threatens the life of “humanity” (and the definition of humanity) as a whole. The manifestation of violence on racialized children, and the spectacularity and signification of the death sentence through police killings of children, modern lynchings and the state’s endorsement of such acts make survival untimely, challenging Foucault’s temporal line. In other words, the pathologization of certain population allows not only their expendability, but also pedagogical acts of archaic violence that enforce the disciplinary exclusion of some life from social meaning. The Black feminist (re)definition of survival at work in this chapter also opens the space of death for consideration not the limit of power, but rather a means through which power reproduces itself by excising some from the meaning of life. This is how as Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, certain lives become unmournable.⁸ In fact power chases down and erases the words and actions of the feminists under study here even beyond death. But secondly, the relevance of the spirit to the possibility of survival places pressure on our definition of what life is, and makes acts of ideological, psychological, physical, sexual and economic violence that are deadly to our spiritual well-being even when they leave our physical bodies in-tact visible as violent markers of the boundaries of life. Jordan and Lorde, the primary theorists under discussion in this dissertation both extend themselves to the simultaneous work of speaking out against the gendered violence and abuse they survived, while insisting that the spirit of their work both precedes and exceeds their physical lifetimes, and in each case survival, if possible, relies on access to a means of expression.

⁷ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

⁸ Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004, 19-49.

June Jordan points to this dilemma between expression and repression in relation to surviving sexual violence. In “Notes Towards a Model of Resistance,” a 1996 address to The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, June Jordan makes a confession. “Rape is not something I think about. I mean not ordinarily.”⁹ As the survivor of two rapes in her adult life, this is a telling admission. Rape is something we repress in our own consciousnesses, in order to “survive.”¹⁰ And as a fellow survivor, I have to admit that I did not want to write about rape or sexual assault in this chapter, but I am following the example that June Jordan sets. Despite her admission that she does not ordinarily think about rape, she makes the lessons she learned from her own response to rape central to her idea of a what it will take to create a successful model of political resistance *in general*. Gendered violence and violence against children is not simply a shadow implication or an extra reference haunting the meaning of the word survival. As it appears in this dissertation, the matrix of domination mapped onto the bodies of queer people, women of color and children in particular is key to the production of a theory of survival that can transform a political and economic logic that lives on and in our bodies. Jordan explicitly points out that a particular form of education that privileged silence about sexual violence negatively impacted her ability to resist the rapes that she experienced: “...the costly paralysis/of my shock/ directly devolved from my/ isolation,/ from my not knowing other women/ who had been raped,/ from my not knowing that rape/ happens mostly between men/ that you take for granted as/ a friendly part of your/ regular life/ and yourself, your body/ suddenly

⁹ June Jordan. “Notes Towards a Model of Resistance” in *Affirmative Acts: Political Essays*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, 143.

¹⁰ See also Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

chosen for violent domination....”¹¹ When women who have survived rape do not have access to each other’s stories they are not well equipped to respond to rape as a manifestation of domination. In fact, Jordan says that it was her access to a language of racism as domination that ultimately allowed her to move out of her shock and respond in self-defense to a white rapist who had up to that point been her friend. In her subsequent experience of being raped by a Black man, who was president of his chapter of the NAACP, she did not have a language to describe the domination she was experiencing. In each case Jordan attributes her experiences of sexual assault to isolation and the absence of community and attributes her shock and inability to respond in the face of violence to her lack of access to a readily available *language* for the domination she was experiencing. Through her survival, Jordan learns that isolation and incomprehensibility are key threats to her livelihood and therefore she seeks to use language to produce a community of accountability. In this speech, Jordan models what would be necessary in order to resist domination from the state in the forms of physical, economic and gendered violence: a queer mode of articulating our experiences that interrupts the use of silence to reproduce violence as a social relationship.

In her “biomythography” *Zami*, Audre Lorde recounts her experience of being molested by a white store manager and of being raped by a boy from her school. In both cases the violence operates through silence and imposes silence on the same theorist who would later teach generations of feminists to “transform silence into action and power.”¹² Lorde was silent about the harassment of the shopkeeper because she blamed herself for

¹¹ June Jordan. “Notes Towards a Model of Resistance” in *Affirmative Acts: Political Essays*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, 147.

¹² Audre Lorde. “The Transformation of Silence into Action and Power,” in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 40.

wandering away from her sisters in search of comic books, and ultimately her silence was rewarded, with free copies of torn comic books “for the little sweetheart.”¹³ Ironically for Lorde her silence about her abuse was an exchange that both got her reading material and kept intact one of her few opportunities to leave her strict household. In the act of writing her life story, after years of nightmares, Lorde finally intervenes against an economy of silence that has had an impact on her own spiritual wellness and offers readers access to words through which to express their own potential experiences of abuse. Similarly when a “boy from school much bigger than me” dominates and rapes Lorde, she relates her experience of violence and her silence about it to her access to reading material, and her feelings of isolation. The boy corners her when she is returning home from the library, and has (against her mother’s warning) stopped in a neighboring apartment building to look on the mailboxes for the name of a girl from school who she wants to befriend. The boy threatens to break her glasses if she resists him, and Lorde silently worries that she is pregnant for four years, while illegally seeking and hiding books about sex and anatomy (by forging her mother’s signature). She carries this fear until she finally begins to menstruate and keeps the incident a secret from her mother, because she is ashamed and afraid to talk about sex with her at all. The dynamics between silence, fear of criminalization and access to a social world and literary material are not merely coincidental. Because of her parent’s pre-emptive response to the racist, sexist, society in which they were raising Black daughters, Lorde lacked access to a social world except through disobedience. This left her open to violence and also deprived her of access to intergenerational support. Critically

¹³ Zami, 49.

responding to their experiences of isolation and violence, Jordan and Lorde created redefinitions of survival that specifically focused on the possibility of an alternative sociality, that they hoped could be intergenerationally supportive without policing deviance.

Both Lorde and Jordan write about the pain of growing up in households that they felt were not supportive of their differences, with parents who were at times excessive and abusive in their punishment. In her autobiography of her own childhood *Soldier*, Jordan describes the violence she experienced in her home and the way it transformed her into a fighter. Jordan transformed her fighting spirit into a queer intervention instead of reproducing the logic of domination through force that she learned defending herself against attacks from her father. In a chapter of her autobiography called “Choosing and Being Chosen, Fighting and Fighting Back,” Jordan compares the schoolyard fights that were part of her growing up experience to the physical abuse she experienced at home. The construction of the verbs “to choose” and “to fight” in the title of the chapter reveal that subjectivity and agency are at stake. There is a difference between fighting and fighting back. Fighting, which Jordan contextualizes as a normal part of her peer culture and a frightening part of her home experience was not a choice, but rather a circumstance to navigate. But Jordan’s relationship to fighting became more strategic. In the schoolyard she cultivated a reputation for being “crazy” by “go(ing) ballistic” when she was jumped by other little girls.¹⁴ At home, however, she was in a very different relative position when the people enacting the abuse were her parents. Her mother, she says, would suddenly hit her as

¹⁴ June Jordan. *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood*. New York: Basic Books, 2000, 135.

she came home, without explanation and seemingly without direct cause. “I never knew why about the whole thing./ I never hit her back. She was my mother./And she was like a girl. But with my father, the beating turned into a fight between us.”¹⁵ Here Jordan suggests that she has a choice in her response to her mother. She chooses not to fight back, not because she physically cannot, but because the masculinity that she ascribes to herself via her father’s treatment and her own code of ethics prohibit her from hitting her mother. She would avoid her father’s blows, which sometimes came with the warning of his shouting, and throw things back at him. When he started coming into her room in the middle of the night to beat her, she began to sleep with a knife under her pillow. The middle-of-the-night beating finally stopped after she threatened her father with the knife. In *Soldier* as in her 1981 text *Civil Wars*, Jordan identifies herself as a fighter and applies the fighting stance she learned as a child to her political approach, which incorporates, fighting back and self-defense as a survival strategy. Survival, in the context of her two parents, meant two different things. Surviving her father’s attacks she privileged her physical safety, dodging, fighting back and ultimately threatening him with a weapon. Surviving her mother’s abuse however, she privileged the task of maintaining her own sense of self and her own sense of her mother *as* her mother, submitting to the physical violence, but refusing to understand it. Ultimately as a fighter in academic, artistic and literal sense Jordan had to learn to balance love, “from my childhood in Brooklyn I new that your peers would respect you if you could hurt somebody, Much less obvious was how to elicit respect as somebody who felt and who

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

meant love.”¹⁶ In her own work to create a body of work and a praxis for children’s literature, Jordan sought to revise the violent lessons she learned as a child with accountability for the survival of children that provided them access to love and hope, not just fear and violence as resources.

In their redefinitions and queer invocations of survival, Lorde and Jordan theorize a relationship to the future, parenting and sexual freedom that seeks to interrupt the reproduction of the violence they have survived on interpersonal and systemic levels. The temporality of survival means that there is a way of understanding the present that presumes and produces a time after the normalcy of the violent situation, after the time of normalized gendered violence. As Hazel Carby points out in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, “Rape itself should not be regarded as a transhistorical mechanism of women’s oppression but as one that acquires specific political or economic meanings at different moments in history.”¹⁷ The concept of surviving that Jordan and Lorde take up also suggests that gendered violence, though systemic, is not inevitable because the political and interpersonal dynamics that result in normalized and institutionalized gendered violence *do not have to be reproduced*. This is a necessary futurism, an intention that our love will outlive the interpersonal and systemic attacks that threaten the survival of our bodies and our spirits. Survival in this sense is an intervention into time and also a diasporic intervention into space, because the enactment of dispersion on the bodies of people and land on this planet through the mechanism of global capitalism has operated through a logic of gendered physical,

¹⁶ June Jordan. “Where is the Love?” in *Civil Wars*. New York: Beacon Press, 1981, 141.

¹⁷ Hazel Carby. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, 18.

sexual, cultural and economic violence, which undervalues the lives, bodies and time of people based on a logic that is gendered, racialized and spatiatized which justifies through the division of the global south from the global north through a process of imposed debt, which further undervalues the labor of nurturing and the public sector (schools, hospitals etc) in the global south. In polemic and poetry, June Jordan and Audre Lorde respectively argue for a logic of survival that is both futuristic and solidarity-driven, across space and time. We mean more than the violence mapped upon us. We survive even our own lifetimes.

We were never meant to survive. And we do it anyway.

Break it down. Survival. Life underneath waiting to embrace all of us.

Survival is a poem written in a corner, found waiting in a basement, forgotten. Survival is when the (un)timeliness of your word is more important than the longevity or strength of one body. The first definition of survival in the Oxford English Dictionary is “The continuing to live on after some event, remaining alive, living on.” Survival is a futuristic word. Survival projects forward because it supposes itself, the reader and the subject to exist *after* something else, something unacceptable, unlivable. Survival is about living after and through something that is not life, a system that is incompatible with life. Life. Beyond the deadly circumstance of the biopolitical framework in which certain lives are expendable. A second more obscure and anthropological definition of the word survival is “continuance of a custom, observance, etc. after the circumstances or conditions in which it originated or which gave significance to it have passed away.” This definition of survival, often used in African diaspora studies to describe evidence and traces of “African” customs that live on the practices of Black-identified communities in a

variety of Western contexts, can be queerly reframed.¹⁸ Survival, in this sense is about the reproduction of a social form beyond the social world in which it was created. This version of survival, referencing a social world that was not reproduced, but a custom that remains nonetheless, provides a queer space for the understanding of a queer future. Influenced by David Eng and David Kazanjian's work on mourning, this dissertation deals with the political significance of remains, and the loss that makes them into remains, but also values the existence of remains as evidence of the possibility of change.¹⁹ How will our desire exceed a system so deadly that it calls us to want something else?

My engagement with the term "survival" in the work of these two radical Black feminist authors is an attempt to reactivate the hope that our survival will obliterate the violent hegemonic narratives that make a radical, leftist, queer Black feminism necessary. In this chapter I read Jordan and Lorde, respectively, in order to examine the linguistic context in which the term survival becomes necessary and the poetic intervention through which the meaning of survival can shift. Drawing on this multiplicity and the queer temporality in the word survival, I use survival here to imagine a futuristic relationship in the present that does NOT presuppose the reproduction of that present in the future. Thus I find the word survival generative and

¹⁸On *african survivals*: George Shepperson, "Pan-Africanism and pan-Africanism: Some Historical Notes," *Phylon* 23 (winter 1962); 346-58 and George Shepperson "The African Abroad or the African Diaspora," in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. T.O. Ranger. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968. Kamau Braithwaite. *Roots*. Havana: Casa de las Americas Ediciones, 1986. Sterling Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

On African Survivals in Language Practice: Lorenzo Dow Turner. *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949. And Beryl Bailey. *Jamaican Creole Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

¹⁹David Eng and David Kazanjian eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

evocative to describe the praxis of Black feminists who imagined that their practices, incompatible with the world reproduced by the dominant narrative of their time, would survive as traces in a future beyond their agency.

The situations of this dissertation, both the situation of the radical Black feminists that responded to post-civil rights backlash and an anti-welfare imperialist state, and the situation of the threatened knowledge project that this dissertation attempts to achieve, require a rigorous and hopeful redefinition of survival. If (queer/Black) mothering, the other key term of this dissertation, marks the production of rival meanings for Black life and rival social forms that affirm and perpetuate criminalized existence, survival is that process, and possibility that queer Black mothering produces. June Jordan and Audre Lorde, co-mothers of this project and the primary theorists featured in this dissertation, had much to say about survival. They each use the term survival in a manner that intervenes into the dominant meaning of survival, which the Oxford English Dictionary shows us is rooted in a tradition through which power and property systems outlive death through inheritance. Both Jordan and Lorde insist that the type of “survival” that they are interested in is in direct contradiction to capitalist systems of wealth and power and the bodily and embodied domination that those systems rationalize. They draw on the definition of survival that emphasizes life after a disaster, and the disaster that these authors hope their words will survive is the emergent neoliberal capitalist order they witnessed in their lifetimes. The queer survival of Black feminism draws on an anthropological definition of survival, that cultural/spiritual practice that continues to exist even after the system in which it was made meaningful, no longer does, making another meaning possible.

Jordan and Lorde offer queer redefinitions of survival that threaten both the perpetuation of capitalist values and the manifestation of those values on the body through the technology of gender. Therefore they are critical of the patriarchal modes through which Black cultural nationalists imagine the survival of Black people in their writing and their approaches to parenting. In Chapter 4: Difficult Miracle, I discuss the ways in which Lorde addresses violence against women within Black communities as a problem within nationalism through her chorale “Need.” In “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” Audre Lorde specifically challenges the use of a mythical absolute patriarchalism in cultural nationalist ahistoricalizations of Africa, by lifting up histories of Amazons, Queen Nzinga, West African warrior women, and traditions in which African women had wives.²⁰ Consistent with this theoretical critique of the gendered manifestation of cultural nationalism, Lorde and Jordan offered a challenge to assertions popularized by Daniel Moynihan and embraced by many Black leaders, that the only viable mode of Black survival would be the adoption of a patriarchal system within Black communities. In their queer practices of mothering; their spoken and lived critiques of compulsory heteronormativity, the way that they each raised their Black children without either biological or social Black fathers they challenged this proscription.²¹ While the definitions of survival that Lorde and Jordan create do invoke diasporic solidarity and a majority consciousness among oppressed people of color in and outside of the United States, their definitions of survival do not accept the idea that a Black patriarchy would be an appropriate ideology to recuperate

²⁰ Audre Lorde. “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” in *Sister Outsider*. San Francisco: The Crossing Press, 1984, 45-52. First published in *The Black Scholar* vol. 9 no. 7, 1978.

²¹ See further discussion in Chapter 2 “The Danger of (Queer) Black Maternity.”

from an African past, or that such an ideology would benefit the people to which they are accountable in their presence. Through their repeated uses of the term survival they use the term poetically, intervening into a preexisting meaning. Lorde and Jordan intervene into the deadly logics that make survival unlikely and envision a future that exceeds the disasters of capitalist violence, and gendered violence within Black communities. In each case, this is a poetic intervention. In this chapter I will be reading the poetic implications of Jordan's pedagogical polemics on the politics of children's literature and the poetic practice of Lorde's body of published poems.

In a series of essays on children's literature in the 1970s, June Jordan marks the logic of racist capitalism as a false narrative construction that attacks Black life and threatens the survival of all life on the planet. In this chapter, I read that intervention in historicized literary terms. Accordingly, Jordan argues that an intervention that could produce survival for those targeted by narratives that devalue certain forms of life, must begin on the level of language use. Jordan's polemics use the term survival to throw the meaning of every other term into question. What must our relationship to language be, she asks, if Black children are to survive? In unstated collaboration Audre Lorde uses survival as a key term in her poetry from the early 70s on. Lorde uses poetic form to offer an intervention into what survival itself can mean as a relationship in practice.

A Polemic of Survival: An Etymology of Survival in the Essays and Speeches of June Jordan

"Let us write stories that preserve the living, struggling, needful spirit from its extinction."

-June Jordan, "Towards a Survival Literature for Afrikan-American Children"
1974

The Hungering For: Poetic Stakes

If, as Wynter argues in “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” the poetic is a process through which to produce a set of relations that exceed and contradict capitalist objectification, Jordan’s definition of the poetic in her 1969 speech “Children and the Hungering For” makes it clear that her relationship to children’s literature is a poetic one.²² As I will discuss in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4 the 1970’s were a transitional time in June Jordan’s reception as an artist and in her seemingly separate roles as both a critic and author of children’s literature and an adult poet and essayist. Though her literary engagements and publication deals were predominantly in the children’s literature school and library markets in the 1970’s, Jordan approached children’s literature from a poetic perspective in the sense Wynter offers. The 1969 speech, “Children and the Hungering For” presented at the children’s literature component of a tri-state poetry festival and later published in an anthology on the significance of children’s literature, is explicitly about the impact of poetry in the educational lives of children.²³

Jordan and Lorde’s definitions of survival offer a poetic natality, an understanding of the meaning of life that intervenes into the criminalizing narrative about what the existence of Black children means. This idea of poetic natality would probably infuriate Hannah Arendt, who coined the term natality in her 1958 work on *The Human Condition*. Arendt’s concept of natality is the miraculous idea that the possibility of history and action change every time a person is born. Arendt argues that this natal

²² Sylvia Wynter. “Ethno or Socio Poetics.” *Alcheringa*, Vol. 1 Issue 2, 1976, 87.

²³ details on the festival and the book *Somebody Put A Light Under Those Kids* also more on this in Chapter 3: “Teaching Us Questions”

possibility is only meaningful within a *narrative* understanding of life that has a beginning a middle and an end and where the meaning of life is unitary. According to Arendt:

Birth and death presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but whose durability and relative permanence makes appearance and disappearance possible, which existed before any one individual appeared into it and will survive his eventual departure. Without a world into which men are born and from which they die, there would be nothing but changeless eternal recurrence, the deathless everlastingness of the human as of all other animal species.²⁴

and

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zoe* that Aristotle said that it “somehow is a kind of *praxis*.”²⁵

The reproduction of a social world in which birth and death mean what they mean now is a requisite for the impact of birth to have the exciting significance for action-potential that Arendt ascribes it in her theorization of natality. Like Agamben, Arendt goes back to the Aristotelian distinction between *bios* (life with political meaning) and *zoe* (mere reproductive life). Arendt’s careful distinction between the meaning of human life and meaning of animal life seeks to produce a particular exceptional idea of meaningful personhood and coincides with her distinctions elsewhere about the meaning of the student movement (pure transformation) vs. the meaning of the Black

²⁴ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 97.

²⁵ Ibid.

student movement (chaotic violence).²⁶ As Chapter 2 will document, the interconnected narratives of slave code, abortion law, and welfare policy in the United States inscribe the figure of the Black mother as mere reproductive life, or more accurately, life with negative meaning. Because of the law through which the child follows the condition of the enslaved mother the Black mother becomes the cipher through which children can be born into illegibility...born without any legal rights, and in the rhetoric (welfare queen) and practice (welfare reform) of welfare legislation the poor Black mother is caricatured and characterized as she who produces meaningless life, babies who are nothing more than a way to cheat the system for welfare benefits. So in my analysis it is meaningful that Arendt distinguishes *bios*, meaningful life full of natal potential, from *zoe* reproductive/animal life, and I in turn must distinguish my use of the concept of natality from her narrative use. I argue that with their use of the term survival, Jordan and Lorde invoke a poetic natality, revealing the impact of birth on the *meaning* and *structure* of life, not just the content of the story. Lorde and Jordan use survival to trouble the beginning, end and middle boundaries of their own lives which brings us back to Sylvia Wynter's definition of poetry.

Preceding Sylvia Wynter's 1975 declaration at the First Conference of Ethnopoetics that "Poetry is the agent and product by which man names the world," Jordan explains to her 1969 audience that "Poetry is your own naming of the world,"

²⁶ Hannah Arendt. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1970, 35-6: "Serious violence entered the scene only with the appearance of the Black Power movement on the campuses. Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualification, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representative of the black community. Their interest was to lower academic standards....it seems that the academic establishment, in its curious tendency to yield more to Negro demands, even if they are clearly silly and outrageous, than to the disinterested and usually highly moral claims of the white rebels, also thinks in these terms."

emphasizing the act of naming as a mode through which to produce a relationship that would otherwise be predetermined by the pervasiveness of a capitalist logic in the very grammar of the English language.²⁷ Positing poetry as an intervention against the *sentence* of disconnection (both in the grammatical and punitive senses), Jordan suggests that a poetic approach, and the literal form of poetry as an educational practice in the lives of children offers them a way of connecting to a community and environment. Connection, she argues, is what all of us, especially children, are “hungering for.” The grammatically unorthodox prepositional ending of this (non)sentence “Children and the Hungering For” is a poetic reach towards a relationship that does not exist, but which can be made possible through language.

Jordan goes on to share the specific lessons she has learned through her work as a visiting poet in New York City Schools, namely that poetry provides a way for children to relate, and a queer desire to *want* to relate across socioeconomic boundaries while at the same time enabling an intergenerational potential through which poets can find each other across age and professional status. Sharing the details and products of *Voices of the Children* a weekly workshop, regular publication and anthology she produced in collaboration with Black and Latino children in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, Jordan presents poetic engagement as an encounter through which children form and clarify their own critical relationships to a language and a social order to which they often refuse to consent. For example, a number of poems written by the students on the event of the

²⁷ Sylvia Wynter. “Ethno or Socio Poetics.” *Alcheringa*, Vol. 1 Issue 2, 1976, 87. June Jordan (June Meyer). “Children and the Hungering For.” Delivered on March 29th 1969 at Lehigh University at the Tri-State Poetry Festival. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 55 Folder 14. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University. A version also published in Nancy Larrick, ed. *Somebody Put A Tap in These Kids: Poetry and Young People Today*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1971.

assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrate the students' critical views on the possibility of equality within a racist state. The students were together, on their way to a poetry reading with Jordan, when they learned of the assassination. If the product of the racist state is the violent murder of a civil rights leader and peace activist, if indeed assassination is the *sentence* for civil disobedience, these children deviated from the sentence, using poetry to refuse the reproduction of that status quo. In the moment their responses were sentence fragments, "Might as well die," "Better to fight and then to die."²⁸ During the poetry reading, 12 year old Micheal Goode, a student who continued to write to Jordan into his adult life wrote his own poem "April 4, 1968," in which he struggles with the sentence. The beginning of Goode's poem reads

*war war
why do god's children fight among each other
like animals
a great man once lived
a Negro man
his name was the Rev. Martin Luther King.

but do you know what happened²⁹*

Goode refuses capitalization in poem, except for the words "Negro," "I," and "Rev. Martin Luther King." He therefore, never starts a sentence. However, after the ruminations "war war" and the unmarked question of why "god's children fight among each other," Goode does make a sentence-ending statement in three parts. Juxtaposing "animals" his critique of racist violence, against "a great man" and capitalizing "Negro" he makes his statement towards the survival and recognition of the victim. "his name was the Rev. Martin Luther King." Employing a period here, Goode continues to disrupt

²⁸ Ibid, 7.

²⁹ Ibid, 8.

the death sentence that ends his statement about a great man who “once lived” by following up with an uncapitalized unmarked question. “but do you know what happened” The question of knowledge continues throughout the poem as Goode asks the reader a series of questions without question marks. “but do you know what happened” “but do you think you yourself/can stand up.” Finally, at the very end of the poem Goode asks his reader a marked and remarkable question, and answers it with the only sentence in the poem that would not be called a run-on or a fragment if it were in an essay.

what kind of a world is this?

I don't know.³⁰

Goode disavows the knowledge of the world he is supposed to reproduce as a student and a child, and asserts, through his resigned response to a very adult rhetorical question that though he clearly *does* know the world he lives in, well enough to demonstrate it vividly and critically in this poem, he refuses that knowledge. There must be something else to learn. Jordan includes this piece as an example in her speech as well as in *Soulscript* her anthology of Black poetry by adults and children. I read this poem, and Jordan's invocation of it as an invitation for the rival pedagogy that poetic engagement can enact. If the students, through poetry, express their refusal of a world that is teaching them brutal lessons through violence, like the lesson that Black life is expendable, and the lesson that a democratic practice based on equality represented by King is punishable by death, then they are creating a rival pedagogical space and signaling a need for another set of lessons. This is a poetic afterlife for King that

³⁰ Ibid.

participates in the transformation of the civil rights project from an assimilative to a critical stance.³¹ Jordan insists that children's literature must meet this poetic demand that the survival of the conditions evident in King's death require a new language.

Jordan's attention to the transformative function of children's poetry shows an attention to form that should not be taken for granted. In fact, during the post-Civil Rights era of liberal attempts to represent the experiences of Black youth, the words of Black children could be highly commodified. For example, in contrast to Jordan's attention to the work of the young poets in *Voices of the Children* a 1969 collection called *Chicory: Young Voices from the Black Ghetto* targeted at the same market exemplifies how little attention to form educators and even poets engaging Black youth could offer. *Chicory* is a product of the VISTA war on poverty program and the Community Action Neighborhood Center initiative in Baltimore, framed by editors Lucian W. Dixon and Sam Cornish (a poet I will contrast Jordan against *again* in Chapter 4 for the difference in his memorialization of King). *Chicory* which advertises itself as "a jewel box of human expressions, unpolished, unrehearsed voices of the young," on the back cover, hardly distinguishes between pieces written by the young people in the program and pieces that were "overheard" and written by staff members.³² The front cover sports an imitation scrawl designed to represent the "real" borderline literacy of the participants, most of whom have to be spoken for via the practice of transcribing "overheard" non-standard English. It is also unclear whether the collection "really" fulfills the task of representing the voices of Baltimore's youth, especially when one of the overheard unattributed youth

³¹ In Chapter 4 "Difficult Miracle," I discuss the way that Jordan and Lorde queerly participate in the poetic afterlife of King.

³² Sam Cornish and Lucian Dixon eds. *Chicory: Young Voices from the Black Ghetto*. New York: Association Press, 1969.

respondents recounts witnessing street life for 40 years. *Chicory* is only one example of the fetishization of the “real” experiences of Black youth, which are imagined to retain their objective “realness” despite mediation (even when they are written by staff members.) Tellingly the producers of *Chicory* also attempted to create a film “along the lines of *The Cool World*,” a film that Jordan critiqued in her journalistic writing. The editors’ comparison of their intended film (the filmmaker disappeared) that would reflect the “real” experience of Black youth in Baltimore as “along the lines” of a film based on a novel about Black life by a white novelist points to the complicated status of authenticity in their performance. Jordan, modeling a move that she will make in her engagement to children’s literature troubles the relationship between the “real” and “fantasy” in her documentation of her interactions with Hampton Clanton, the young star of *The Cool World* who remained illiterate and without job options despite his usefulness for the sale of a narrative about the compelling “realness” of the Black experience. Jordan points out that

Hamp made me wonder what he got out of the picture. He has a word. Fantasy is his word for the reasonable expectation of school to cultivate his mind and train him usefully for a labor market that is not rapidly diminishing, as is the market for semiskilled labor.³³

As John Jackson points out in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* the construction of “realness” is a form of objectification.³⁴ Clearly the “realness” imposed on the experiences of Black youth which is then expropriated to sell a narrative about the reality of race as a construct, depends on objectification. In line with Jackson’s call for the revelation of racial sincerity as a structure that reproduces objectification, Jordan’s

³³ June Jordan. “Testimony (1964)” in *Civil Wars*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, 13.

³⁴ John Jackson. *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

engagement with realness compels us to engage realness as a question of form. Jordan, in her *Voices of the Children* workshops and anthology and elsewhere is greatly concerned with the forms in which Black children express their observations about and interventions into the narratives that structure their lives. By contrast the claim to “realness” constructed by texts such as *Chicory* and *The Cool World*, suggests that Black life, and young Black life in particular has no form and is not transformed by mediation. Jordan counters with the observation that Black life is not self-evident, it is structured by systems of power, including an educational system and a labor market where that which should be reasonable becomes a fantasy. Jordan constructs a sustained argument on the terms of the forms of Black expression, which she finds to be meaningful and specific and the question of what is or is not reasonable for Black young people to expect or demand from life.

Jordan creates the frame for her sustained engagement with children’s literature during the 1970’s, a decade in which she publishes numerous children’s books, reviews more, publishes an anthology of children’s poetry and due to the success of *Who Look at Me?* a book-length poem dedicated to her son Christopher, reads and speaks at school after school and library after library in New York City. However, Jordan’s engagement with children’s literature is poetic even when she is not writing poetry, with and for an audience of children. Jordan’s work is set against a backdrop of calls for “realistic” children’s literature to deal with the “problem” of the Civil Rights Movement, which in Susan Rahn’s introduction to her annotated bibliography of the history and criticism of children’s literature compares to other “problems” like “divorced parents” and “mental

illness.”³⁵ In the 1970’s spurred by an influential 1967 article by Nat Hentoff called “Fiction for Teenagers,” authors of young adult literature turned away from fantasy and magic and embarked on a mission to create ‘realistic’ pedagogical literature for young adults.³⁶ In a 1969 book Aidan Chambers continues this argument insisting that more young adults will read if they are presented with “realistic” fiction, instead of non-realistic fiction which he judges as useless.³⁷ Carolyn T. Kingston agrees that realistic children’s fiction that follows the tragic mode is especially valuable for catharsis.³⁸ In 1973 a special issue of *American Literary Realism* examines Children’s literature as a neglected topic within its purview.³⁹ By 1978 Jana Varleja, editor of *Young Adult Literature in the Seventies* notes that the “New Realism” a “trend.”⁴⁰ As we will discuss further in Chapter 3 “Teaching Us Questions,” Jordan departed from this tendency in her work (for example her young adult novel *His Own Where* depicts two teenagers creating a new life for themselves in an New York City cemetery after leading a direct action protest for access to safe sex materials in school) but she also departs from this tendency in her criticism of children’s literature, which is not anthologized and also does not appear anywhere in bibliographies of criticism on children’s literature such as Grahn’s. Jordan does not argue for fantasy in children’s literature as it is usually framed (fairies, time travel, etc.) but she critiques a form of realism which she understands to reproduce the status quo, when for her the function of children’s literature is to build faith, models,

³⁵ Suzanne Rahn. *Children’s Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of the History and Criticism*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1981, xiv.

³⁶ Nat Hentoff. “Fiction for Teenagers.” *Atlantic* 220, 6 (December 1967): 136-141.

³⁷ Aidan Chambers. *The Reluctant Reader*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1969.

³⁸ Carolyn T. Kingston. *The Tragic Mode in Children’s Literature*. New York: Teacher’s College Press., 1974.

³⁹ *American Literary Realism 1870-1919*. Issue 6, 2 (Spring 1973).

⁴⁰ Jana Varleja ed. *Young Adult Literature in the Seventies: A Selection of Headings*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1978.

action and form for an alternate reality in which oppression is unacceptable and therefore not accepted. In the remainder of this section I will examine the ways in which Jordan's essays and speeches on social linguistics in the educational apparatus and children's literature, all of which hinge on the keyword "survival," seek to use language poetically, as a means to exceed and reject a capitalist relation of so-called realism in favor of a social form of language aimed towards the cultural and spiritual and physical survival of oppressed children.

White English: The Linguistics of Survival

June Jordan's essay "White English: The Politics of Language" is the lead essay introducing and contextualizing a series of essays by Black writers on the relevance of Black culture across generation in the August 1973 issue of *Black World* focused on "Black Speech and the Education of Black Children" and organized by executive editor Hoyt Fuller. In her tagline for this article, Jordan is characterized/characterizes herself as a "New York poet and writer," but makes no mention of *Some Changes*, her recent book of poetry for adults, mentioning only her books for young adults. Immediately preceding an essay by elementary educator Barbara H. Stewart on *Sesame Street's* failure to represent Black colloquial speech effectively, "White English" presents the political stakes of the languages in which Black children, or any children are taught to speak, read, write and understand society.

Jordan clearly asserts that language is the way in which dominance operates in society. In the pull quote that appears next to Jordan's photograph on the first page of the article she argues "Power belongs to those who can determine the use, abuse, the

rejection, definition/redefinition of the words—the messages---we must try and send each other.”⁴¹

Jordan’s basic argument for Black English in her essays directed towards teachers and librarians is a liberal one: that an educational system that excludes modes of speech in which Black people communicate denies Black children access to both their primary relationship to the language spoken at home and will not allow them to properly learn a “white english” which Jordan describes as a second language, in which Black children will have to be fluent in order to operate in a society dominated by white people.⁴² In this first sense the politics of language is a matter of survival for Black children forced to live in a world dominated by what Jordan calls “white terms,” but the relationship between language and survival is more nuanced than this. Like Audre Lorde’s experience of rape, mediated and framed by her struggle for access to library illustrates, survival is double-edged. That which we need access to in order to survive often comes with violent costs. We (barely) survive the terms of our survival. Jordan argues that fluency in white English, as a mandate for Black children, costs them and the society as a whole something that they can never get back. This article on “White English” directed towards the readers of *Black World* makes the radical argument that a world dominated by “white terms” is not a sustainable or livable world for anyone, and therefore survival requires its own redefinition.

Jordan associates “white” language use with a political double-speak that means exactly the opposite of what it says. Using the example of US imperialist war and the terms “carpet bombing” and “defoliation” which are used to obscure the burning of

⁴¹ June Jordan. “White English: The Politics of Language” in *Black World*. August 1973, 4.

⁴² See for example June Jordan “Towards a Politics of Language,” in *Publisher’s Weekly*, 1973.

human beings and the bombing of hospitals in Vietnam, and Richard Nixon's description of his domestic policy as one of "compassion, concern and social progress at home," where social programs and federal aid to public housing and public schools are cut. Jordan argues "And , since that's what 'compassion' means in White English, I most definitely do not see why any child should learn *that* English/prize it/participate in such debasement of this human means to human community: this debasement of language, *per se*."⁴³ Access to "White English" then, for "any child" is contrary to human survival because it denies access to "human community" in a way that we can, after the fact, describe as the language and logic of a economic global relationship called neoliberalism, in which foreign invasions and domestic transfer of federal money towards the private sector is described in a way that masks the violence it requires. Elaborating, June Jordan points out the way in which during the political moment of the early 1970s "we accept... 'self-reliance' to mean bail money for Lockheed Corporation and for the mis-managers of the Pennsylvania Railroad, on the one hand, but on the other allow 'self-reliance' to mean starvation, sickness and misery for poor families...then our mental health is seriously in peril; we have entered the world of double-speak-bullshit, and our lives may soon be lost behind that entry."⁴⁴ The threat that the dominance of "White English" poses is not just about children, it is about a political and economic process of consent that sacrifices the majority of people to the interests of corporations, which Jordan understands as a war at home, waged primarily against the most disadvantaged Americans. "How will we survive this new...phase of white war against Black life?" she

⁴³ White English, 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

asks.⁴⁵ The question of survival, which is implicit in the examples Jordan raises, becomes explicit here. The terms in which a group of people speaks are crucial, because they are the terms, or standards by which they engage with their own domination. “We will not survive by joining the games according the rules set up by our enemies; we will not survive by imitating the double-speak/bullshit/non-think standard English of the powers that be.”⁴⁶ Jordan argues that accepting the standard terms, is an act of “extinction” and “obliteration” first because it consents to a system that wishes social, cultural and literal death upon Black communities, and second because in this act of consent and assimilation Black people lose themselves without any chance of ever actually gaining white privilege.⁴⁷ Survival, for Jordan, has a both a literal and cultural meaning. As she will distinguish in a speech at Howard, with culture, people can survive, but without it, they merely subsist.⁴⁸ The question of culture, her projection beyond individual lives to collective social practice, gives survival a futuristic presence in Jordan’s usage. She explains, “we must devise and pursue every means for survival as the people we are, as the people we want to become.”⁴⁹ Choosing not to separate “the people we are” from “the people we want to become” with so much as a conjunction, Jordan performs a poetic act here; survival is the connection between presence, perpetuation, being, vision. Survival is an urgent futuristic project that depends on a radical relationship to language in the present. *The people we are, the people we want to become*, the collective production of Black life as an act shaped by desire is what is at

⁴⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ June Jordan. “Toward a Survival Literature for Afrikan Amerikan Children” Howard University, Conference of Afro-American Writers, 1974.

⁴⁹ “White English” 6.

stake here. This temporal simultaneity allows Jordan to ask for an intentional language use for Black communities that does not depend on historical authenticity, but rather expresses a futurist intention for the survival of Black people on their own, shifting terms.

Survival here is a queer relationship to Black life and Black mothering. Comparing the word “standard” to the word “straight” and concluding that “standard” is a version of the word “straight” with more institutional power, Jordan laments the fact that by their deviance from this straight standard “literally millions of Black children are ‘wrong’ from the moment they begin to absorb and imitate the language of their Black lives.”⁵⁰ This wrongness, or deviance is a maternal wrongness, a result of the queer mothering of Black children in Black languages which Jordan contrasts to the way the “white child is rewarded for his mastery of his standard white English; the language he learned at his mother’s white and standard knee. But the Black child is punished for his mastery of his non-standard Black English...”⁵¹ Jordan does not go on to describe the queer, deviant, non-standard knee of the Black mother, but the transmission of language through differentially valued and criminalized forms of mothering is implicit. The cover of this issue of *Black World* has already linked the issue of “Black speech and the education of the Black child” (the title of the issue) to Black family structures. The cover features Charles Alston’s “The Family” a painting that depicts an older woman (a mother? a grandmother?) in a chair. A boy who looks about twelve stands behind and next to her chair with his hand on her back and another faceless smaller child stands behind him. In the corner, almost cut out of the frame is a framed picture of someone

⁵⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁵¹ *ibid*, 7.

else. “The Family” here, whether Alston’s depiction is celebration or lament, is a unit that is distinctly different from the “standard” patriarchal family. Jordan’s final insistence, “And, as for our children; let us make sure that the whole world will welcome and applaud and promote the words they bring into our reality,” is an affirmation of this deviant mothering and teaching between generations within Black communities.⁵²

Jordan argues that a language is evidence of a logic with structural implications. By affirming the language that Black children learn at home, Jordan is affirming the alternative structures of homemaking that Black children learn within alternative family structures. Ultimately Jordan’s argument is *for* deviance in language towards a poetic push towards experimental ethical relationality: “in the struggle to reach each other, there can be no right or wrong words for our longing and our needs; there can only be the names that we trust and we try.”⁵³

Children’s Literature: Realism, Narrative and Survival

If her essay on “White English” presents the political stakes of a linguistic approach to languages or usages of English in the educational lives of Black children, the series of essays on Children Literature that Jordan wrote during the same period extend her argument to address the narrative forms and mode of production of literary work for young audiences. It is important to note that this work on the key role of literature in the survival of Black youth comes after Jordan’s work in the New York City public schools as a poet, her facilitation and publication of the previously mentioned *Voices of the Children* and her work in the SEEK (Searching for Enlightenment, Elevation and Knowledge) program for “under-represented” (i.e. Black and Latino) students at CUNY

⁵² *ibid.*, 10.

⁵³ *ibid.*

who were motivated by the logic of cultural relevance in education to take over City College. Therefore these essays, addressing an audience of adult artists and educators must be understood in the context of Jordan's ongoing work producing alternative literatures and pedagogies with young people. Children's literature was also a contested and important field within post-Civil Rights publishing. Liberal guides like *The Negro in Schoolroom Literature* by East Harlem reading program director Minnie Koblitz looked to integrated and respectful representation of Black professionals and historical figures in classroom literature as a tool towards a day when "a bibliography such as this one will be unnecessary when skin color becomes irrelevant on the American and world scene."⁵⁴ At the same time, as Dianne Johnson reminds us in *Telling Tales: The Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth*, the question of who could write or remedy literary images for Black children was a controversial issue as protests of children's literature aimed at African American children by white authors emerged early as 1931. Notably Louise Fitzhugh's *Nobody's Family is Going to Change*, published in 1974 was critiqued for having images of Black characters on the cover, but insults and racial epithets in the text.⁵⁵

Against Realism: The Possibilities of Children's Literature

In 1973 in the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, June Jordan wrote an article directed towards other authors of children's literature and the librarians and educators who determine which books children can access, decrying the impact of realism on the literary field and on the imaginations of young readers. Again, using Nixon as the

⁵⁴ Minnie W. Koblitz. *The Negro in Schoolroom Literature: Resource Materials for the Teacher of Kindergarten through the Sixth Grade*. New York: Center for Urban Education, 1966.

⁵⁵ Dianne Johnson. *Telling Tales: The Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990.

ultimate example of the operation of a false narrative in the dominant imagination Jordan starts her polemic with the provocation, “Hard to say what’s real anymore. I mean is Watergate real?”⁵⁶ Jordan declares that due to the political practice of denying social and ecological factors that make life possible, “we have abandoned the truth...the truth has been lost to our despair and justified distrust resulting from the unprecedented perversion of words...”⁵⁷

Survival, as it operates as a key word in this polemic has two valences. First, there is the general survival of a human population, dominated by (and consenting to) a narrative that disavows responsibility for the basic requirements of the planet. Secondly there are the differential life values and survival chances of populations in relation to each other. For example, Jordan insists that “famine is *real*” (emphasis in the original).⁵⁸ She emphasizes “*Ten million human beings will die unless we acknowledge they are real. Their hunger is real.*”⁵⁹ In this case Jordan speaks as an American citizen with relative access to power and credibility, arguing that the bare life survival of those facing famine in Africa depends on the belief that those in domination of the global market refuse: that “other” people are real. However, she argues, what is believed or not believed to be true is of the utmost importance for the survival of groups of people, because whole groups of people can be placed in “the jeopardy of possible extinction resulting from your disbelief...”⁶⁰ Anticipating Gayatri Spivaks argument in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that power circulates in the world along circuits of credit, which is

⁵⁶ June Jordan. “Young People: Victims of Realism in Books and in Life.” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, October 1973, 142.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

not merely a system of monetary debt, but primarily a system through which some people (the west) are credible, or believable, and *other* people, which Spivak calls the “native informants” are unbelievable, incredible.⁶¹ They have no credit.

Jordan points out that in this game of twisted truths and differential terms along which people can or cannot be believed, which worldviews dominate in the struggle to define what life means, is a matter of survival. Jordan points out that the American rhetoric about corporate expansion, “record-breaking crop production,” “historic peace waged and won by America around the world” and the perpetual evasion and pushing back of deadlines to control waste and pollution by industry disastrously affects “our most precious resource: our capacity to survive.”⁶²

This “reality,” the reality of famine, or pollution, is not the realism that Jordan argues against. Ironically, Jordan points out, any attempt to speak against these unrealistic economic and social and industrial policies or to remember the real impact these policies have in the lives of the majority of the people in the world, is called, in the rhetoric of the United States “unrealistic.” Jordan is addressing survival in the face of bare life as both material struggle and narrative. According to Jordan, the injunction to “be realistic” is nothing more or less than “a cop-out,” that reinforces an unacceptable status-quo.⁶³ In the field of children’s literature, Jordan laments, this form of realism reinforces hopelessness and teaches children that there is no other way that the world can be, except for the messed up way that it is. These books are applauded for teaching young people about the world, but Jordan protests the mode of relationship to the world

⁶¹ Gayatri Spivak. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁶² “Young People: Victims of Realism in Books and in Life,” 43.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

that this form of literature enforces: acceptance of the unacceptable, as opposed to the creative act of imagining and implementing a better world. In a section of the article entitled “My Manifesto” June Jordan shares that she has “resolved that I will attempt, in all of my written work, to devise reasonable alternatives to this reality, and to offer these alternatives particularly to young readers.”⁶⁴ Among these “alternatives” Jordan includes people actively working for social alternatives including “the assertion of human rights over property rights.”⁶⁵ She insists that for children because, “they are the ones we have failed...and we are the ones who owe our children something else, right now,” it is the responsibility of children’s authors to present alternative understandings of reality “a story of love gracing an entire family, or an entire community for thirty to forty years” for example.⁶⁶ If we were really “realistic” Jordan asserts, we would realize that the state of things is unacceptable and must be transformed, or else no one will survive. The tools for that transformation are an intervention into the formal practice of creating literary narratives based on a belief system and a logic that actively redefines what survival and life itself can mean.

The realism that Jordan writes about, in the context of her own literary criticism and my own literary critical positioning of her work, cannot merely be a term to describe the politics of varying definitions of reality. Realism, of course, is a literary term, and though Jordan specifically targets negative, violent and depressing young adult books here and in a number of her reviews of children’s literature in the New York Times, her critique extends to literature more broadly and the relationship between realism as a

⁶⁴ Ibid, 44.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

literary convention and the African American narrative tradition.⁶⁷ My argument is that June Jordan's redefinition of realism as a platform through which to interrogate which realities should be foregrounded in Children's Literature and African American Literature is a queer literary critical act, towards a queer form of survival. Arguing against a tradition that presents an oppressive reality as fixed, or even as acceptable and which therefore leads to the social reproduction of the status quo through the re-teaching of these norms to a reading public, Jordan argues for a queer practice, a practice that does not reproduce the status quo, but rather challenges that situation by affirming criminalized forms of Black life, and forms of Black love that seem dangerous even within works by Black authors. In her essay "Notes Towards a Balance of Love and Hate," comparing the place of Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston in an African American literary canon, Jordan points out that realist works of African American fiction by authors such as Wright and Petry are valued within an African American literary canon because they realistically present the oppressive situations faced by Black people in the United States, but argues that works that present the internal gender dynamics, love relationships and family forms of Black communities are crucial to the project of actually representing the potential and significance of Black life.⁶⁸ This focus on love, in the protest market of Black literature is a queer act. It builds upon James Baldwin's suggestion that protest literature ironically consents to the systems of domination it

⁶⁷ In her review of *Eva's Man* ("All About Eva," New York Times, May 16, 1976 p217) Jordan critiques Gayl Jones for paying insufficient attention to Eva's childhood and for presenting only the aspects of her oppression without accounting for the presence or possibility of love in the home life of Eva. Jordan's critique of "realism" in Children's Literature is also part of a longer project of re-theorizing reality and the portrayal of Black life for the benefit of Black children.

⁶⁸ This essay was also published in *Black World* in 1974, but unlike most of Jordan's writing on children's literature was anthologized in two of Jordan's essay collections: first in *Civil Wars*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, and then again in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan*. New York, Basic Books, 2002.

represents by failing to present something else, linking realism to consent and arguing for an alternative literature focused on the radical potential of love.⁶⁹ As I examine further in chapter 4 *Difficult Miracle*, the focus on martyrdom and death in protest literature rejects opportunities to learn about and theorize the work of survival. Jordan's argument is a queer intervention because it marks "realism" as a reproductive narrative that reinforces the normative state of things as the only possibility, especially when pedagogically targeted at children.

Absurd Narratives

At the First Conference of Afro-American writers at Howard University in 1974, June Jordan, predictably, was featured on a panel about African American literature for younger audiences. Similarly to her tagline in *Black World* Jordan's bio in the conference program mentions only her publications for child audiences. If her comments may seem to have been relegated to the panel about children's literature, Jordan certainly does not view the production of literature for children as a marginal pursuit within the field of African American Literature. In fact her engagement with children's literature takes on the question of generation and the status of children within a Black cultural nationalist imaginary.

Like her earlier argument about the impact of "white english" and the importance of intentional uses of self-determined languages in the education of Black children, Jordan centralizes the role of children's literature in the production of a planetary logic

⁶⁹ Jordan also theorized this practice in her literary work. For example in her own young adult novel *His Own Where* her portrayal of a young man and woman who lead an impromptu protest for sex education in their school and then escape and set up house in a New York City graveyard may not be realistic, but it explores the queer possibilities of life centered on the multiply possible manifestations of love in the lives of young people. More on *His Own Where* in *Teaching Us Questions*.

worthy of the future. In “Towards a Survival Literature for Afrikan-American Children,” Jordan builds on the cultural nationalist overtones of the conference in general to prioritize the survival of Black children and to argue against a capitalist narrative that would sacrifice Black children. She argues that the task of the writer is to literally, and literarily equip Black youth with the tools needed to see the capitalist narrative as an absurd and dangerous one, and to produce and practice a logic of community cooperation, towards not only subsistence, but survival.⁷⁰

Predictably, Jordan sees language as the key survival tool of Black people and laments that the public school system “proceeds to denigrate and punish the most innocent, beautiful purveyors of our Black language: our Black children.”⁷¹ Jordan explains that language is the way that a people hold on to “community consciousness” and express a culture. Here Jordan is unequivocal on the necessity of Black culture, in an audience that cannot help but agree, “without culture a people do not survive; we subsist, at best.”⁷² This distinction between subsistence and survival is key to Jordan’s redefinition of survival as not merely the perpetuation of life on biological terms, but a creative practice. This distinction between subsistence and survival will be important to Jordan at the 4th Conference of Afro-American Writers at Howard when in an intense question and answer session that June Jordan chaired, she and Barbara Smith are accused of bringing death upon the Black community by affirming lesbianism and bisexuality. Specifically, Frances Welsing says after the talks by June Jordan, Barbara Smith, Sonia Sanchez and Acklyn Lynch on the “Black Women Writers and Feminism”

⁷⁰ June Jordan. Conference Paper, 1974 Conference of Afro-American Writers, Howard University. Lucille Clifton’s unprocessed boxes. Woodruff Library Rare Books and Manuscript Archives, Emory University.

⁷¹ Ibid, 2.

⁷² Ibid, 3.

panel as the first comment that “if we endorse homosexuality, then we have endorsed the death of our people,” and this comment is met with applause from the audience.⁷³ June Jordan, as moderator and panelist responds,

I think that the death of a people can be accomplished and is being accomplished in many different ways, and I haven't heard anyone here today talking against motherhood or talking against having children. What I have heard people talking about is about self-love and self-respect and if we cannot allow that all of us, all of the people have a right to self-love and self-respect, then I say we are already dead as a people.⁷⁴

There is no applause noted. Drawing on her earlier definition of survival, Jordan clarifies that survival is not the same as subsistence and therefore is about more than the literal physical survival and reproduction of Black life, (though that is a concern she has due to the eugenic practices of the government). This redefinition of what constitutes communal death for Black communities is crucial to make space for the proto-queer literary critique that she supports Barbara Smith in launching in her presentation of her landmark essay “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” on the panel.⁷⁵ Survival remains an exercise of power over the terms through which life and death is mediated, and requires a definition of life that is not merely biological, not culturally essentialist, but rather an ethical project of self-love and communal recognition. In other words Jordan's definition of survival is cultural and democratic, requiring that each member of the Black community have access to self-love and self-respect. This is in fact a queer redefinition of Black life both against an “Absurd and Deadly” racist narrative” and a heteropatriarchal Black cultural narrative that is absurd and in Jordan's view, deadly.

⁷³ Conference proceedings including full transcript of Q&A published in Juliette Bowles ed. *In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora and Lorraine: Essay and Interviews on Black Women and Writing*. Howard University Institute for the Arts and Humanities, 1979, p. ____.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Barbara Smith. “Toward at Black Feminist Criticism,” in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 3-21.

Back in 1974, in front of an earlier Howard audience, Jordan uses a number of formal features to demonstrate the existence of an absurd, but normalized narrative that definitionally threatens Black survival. In the written version of the speech, which was published as part of the conference proceedings, a number of formal features illustrate the work that Jordan hopes to encourage African American writers to perform in their relationship to children's literature. For example, Jordan capitalizes the words in the narrative that she calls the "Deadly and Absurd Perspective of White Amerika" to let us know that this is the title of a story that we have been consuming as if it were reality. The characters in this story through which the lives of "non-white" children are attacked if not prevented have proper names, such as, "Overpopulation," the villain, and the heroes: "Population Control" "Sterilization." Jordan seeks to remind us of the power dynamics at play by introducing another set of characters that have key roles in the story that Black children must be taught: "Amerikan Over-Consumption/Amerikan Greed/Amerikan Waste." She is very explicit about the naming of these characters explaining: "We must replace words (concepts) such as "Overpopulaton" with (words) concepts such as Inequitable Distribution of Food."⁷⁶ As Jordan's use and then reverse use of parentheses suggests these names do the branding work of normalizing concepts. In order that the children directly threatened by these logics know what they face, she insists on recharacterizations of the actors in the story.

Explaining the cumulative significance of United States policies aimed against the survival of Black children, Jordan starts four consecutive paragraphs with the phrase "In addition," adding racist hate violence and police violence, marginalization of Black

⁷⁶ "Towards a Survival Literature for Afrikan-American Children," 1.

culture from its 1960's tokenization in mass media, a school system that is against "Black English," attacks against Black Studies at the University level, to her basic injunction against neo-liberalism via "absolutely inadequate levels of aid to poor Black families." The repetition of "in addition" is pedagogical, seeking to teach the audience, in the method that she hopes they will teach the children, that the odds against Black survival are neither coincidental or unidirectional. This litany of additions is what she calls "merely a sketch of systematic interconnected White Force aims," which she explains are enforced through "The Deadly White Perspective on non-white life."

The interconnected narrative is pernicious and Jordan is careful to illustrate its connections, emphasizing her argument that the violence against Black life is systematic and conceptually linked. For example "Population Control" which Jordan introduces as a character to explain the "Sterilization" strategies waged against non-white children, extends to the police violence which is used to control the population both by decreasing its number, but more perniciously by using extreme force to teach Black youth that their lives are less valuable than, and in fact contradictory to, the general well being that police officers are charged to protect. Jordan claims that "Sterilization" is a strategy aimed not only at "the very wombs of the Black women who will or will not be able to bring Black Children, the future of us all, into the world," but which targets "the minds" as the "possible power of Black people" through lowered admission rates and defunding for Black studies programs within the University. This robust definition of Sterilization as a tactic is a negative for Jordan's oppositional redefinition of survival. If Sterilization includes tactics against the physical reproduction and intellectually development opportunities of Black, then survival, via a meaningful definition of Black life, includes both reproductive autonomy for Black women and educational self-determination for

Black students. If Population Control means both the widespread tactics (discussed in more detail in chapter 2) to prevent the birth of non-white children by limiting the reproductive autonomy of women in the “developing world” and women of color in the United States, and a disciplinary apparatus that sacrifices Black life by using excessive force against Black youth, while failing to enforce the law against racist murderers, then survival requires not only reproductive autonomy, but also a structure of accountability in which Black life is understood to be valuable and worthy of protection and respect. It is telling that the terms that Jordan uses to outline the interconnected attack against Black life are centered around the physical potential of mothering. Centering her analysis here, on the re/production of Black life through maternal agency and advocating for a children’s literature designed to raise Black children to be skillful in their interpretation and subversion of the narrative forces they face, Jordan creates a definition and mode of survival that centers on a redefinition of mothering. In her suggestions at the end of the talk for how to implement this practice, she centers birth and mothering. Her first suggestion insists that literature for Black children should treat the event of “new life” or the birth of a baby as a cause for “joy and welcome” and practical suggestions for the baby’s survival in the context of the family that receives the child.⁷⁷ And in support of her suggestion that stories for Black children should include alternative leadership models, like ones being practiced and experimented with by people in the process of overthrowing colonial rule, she centers a very close to home example of how Black children’s literature can be used to teach the critical thinking and problem solving that she believes young Black people need. Her example features a mother who is struggling

⁷⁷ Jordan’s own book, *New Life: New Room* fulfills on this suggestion. June Jordan. *New Life: New Room*. New York: Crowell, 1975.

with the problem of how to clothe her family in the winter while living in poverty, and the solution she proposes involves the mother organizing collectively with other mothers to address the injustice that has caused her to be in her predicament. If the narrative attacking Black children attacks the social, biological and intellectual production of Black life, the stories that will produce survival require a queer revision of the act of mothering. How, she asks, will Black writers participate in the mothering of Black children as a collective? In Chapter 2 I elaborate on the position of poor Black mothers as deviant intellectuals, criminalized for nurturing a population that exceeds and threatens the reproduction of the labor force and the reproduction of the narratives that enforce the capitalist status quo. As I argue in Chapter 2, mothering is one name for the means through which survival can be produced. Mothering is a queer and threatened act, the labor of both rejecting the killing narrative and creating new terms.

Love as Lifeforce: The Creative Spirit and Children's Literature

Jordan creates these new terms by offering a rigorous explication of the relationship between love and survival. As part of her decades-long courtship with UC Berkeley where she would finally teach and implement her transformative Poetry for the People curriculum (more in Chapter 3: "Teaching Us Questions), June Jordan gave a lecture on "The Creative Spirit and Children's Literature."⁷⁸ This lecture builds upon her work to distinguish the meaning and means of survival as an imaginative literary practice and distills those principles of accountability to youth and the planet into loving terms for a belief system, a definition of creativity designed to create survival. She starts

⁷⁸ June Jordan. "The Creative Spirit and Children's Literature," June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 55 Folder 16, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

her talk by using a full page to state her belief system about what she calls the “creative spirit” of the universe that we can and should make manifest in our lives. “Love is lifeforce.”⁷⁹ She begins, “I believe that the creative spirit is nothing less than love made manifest...Love is opposed to the death of the spirit. Love is opposed to the death of the dream. Love is opposed to the delimiting of possibilities of experience.” This declaration and definition of “love”, an even harder term to define than survival, anticipates the responses that the audience at Howard University will give to her “Where is the Love?” conference paper, alongside Barbara Smith’s advancing of a “lesbian” reading practice in “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism.”⁸⁰ Love, she emphasizes, has infinite manifestations and defies the social reproduction of a limited range of experiences. Love, she affirms, is energy and purpose, a standard to aspire to through life. She ends her page long declaration with the words, “That is what I believe.”⁸¹

Having put this belief system in place, Jordan goes on to contrast the miraculous presence of love’s creative life-force, a resource for inspiration that seems to transcend the individual, with the task that she is called to use her access to inspiration for, “ a most sobering task, the task of survival.”⁸² She goes on to offer a political definition of survival, contoured by and distinguished from her more mystical definition of love as lifeforce. Survival is the political, specific and tangible manifestation of love:

And because we coexist on a planet long defiled by habits opposite to the creative spirit, habits opposite to love, it seems to me that the task of surviving and/or the task of providing for the survival of those who are not as strong as I am, is a political undertaking. Vast changes will have to be

⁷⁹ Ibid, 1.

⁸⁰ Barbara Smith. “Toward at Black Feminist Criticism,” in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 3-21.

⁸¹ “The Creative Spirit and Children’s Literature,” 1.

⁸² Ibid, 2.

envisioned and pursued if any, let alone all, of us will survive the destructive traditions of our species.⁸³

Survival, Jordan explains requires us “to make love powerful” as a resource through which all people, and in particular people who are currently oppressed, can fulfill their purposes, and fully participate in the lifeforce that is love.⁸⁴ For Jordan, making love powerful is a democratic transformation of a collective relationship to the planet, and is especially well placed when practiced for and with children. Because, she explains:

Children are the ways that the world begins again and again. If you fasten upon that concept of their promise, you will have trouble finding anything more awesome and also anything more extraordinary exhilarating, than the opportunity or/and the obligation to nurture a child into his or her own freedom (sic).⁸⁵

This work, of “nutur(ing) a child into his or her own freedom” is a queer mothering practice, a possible way for the world to begin again without the destructive habitual relationship that threatens the survival of life on the planet. It is mothering as a creative practice that Jordan exhorts adults generally and children’s authors specifically to engage in responsibly and *responsively*. This intergenerational work reframes the future as a collaborative project in which accountability to youth can and should have a transformative impact on the way adults view their own lives. Jordan explains,

And I want these things for children because I want these things for myself and for all of us, because unless we embody these attitudes and precepts as

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 3.

the governing rules of our love, and of our political commitment to survive, we will love in vain, and we will certainly not survive.⁸⁶

The purpose of love then, is survival, and survival is a political commitment to live past and against the disaster of capitalism's waste and greed. Therefore the standard that Jordan holds children literature to is radical love.

Survival, in June Jordan's insistent and loving polemics on the requirements of children's literature in the 1970's is a queer project. It rejects the social reproduction of an unsustainable global configuration and demands the transformation of what is possible and imaginable through a radical ethic of love. The project of children's literature, towards survival, is a queer pedagogy, an intergenerative approach that would teach children and their teachers to desire difference, in the form a different world. Jordan's persistent use of survival as a key word in her essays on children's literature refracts her transformative approach to the term, emphasizing, like only polemic can, what survival is *not* and demanding a queer erotics for the love we deserve. We must desire something other. Audre Lorde's poetic use of the term "survival" in an overlapping period with Jordan, offers a theorization of what an "other" relationship of survival might look like, what form of language can point to and produce the desired relation.

A Poetics of Survival: An Etymology of Survival in the Poetry of Audre Lorde

"I found myself worrying about whether or not she'd/we'd survive.
(Which for Black/Poet/Women is synonymous with grow.)"
-Audre Lorde *Preface to Pat Parker's Movement in Black* 1989

⁸⁶ Ibid, 10.

In this section I will trace Audre Lorde's use of the word survival in her best known and lesser known poems in order to offer an alternative evocative function of survival, a poetic (after)life for the word survival in which the use of the word pushes against and transforms the language that makes it legible. As the epigraph above demonstrates, Audre Lorde believed that the term "survival" exceeded itself in the work of *Black/Poet/Women*. In her preface to Black lesbian feminist poet Pat Parker's collection *Movement in Black*, three short years before her own death, and immediately after Parker's death from breast cancer, Lorde remembers worrying about whether it was possible for poets with the stance and positionality they shared to survive. Lorde's is an intersubjective assertion survival happens on the boundary between "she'd" and "we'd." Lorde inserts a parenthetical that immediately redefines survival as not merely the absence of death but the presence of growth. Survival in this case requires the ability to grow past an individual body, which is why miraculously, Lorde can end her preface declaring that Parker's poetry proclaims "I HAVE SURVIVED!" "Survival" itself is a key word in the lexicon of Lorde's legacy, but it does not go without saying that Lorde's poetry survives at all. Just as the essays by Jordan discussed above were published (with the exception of *The Creative Spirit and Children's Literature*), but not anthologized or collected as part of Jordan's body of non-fiction work, the majority of the poems by Audre Lorde that I will read here, though published, have been under-studied. Though Lorde survives in activist communities as an icon for political approach built on an intersectional analysis, and her essays are sometimes understood to be key texts in women's studies, Lorde's poetry is rarely read or taught in English departments. As Megan Obourn suggests, Lorde's status as an icon operates through the "hegemonic discourse of US liberal multiculturalism," a situation that makes it more convenient to

avoid rigorous study of Lorde's poetic work (similar to liberal multiculturalism's use of Martin Luther King Jr. that allows for the quoting of only a few of his many speeches.)⁸⁷ I agree with Obourn that reading Lorde's poetry closely disrupts the liberal context in which she is embraced and undertheorized. Continuing the work of the very few critics who have focused on Lorde's poetry I argue here that Lorde's uses of the poetic form offer an intervention into the meaning of survival and mothering, the key theoretical terms of this dissertation.

"A Litany for Survival," one of Lorde's best-known poems, has fulfilled its own prophecy. It is literally the vehicle through which Audre Lorde's poetry survives. The poem itself has survived much more visibly than other poems in her body of work. In 1988 a radio profile created in honor of Audre Lorde's work began with the sound of drums and Lorde herself reading 'A Litany for Survival.'⁸⁸ The title of the groundbreaking biographical film about Audre Lorde's life by Ada Gay Griffin and Michele Parkerson is entitled "A Litany for Survival."⁸⁹ "A Litany for Survival" is available as a podcast on the internet.⁹⁰ At a rally mourning Amadou Diallo, entitled "A Litany for Survival," Patricia Spear Jones read the poem aloud.⁹¹ One of the sections in *Colonize This*, one of the landmark text of contemporary young radical women of color,

⁸⁷ Megan Obourn. "Audre Lorde: Trauma Theory and Liberal Multiculturalism." MELUS, Vol.30, NO. 3, Fall 2005, 220.

⁸⁸ A Radio Profile of Audre Lorde produced by Jennifer Abod. Cambridge, mass: Profile Productions, 1988, 1 hour.

⁸⁹ Ada Gay Griggin and Michele Parkerson. "A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde. Third World Newsreel, 1995.

⁹⁰ <http://thetalkingpeoplepodcast.blogspot.com/2007/11/poems-litany-for-survival-by-audre.html> (accessed 2/2/10)

⁹¹ *A Litany for Survival* was an event sponsored by ANANSI: Fiction of the African Diaspora and Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church. <http://aalbc.com/events/poet%27s.htm> (accesses 2/2/10) Spear also read Jordan's "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies at the event.

is entitled “Family and Community: A Litany for Survival.”⁹² Kara Keeling’s recent book *The Witch’s Flight* explains its stakes with an essay entitled “Another Litany for Survival.”⁹³ This poem has indeed survived in many forms and is the major poem for the continuation of Lorde’s presence in contemporary discourse. But the actual life of the word “survival” in Audre Lorde’s poetry is undertheorized and often overshadowed by the celebratory resonance of “survival” despite the haunting refrain of the poem itself, which insists “We were never meant to survive.” Here, I look at a wider set of uses of the word survival in Lorde’s poetic body of work in order to arrive at a more robust signification.

The Undead or Survival Past Reproduction: “Prologue”

Before “Litany for Survival,” Lorde was already developing a theory of intergenerationality that had less to do with the perpetuation of the past than with the speculative vision of a queer future. In “Prologue,” penned in 1971 and intentionally the last poem in her 1973 collection *From a Land Where Other People Live*, Lorde uses derivatives of the word “survival” as many times as she will in the later “Litany for Survival”, but this complex poem is much less quotable and indeed hardly ever quoted. It is a much more cumbersome work, less performative, less portable. This poem is about how Lorde will or will not be remembered, and it is a case study in the forgetting that characterizes Lorde’s literary survival. “Prologue” closes out the collection in which Broadside Press founder Dudley Randall refused to let her include the explicitly homoerotic “Love Poem,” but in the end, though “Love Poem” is more often quoted,

⁹² Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman eds. *Colonize This: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*. Emeryville: Seal Press, 2002, 1-85.

⁹³ Kara Keeling. *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, 1-10.

recycled, and remembered, “Prologue” may be the queerer text haunting this work from inside.⁹⁴ “Prologue” seeks to prepare the way for something besides itself, beside and besides poetry. The last poem in the book comes before whatever the reader will do after reading, the afterlife of a set of poems the reader has survived. Pre-textual, and post-textual at the same time, Lorde’s engagement with the form of the prologue allows her to perform a haunting act that is queerly futuristic.

Though a prologue almost always appears at the beginning of a bound text, most authors, editors and publishers admit that it is usually written after the to-be-published work is completed. The prologue is a backwards look and a warning to the reader about what is to come. The queer temporality of the prologue is a privileged standpoint. She who writes the prologue has seen what the reader has not. In the act of creating the prologue, the writer is a prophet, speaking with the authority of a pre-publication intimacy with the completed work. The prologue, “at once before and after” like the speaker Lorde’s later “Litany for Survival,” has a queer relationship to the production of the text and to the role of subjectivity within the poetic text. The prologue, queerly considered, is proof that the speaker has survived the production of the text, and though having been in some way transformed or even produced by that text, she can critique it. In this manner, Lorde’s use of form teaches us about why her poetic work is theoretically important, not just as I theorize about it, but *as theory* in and of itself. Lorde uses the prologue in order to create a speaker who can speak past her own life, and to create a text that can critique it’s own textuality from within, providing a critique of and an alternative to the reproductivity of the Black Arts Movement.

⁹⁴ Alexis De Veaux. *Warrior poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005, 129-131.

Untimely, like a prologue, the speaker in Lorde's "Prologue" is "haunted" by the first word of the poem. The poem starts

Haunted by poems beginning with I

which achieves a number of effects.⁹⁵ First, the speaker asserts that poems can do the work of haunting. Later we will find that the poet speaker is "in a echoless coffin" and unable to see her own reflection, a vampire perspective.⁹⁶ Haunted and haunting, this poem is for and from the undead, those who survive death in life, faced with the limits of subjectivity. This is a particularly important stance for Lorde as a female and lesbian poet within the Black Arts Poetry movement to make because as Sharon Holland argues in *Raising the Dead* the threat of the "BLACK FEMALE" ghost is a projection of the transformative potential of the outcast, disenfranchised onto a fear of death.⁹⁷ Homosexuality specifically in this case, criminalized as the passageway for the Black community into death (the accusation to which Jordan responds to above) reveals that the speaker haunts the community with her alternative relational and poetic structure, her dangerous subjectivity. It is the limit of the subjective, "poems beginning with I" that characterizes the speaker's horror.

Lorde's use of "I" is a reminder of the identity-based poems that characterize Lorde's colleagues in the Black Arts Movement. This critique is boldly launched in a

⁹⁵ Originally published in Audre Lorde. *From a Land Where Other People Live*. Chicago: Broadside Press, 1973, 43-46. Reprinted in Audre Lorde. *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 96-98.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 96.

⁹⁷ Sharon Holland. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 2.

book published by Broadside Press, a staple press of the Black Arts Movement poetry industry. From the beginning, the poem puts itself in conversation with other poems and distances itself from the declaratory stance of many of the poems that were popular in the Black arts publishing industry. The work of Black poets testifying, declaring their humanity, their first-person stances on life has created a position that haunts the poet who might seek to speak outside of such a straightforward concept of subjectivity. One way to understand the haunted position of this poem is the space between orality and textuality within a Black Arts Poetry movement. Distinct from the dominant literary market, Black Arts Poetry imagined itself to be more live, more oral.⁹⁸ The poems were performative, referencing a tradition of Black preachers in storefronts and on corners and directed towards a living audience preceding contemporary hip-hop and spoken word to come. The very name of Broadside Press refers to a strategy of passing out and posting poems, with the intention of making political Black poetry part of the everyday lives of Black people. However, Lorde's other poetic influences were long dead British poets whose words came to her only as text, and whose poetic force was in their projection of written poetry across time, reproduced through an educational apparatus and a literary industry that kept such work, from dead poets, alive, for silent audiences of readers to revere. The position of Lorde's poetry is queer in either context. The speaker in "Prologue," haunted, undead and haunting, takes on the characterization of whiteness,

⁹⁸ For example in his 1963 essay "Expressive Language," Amiri Baraka states first (in the very first sentence in fact) that "Speech is the effective form of a culture," and later that "Context...is dramatically social." Further, in 1972 in "Some Reflections on a Black Aesthetic" Larry Neal emphasized this aurality when he describes the 'Black Arts Movement/Black Art Aesthetic' as "more concerned with vibration of the word than the word itself."

or the consent to whiteness as death in the Black arts lexicon.⁹⁹ Instead of consenting to the binary that the architects of the Black arts movement created, defining “Black poetry” against “white poetry” and even more forcefully against “colored or negro poetry” that aspired towards whiteness, I want argue that Lorde’s poetry creates a speaker that is at once present, (a)live and already past, textually embalmed. Thus the status of the speaker or writer, the “I” in the poem, is it stake.

The opening line of “Prologue” makes this tension explicit, but it is not the first place this tension emerges in Lorde’s work. In one of her first published and best-known poems “Coal” Lorde navigates the question of whether the poet is *present* in time or in space. Much beloved, and commonly understood to be, like many of the poems in the Black Arts poetry movement, a definition and affirmation of Blackness as a valid place from which to speak, “Coal” is and is not a “poem beginning with I.”

“Coal,” published in Lorde’s first collection *The First Cities* is one of her best remembered poems, and one of the poems that put her on the map in the Black Arts industry. As Megan Obourn points out, the poem is often read as an affirmation of Blackness.¹⁰⁰ Centering on the relationship between coal and diamonds, the poem includes content like “I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside,” a statement that resonates with the emerging cultural nationalist idea of Blackness that characterized most of the Black Arts movement. Ultimately this is about the racialized, differential value of words,

⁹⁹ For example in his “Poem for HalfWhite College Students,” Amiri Baraka asserts an authentic relationship to language and life, “How do you sound, your words, are they /yours? The ghost you see in the mirror, is it really you...” (Amiri Baraka. *The Baraka Reader*. Berkeley: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1999, 220.)

¹⁰⁰ Megan Obourn. “Audre Lorde: Trauma Theory and Liberal Multiculturalism.” MELUS, Vol.30, NO. 3, Fall 2005, 220.

*How a sound comes into a word, coloured
By who pays what for speaking.*

this poem lives on the line between words as rhythmic sound, and words as meaning within an economy reproduced by the differential value that the reproduction of racism makes possible.¹⁰¹ The word “I” then, is particularly important in this context of “who pays what for speaking” because it establishes the authority and either the proximity or distance of the speaker. And “Coal” may or may not be a poem “beginning with I.”

Starting

*I
Is the total Black*

Coal introduces ambiguity into the essential statement of Blackness that the Black Arts Movement requires. Maybe “I” is the speaker, speaking in the Black vernacular: “I is the total Black, being spoken...” Maybe “I” is a numeral introducing an unpunctuated question: 1. is the total Black being spoken from the earth’s inside(?). Maybe the numeral “I” is still a subject position: “one is the total Black” distancing the speaker from the subjectivity of Blackness. The multiple possible readings, achieved by a simple line break after “I,” offer a critique of the relationship between these three possibilities. The fact that the poem *may* start in the Black vernacular but may not, means that the use of the Black vernacular is being called up for critique, especially since Lorde uses an antiquated (or contemporary British) spelling of the word “coloured” in

¹⁰¹ Audre Lorde. “Coal,” in *The Collected Poetry of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 6. Originally published in *The First Cities*. 1968.

the same stanza.¹⁰² What is the relationship to language implied and inhabited by the Black poet? “Who pays what for speaking”? The line break that causes the ambiguity, the dis/ease and unpredictability at the beginning of “Coal” seems to suggest that the relationship to language and audience implied by the Black Arts context is in some way broken. I would suggest that for Lorde, publishing and marketing herself in a Black Arts literary context, that break is apparent. While Lorde published and won awards with Broadside Poets, the most recognized press within the Black Arts Movement, her editor, Dudley Randall censored her homoerotic poetry, and the marketing material of the press always tried to fit her into the frame of the Black cultural nationalist mother that she was not.¹⁰³

In “Prologue” then, when the poet admits to being “Haunted by poems beginning with I,” Lorde’s own poem, “Coal” and its role in the Black Arts trajectory, participates in this haunting.

*Haunted by poems beginning with I
seek out those who I love who are deaf
to whatever does not destroy
or curse the old ways that did not serve us.¹⁰⁴*

Like in “Coal”, the “I” in ‘Prologue’ signifies multiply. It is the context that the speaker comes from, describing the poems that precede it in the emergent Black Arts Poetry movement, and it is the beginning of a new line “I/ seek out those whom I love who are deaf.” As Amitai Vai-ram points out this use of *apo koinou* the double function

¹⁰² In her revision of this poem in *Undersong* it is interesting to note that Lorde capitalizes the word Black, a political choice that applies to all of her later poetry. (Lorde, *Undersong*, 110)

¹⁰³ Broadside Press Collection, Box 1, Folder 1. Woodruff Manuscript and Rare Book Library, Emory University. This will be discussed in further detail in chapter 3 “Difficult Miracle.”

¹⁰⁴ “Prologue,” 96.

of one word into two different units of syntax, disrupts the unity of the subject. “I” is the object and the subject here, the objectified subjectivity for which the “I” proves inadequate. Note that the action of the first stanza is described as an inverse of something else, seeking those “who *are* deaf to what does *not* destroy,” the repeated “who,” searching for a compounded visual and sonic absence, is a ghostly act. The broken alliterative “d” in the poem (deaf, does not destroy/did not serve...followed up in the rest of the stanza, with “dying,” “distinction,” “death,” and “dream”) acts as a drumming in the mouth calling up ghosts.¹⁰⁵ The haunting and the seeking here come from the speaker’s description of the horror of reproducing identity. Like the line break in “Coal,” the line break across which the “I” spills, says that the relationship between the speaker and the subjectivity implied by the act of speaking/writing a Black Arts poem is broken, and ruptures certain speakers. The queerness of the speaker breaks her apart from the assumptions of her audience.

*I speak without concern for the accusations
that I am too much or too little woman
that I am too Black or too white*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ In her revision in *Undersong* Lorde emphasizes this drumming “d” by removing “their” changing

*choked into silence by icy distinction
their death rattles blind curses*

to

*choked into silence by icy distinction
death rattles blind curses*

a move that expands death beyond the icy distinguished poets to its wider domain within the generally haunting of the poem. Audre Lorde. “Prologue” in *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982, 110.

¹⁰⁶ “Prologue” (original), 96.

However the policing of appropriate identity politics remains a concern for the speaker, after mentioning the “terrible penalties for any difference,” the speaker reveals the ways in which community audibility seems to be contingent on the reproduction of sameness: “my own voice fades and/my brothers and sisters are leaving.”¹⁰⁷

Lorde uses word placement and repetition as formal strategies that make her tense relationship to the poet audience visible. The word “Hear,” is a somewhat doomed plea towards an audience that becomes more and more distant in time and space. As the last capitalized word in the long first stanza and the isolated first word of the second stanza the request performs the spatialization that the objectified subject needs in order to perform the critical work of addressing difference and connection across time beyond a reproductive identity politic.

*and through my lips come the voices
of the ghosts of our ancestors
living and moving among us
Hear my heart's voice as it darkens
pulling old rhythms out of the earth
that will receive this piece of me
and a piece of each one of you
when our part in history quickens again
and is over:*

*Hear
the old ways are going away
and coming back pretending change¹⁰⁸*

Lorde's formal strategies perform the proclamation of the poem. Old words go away and come back pretending change. For example, “Hear” in the transition between stanzas remains the same in capitalization and in function as the first invocation, but the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 97.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 96.

second “Hear” stands alone after a space and before the line break making the isolation of the speaker visible, and her demand that the audience “Hear” that much more necessary. Like the “old ways,” phrases repeat only slightly changed. If we look at the noun “heart” as a further repetition of the verb “hear” we can sense the emotive urgency of the request to “hear.” Tellingly, the words that repeat with slight changes are words about the distance between the speaker and the audience. For example “My brothers and sisters are leaving” becomes “are my brothers and sisters listening?” This slight transition reminds the reader that the distance between the speaker and the family, is in some ways a matter of who is willing to listen to the queer message the speaker brings. It is appropriate that these formal strategies that highlight the distance between the audience and the speaker use the familial terminology used to demarcate community within the Black Arts movement (“brothers and sisters”) because the poem seeks to put pressure on the heteropatriarchal form of the family that the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts Movement affirmed. In order to do this work, the speaker must take on a supernatural form, the vampire, the undead, and the poem itself must take on a queer form in order to provide a definition of survival that does not reproduce the heteropatriarchal family, but still asks for a form of hearing that comes from the heart.¹⁰⁹

“Prologue” is a poem about the poetic, seeking to move past the description of selves, woman, Black, white into the production of an alternative future that refuses reproduction (“deaf/to whatever does not destroy/or curse the old ways that did not serve us”), but at the same time envisions a future utopia where:

¹⁰⁹ My reading of Lorde’s supernatural intervention of the meaning is influence by the radical intervention into possible family forms that author and theorist Octavia Butler performs in her speculative novels. Creating human beings that survive past their lifetimes, or inhabit multiple bodies, Butler’s work to imagine life across time outside normative family forms is key.

*The children remain
like blades of grass over the earth
all the children are singing
louder than mourning
all their different voices sound like a raucous question
but they do not fear the blank and empty mirrors...
The time of lamentations and curses is passing.¹¹⁰*

In order to do this work, Lorde draws on the generic traditions of both horror and utopia. Generically producing horror and utopia at once, this poem, hinges on the stakes of reproduction and the possibilities of productive relationality on different terms.

Revealing the trickery through which

*the old ways are going away
and coming back pretending change
masked as denunciation and lament
masked as a choice*

Breaking the poem itself in key places, including the “I” that haunts the first line, but only becomes a subject in relation to the second line, the “Hear” that repeats across a stanza break, Lorde practices poetics as a break in the identity mirror in which the vampire cannot see herself anyway, a possibility that reflection can fail to produce identity and disrupt the integrity of the singularly embodied being instead¹¹¹:

*until our image
shatters along its fault.¹¹²*

“Our image” not “My image.” *Poetry is killing yourself*, inhabiting the coffin in this poem, *instead of your children.*¹¹³ Lorde remains haunted by a parental relationship

¹¹⁰ “Prologue” (original) 96.

¹¹¹ in a later revision of “Prologue” for *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised* lorde introduces a break in the middle of that same line.

¹¹² “Prologue” (original), 96.

that she survives, becoming a monster. The central passages of the poem go back in time, describing the poet's childhood, revealing the bankruptcy of survival, if survival is the reproduction of fear and internalized racism in the parental relationship.

*Yet when I was a child
whatever my mother thought would mean **survival**
made her try to beat me whiter every day
and even now the colour of her bleached ambition
still forks throughout my words
but I **survived**
and didn't I **survive** confirmed
to teach my children where her errors lay...*

Lorde links her mother's abusive practices to a definition of survival that would have required Lorde to become "whiter every day," and transforms the definition of survival through repetition. Lorde has survived past the context of that survival, like a prologue she is able to critique and reframe the context of her own life, because she has survived past her mother's definition of survival. This frames her later suggestion in "A Litany for Survival" that "those of us who learn to be afraid with our mother's milk...were never meant to survive." Survival moves from the noun to the past tense to the present tense. As Lorde teaches the reader and her own children the errors in her mother's definition of survival, she enacts another form of survival for her mother, while interrupting the social reproduction of internalized racism. Interestingly, one of the few end rhymes in this poem hints that there are traces of reproduction even in the act of resistance. "Whiter every day" finds an echo five lines later in "where her errors lay" with an almost identical end rhyme and with a trochee rhythm that reverses the

¹¹³ Audre Lorde. "Power" in *Between Ourselves*, 1976. Reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 215.

heartbeat of the iambic with the tripping rhythm of repeating childhood lessons as a parent. And the speaker admits that her mother's internalized racism still survives in the "colour" of her own (British) word choices, while asserting that her mother contradicts, at the same time through "loving me into her *bloods Black bone*," the mother is the source of the rhythmic alliterative Black authenticity that places Lorde in a Black Arts context to begin with.¹¹⁴ Lorde continues after two stanzas

*My mother survives now
through more than chance or token.
Although she will read what I write with embarrassment...*

"My mother" in both cases is the sign for the productive need to intervene in the meaning of survival in the context of violence. In her revision of the poem in *Undersong*, Lorde takes out the "now," leaving the stronger declarative "My mother survives."¹¹⁵ And the act of the poem makes this production visible and offers a rival productivity. Lorde as vampire, mother, poet redefines survival to be inclusive of death and transformation in order to barter the utopian future where non-linear children "like blades of grass over the earth" disperse without the requirement of patriarchal family or reproduction. Lorde herself offers her own death, after her undead prologue, choosing the printed alternative of poetry over the inscribed bodily and disciplinary reproduction of self through the social reproduction of children, offering:

*my children do not need to relive my past
in strength nor in confusion
nor care that their holy fires
may destroy more than my failures*

¹¹⁴ More on Lorde's complex positioning within the Black arts movement in *Difficult Miracle*.

¹¹⁵ *Undersong*, 112.

*Somewhere in the landscape past noon
I shall leave a dark print of the me that I am
and who I am not
etched in a shadow of angry and remembered loving¹¹⁶*

In this theory of disembodied survival the temporality of light offers a good death. At first the poet speaks at noon “without shadow”, but finally her words become “etched in shadow” written, but dependent on memory, a queer reading practice that may or may not be accepted. Lorde distinguishes between her survival in writing and the perpetuation of her own consciousness, because whatever transformative future occurs she will be

*none the wiser
for they will have buried me
either in shame
or in peace.¹¹⁷*

“Prologue” is a precursor to the statement we need. Prologue is a death poem. “Our poets are dying” the poet tells us and “I hear even my own voice becoming a pale strident whisper.”¹¹⁸ The “Prologue” is the poet’s intergenerative act, not to perpetuate her own life, but to imagine utopia instead of experiencing it, such that that the children “remain,” but “do not need to relive,” the violence that makes her own survival relevant.

And queerly, (though not nearly to the extent of “A Litany for Survival,”) “Prologue” though rarely read, did survive. The speaker in “Prologue” is a poet, is a parent, is a vampire. And “Prologue” itself survives as the epigraph to Lorde’s mentee Jewelle Gomez’s Black lesbian vampire novel *The Gilda Stories*:

At night sleep locks me into an echoless coffin

¹¹⁶ “Prologue,” 98.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 96.

*sometimes at noon I dream
there is nothing to fear.¹¹⁹*

Sixteen years after Lorde's death Jewelle Gomez reminisced on Lorde's influence on her own best known work *The Gilda Stories* and revealed that in through to the vampire subjectivity of poem, Lorde's influence on Gomez's form survived queerly. It was Audre Lorde, Gomez remembers, who insisted that what Gomez offered as a collection of short stories was indeed a novel about a long vampire life where Gilda inhabits more than one body and multiple centuries. The model of survival within death that Lorde theorized in 'Prologue' survives with difference in Gomez's contribution to the Black lesbian feminist literary context.

*Somewhere in the landscape past noon
I shall leave a dark print
of the me that I am
and who I am not
etched in a shadow of angry and remembered loving
and their ghosts will move*

This poem is a "Prologue" to Lorde's own statement that "death is not the enemy."¹²⁰ This poem is "Prologue" to this moment, where a girl sits queerly desiring dead poets, playing with words to quicken questions that she wants to look for in the mouth of an elder, to learn from someone's face. This is "angry and remembered loving" because I would rather touch Audre Lorde's hand than paste together these best guesses at what her structure and form might mean now. This is "angry and remembered loving," inspired by the fact that Black feminist literary practice was never meant to

¹¹⁹ Epigraph in Jewelle Gomez. *The Gilda Stories: A Novel*. Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1991.

¹²⁰ See Audre Lorde *The Cancer Journal*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1980,

survive. The short lives and threatened constituencies of radical Black feminists require the queer definition of survival that I seek to remember in this and the following poems.

Infinitive or Past the Human: “The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches”

In *New York City Head Shop and Museum* Audre Lorde wrote “The Brown Menace Or poem To the Survival of Roaches,” a harder to stomach, harder to quote poem about survival when compared to the later “Litany.”¹²¹ Lorde makes the brave move of literalizing the underlying metaphor of the dominant narrative of racism, underneath the dismantling of welfare and the coerced sterilization of Black women and women of color in the global south. Using the figure of the roach, Lorde brings the rarely admitted narrative of public policy into view: the description of the persistence of Black life, unbound by the limits of the patriarchal family or the internalized values of capitalism is what everyone fears it actually is... invincible vermin, roaches running all over, dirtying everything.

Lorde published “The Brown Menace” in her 1974 collection of poems *New York Head Shop and Museum* during a time when police murders of young Black men were highly visible and the New York City and State were engaged in a widescale response to the evacuation of white ethnics from New York City and the increased population of Black and Latino migrants from the Caribbean and the US South. In the eyes of the police department and the city government, New York was infested. Police violence and

¹²¹ Although recently Cherrie Moraga has publicly quoted this poem, transforming it into its own litany in honor of Audre Lorde and other poisoned feminists of color. The refrain of her talk at Sister Comrade, an evening in celebration of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde at the First Congregational Church in Oakland, CA on November 3rd 2007 was “Go ahead. Call me roach.”

the cuts in city services in Black and Latino neighborhoods were justified based on this logic.¹²² Seeking to bring this latent justification for the economic and police enforced extermination that people of color were facing in New York City in the 1970's into view, Lorde creates a speaker in the position of the most despised creature, the brown cockroach, daring the reader to

*Call me
your deepest urge
toward survival.*¹²³

The roach/speaker in this poem redefines survival, building on scientific predictions that roaches would survive nuclear holocaust, outliving humans for at least as long as they predated homo sapiens. The roach, the speaker of this poem reminds us, will survive the social world that we seek to exclude them from in the present. The intersubjectivity suggested by the constant reflection in this poem means that it cannot only be addressed to the obvious villains, white police officers who kill Black children, or even liberal organizers who fund birth control clinics in Black neighborhoods.

*I am you
in your most deeply cherished nightmare.*

There is another extermination here...that comes from inside. Naming

*your itch to destroy
the indestructible
part of yourself*

Lorde's roach speaker could just as well be talking to Black men who enact or condone violence against Black women, characterizing this violence against women

¹²² More on the details of city services and police violence in Chapter 2: Teaching Us Questions.

¹²³ Audre Lorde. "Brown Menace of Poem to the Survival of Roaches," in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. 149-150. (Originally published in *New York Head Shop and Museum*. Chicago: Broadside Press, 1974.

within the Black community as an attack against the survival of Blackness, the attempt to destroy the Black mother, the survivor of the repeated violence against and within the Black community. That “itch” to destroy is the false “need” that Lorde mentions in her work *Need: A Chorale for Black Women’s Voices*.¹²⁴

She goes on to accuse

*with hate
you learn to honor me
by imitation
as I alter—
through your greedy preoccupations
through your kitchen wars
and your poisonous refusal—
to survive.*

*To survive.
Survive.*

Survive, in the infinitive and then the command form echoes here, describing an oppositional futurity in which oppression itself, the dependence of a society on a hated other even within the self, the death threat itself, is an indelible impact, an unavoidable reminder of the need for transformation. In a later revision of the poem for Lorde’s *Undersong* a collection of her revisions of her published poems that Lorde herself compiled, the last “Survive” in the poem is actually “To survive” keeping the infinitive and eschewing the command. The poem itself survives in both forms: initially as imperative and finally as potential.

Lorde’s characterization of survival in this poem moves beyond the context of biological life into an analysis of impact. Lorde’s move in this poem to align with the

¹²⁴ extended reading of *Need* in Chapter 3: Difficult Miracle

cockroach, the absolute other¹²⁵ questions the category of the human, arguing that survival in general and human survival are not the same project and highlighting the way in which the discourse of humanity is particularized, operating through a dependence on a dehumanized other. The poem provokes a question about form, both biologically and poetically.

If the poetry of Audre Lorde survives in this dissertation, it is not merely as evidence. In fact, it may be necessary to the survival of this poetry that it not fully offer itself up to my reading. The poem, an experiment in form, is not equivalent to its content. Which means a responsible intergenerative reading must understand this poem as more than an example of what one Black feminist would say about roaches and extermination in the early 1970's. This poem, as an intervention in form, precedes Lorde's later evocation of the litany, but instead of a call and response, here there is only a call that brings the muted structure of dialectical humanism into view. The command "call me" repeated three times in the opening stanza and introducing the second stanza is an echo and a reproduction, mimicking the way a humanism defined and haunted by its other is reproduced through a repeated, even rhythmic naming of that other.

*Call me
your deepest urge
toward survival
call me
and my brothers and sisters
in the sharp smell of your refusal
call me
roach and presumptuous
nightmare on your white pillow
your itch to destroy
the indestructible*

¹²⁵ So much so that in the Rwandan genocide the Tutsi ideologues consistently referred to the Hutu's they would attempt to exterminate as "cockroaches."

part of yourself.

*Call me
your own determination
in the most detestable shape
you can be become
friend of your image within me
I am you*

The structure of repetition Lorde employs here is instructive. Besides the repeated “Call me,” and the key word “survive,” Lorde repeats only the words “nightmare,” “refusal” and derivations of “you,” especially the possessive “your.” In fact, in the revised version in *Undersong* Lorde takes out the first possessive “your.” Maybe she thought it was too much. But then again maybe not, in the revised version she takes out the “into” that precedes three of the “your” statements, which seems to highlight the possessive even more. If we take the description of the “nightmare” other out and look at the skeleton created by the repeated words that Lorde uses to frame and punctuate the originally published version of the poem we have

*Call me
your
survival
call me
your refusal
call me
nightmare your
your
yourself*

*Call me
your
you
your
me
you
your
nightmare
you*

*me
your
your
your
you
me
your
your refusal
to survive.*

*To survive.
Survive.*

If we do the violence of taking out the details and look simply at the framework offered here through repetition, a few things stand out. First the second stanza become a queer echo of the first stanza, but haunting, in the stutter of “your/you/your/you,” and the eventual repetition of the possessive “your/your/your/your,” becomes possession two senses. First, the presence of the other that threatens humanism operates through property, the invading other is all over the rightful property of the human, disrupting its propriety “presumptuous/ nightmare on your white pillow.” The roach troubles the property owner’s desire and ability to secure her property “scuttling through the painted cracks/you create to admit me.” Property is the *form* through which the “human” is haunted by its contingency, represented by the radical other. Property is a form of life. “Property” describes a manifestation of life, as in the properties or characteristics possessed by a particular species. And property is a pedagogical form, through which we learn to value life differentially.

But another form of possession, in the spiritual sense emerges as the form and the result of Lorde’s incantation (“call me”). Through the spell worked in the poem, the radical other inhabits not only the privately owned spaces of the human audience, but

the contingent subject itself. The structure of possession appears in the passages describing the intimate learning enacted through repression, “The most destestable shape/ you can become/ friend of your image/within me/I am you” and “you learn to honor me by imitation as I alter.” Like the Orishas that Lorde will explicitly reference in her later poetry, the non-human speaker of the poem compels the “human” reader to embody her difference. As within the context of spirit possession, the human form becomes just one of the shapes that another energy can inhabit, a medium through which to alter a trajectory of survival that does not start or end with the human. Therefore the form of this poem critiques and transforms the form of the human, pointing out that the definition of the human within the specific form of capitalism, i.e. the human as a form of property instead of a form of life or spirit, is incompatible with survival, and that repeating “possession” a central term of capitalism, offers another meaning, another form in which life can persist.

Haunted Audience: “A Litany for Survival”

Therefore, when Lorde publishes “A Litany Survival” she does not mean survival as merely the persistence of animated life in one body. Survival is a collective, trans-species phenomenon that challenges individual embodiment. The poetic possibility created in “The Brown Menace” is what has made “A Litany for Survival” so attractive to embattled collectives who repeat the “for those of us” the “for all of us” and the perpetual “we” addressed in “A Litany for Survival,” creating collectivity where there was only exclusion.¹²⁶ The poem begins

For those of us who live at the shoreline

¹²⁶ Audre Lorde. “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Collected Poetry of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 255. Originally published in *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978, 31.

*standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone...¹²⁷*

Already those who understand themselves as “alone” are hailed as multiple parts of a larger collective “those of us.” Even those lines of the poem, while not connected by end-rhyme or rhythmic repetition, are connected by alliteration that brings the lines together. “shoreline” meets “standing.” And the alliterative threading continues, “constant/crucial/cannot” “dreams/doorways/dawns” “before breed bread, and so on. The way that we were “imprinted with fear” has everything to do with a narrative of isolation, individual failure and expendability. Fear is a pedagogy deployed to reproduce abjection. “Learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk” once again reminds us that the condition of the mother is present in the narrative of naturalized oppression. M. Jacqui Alexander follows Lorde with her own observation that women workers organizing in sweatshops in the global south have reimagined “survival” as “collective self-consciousness.”¹²⁸ Furthermore the collective “those of us” of this poem is diasporic

*For those of us who live at the shoreline
on the constant edges of decision*

and homeless

who love in doorways coming and going

and untimely

at once before and after

and utopist

*seeking a now that can breed
futures*

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Alexander, 12

*like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours*

But survival is not victory in this poem. The description of survival in the refrain fills every “when” with “we are afraid.” Survival becomes not only the persistence of life, but life as the persistence of fear. But the “triumph of the poem” is not deferred, it is “this instant.” Lorde completes the collectivization moving from “for those of us” to

*For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.*

This poem does not predict survival or celebrate victory. It marks the unlikely persistence of that which was never meant to continue, opening a need for active language and untimeliness. “We were never meant to survive” could refer to the enslavement of Africans in the Caribbean, forced to work themselves to death such that their labor was replaced by new imported shipments, not reproduced. It could refer to the bankruptcy of mere survival, insisting, “all of us” were meant for more than this. It could, referring back to “The Brown Menace” disrupt the fantasy of human immortality, restating the inevitability of death. It could offer an intervention into meaning itself such that “meant to survive” offers a failed description, characterized by fear, inadequate to the “crucial” “edges of decision” that those of us “who stand on the shoreline” “in doorways” or at other marginalized crisis positions inhabit. Survival, something that was never meant to happen, can describe the deviant persistence of Blackness past its usefulness as a category through which to stabilize slavery. It can describe the position of feminized warriors forgotten because their battles were not valorized in a history of masculinist race struggles. Lorde closes the poem with the injunction

*So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

Speaking is privileged over what was “meant,” a lesson we learn through the process of remembering. “Better to speak” insists that something else can be produced and must be produced if we remember what has come before. And indeed the survivors of the Black power and Black arts movement need this language of survival. Survivor’s guilt burdens the tongues of elders who seem almost ashamed that they did not die for their people. Young activists who still invoke and praise the memories of Malcolm, X, Huey Newton and Fred Hampton have no idea that leaders like Mae Mallory and Janet Cyril (who started and ran the Black Panther Party Free Breakfast Program in New York City) and other women who literally formed the backbone of the aptly named Black Panther Survival Programs and other Black power activities slowly die in poverty with poor healthcare every single year. *We were never meant to survive*, which is another way of saying the *meaning* of survival does not signify in the context of Black life. *Meaning*, we literally have no way to understand, or even to see this survival. The survival of Black people, even Black visionaries, is not something that has a language. How is it that Rosa Parks lived in poverty all those years while we were building museums for Martin Luther King Jr.? Black death signifies. Black survival is another thing.

In order to continue the work of creating a definition of survival that can do the work of describing life, under the pressure of Black death, Lorde is again working on the level of form. Using a litany, a form of prayer consisting of a series of petitions, Lorde addresses her supplication not to a god, but rather to an audience of her own making.

The structure of the poem is an argument, so distinct that I was able to use this poem to teach undergraduates how to write an argumentative essay. Oversimplified for my pedagogical purposes, one description of the function of each stanza could read:

1. Who we are and what brings us together “for those us”
2. The problem we face “for by this weapon”
3. How we feel about it “we are afraid”
4. The conclusion “so it is better to speak”

The penultimate stanza of the poem describes the subjective situation of the audience that the first stanza convened.

*And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

The refrain “we are afraid,” the consistent ontology of every situation for oppressed people, provides a punctuation across the different times referenced in the stanza, starting with the structure of the day, sunrise and sunset. The repetition of “we are afraid” at the end of every other line creates a rhyme structure and performs the reproduction of abjection over time through oppression. The repetition of “we are afraid” is more apparent, especially in the many spoken performances of the poem, but it

is haunting repetition of the word “when” every other line, that provides the key to Lorde’s intervention into the meaning of survival. The first line begins with “And” connecting to the assertion that “We were never meant to survive,” but through the center of the stanza the word “when” starts every other line. “When” is a marker of repetitive time, time that is repetitive because of the social reproduction of the situation of oppression. But if we understood that repeating “when” to be a question, challenging the inevitability of it’s own repetition (when?/when?/when?) we might understand the role that a poetic intervention into time plays in the generation of a definition of survival that does not consent to traditions of violence and oppression. If we were to consider the end of that structure of repetition to be a stopping point we can see a 14 line non-sonnet

*and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard*

The last set of lines marks the movement of the “when” from the beginning of the line to the inside, preceded by the breath “and” again here, and then in the set of lines, that actually does end the stanza, which offer a counter-argument after a break in the repeating structure

*nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

the “but” places the “when” under the pressure of a critical relationship. And the true refrain of the poem “we were never meant to survive” is a critical relationship to time.

What if we were to understand survival, not as mere persistence, but as a critical relationship to time in which in which forms of life, practiced by oppressed people, challenge the structure of time itself by defying the social reproduction of their own fear?

If that is the case, then I offer one example of the survival of the poem “A Litany for Survival” in the life of a Black feminist community building project, queerly and intergenerationally related to Lorde’s project, and the definition of survival, published by Lorde in 1978, necessary for the lessons of 1979 mentioned in the introduction and present in the work I am doing now. Within UBUNTU, a women of color and survivor-led coalition to end gendered violence, located in Durham, North Carolina, the poem “Litany for Survival” has a palpable life.¹²⁹ The line “it is better to speak” was the motto of the group, which was convened as a space of healing and empowerment, aligned on the belief that speaking out against sexual violence is a key element of creating a just society. The Artistic Response committee of the group, of which I was the first co-chair with scholar and performance artist Ebony Noelle Golden, engaged in a full performative and pedagogical relationship to the poem. Using an emergent technology of interactive poetry, the collective performed poems by radical Black feminists at the public library, on college campuses, in community centers at conferences and in chapels. The performative style emphasized echo and collaboration, so that even if the poem had been written as a statement from one speaker (which it was not), the voice of the poem was multiplied among the performers and scattered across the rooms. The performers never stayed on stage, most times they ignored stages if they were available; the idea was for the words of each poem to come from inside the audience, providing a transition

¹²⁹ See Alexis Pauline Gumbs. “The Life of a Poem: Audre Lorde’s ‘A Litany for Survival’ in Post-Lacrosse Durham” in *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning and Community Literacy*. Vol. 7 no. 3, 2008.

between the normative silence about sexual violence and framing the audience members as the speakers to come. Then the poems were transformed into call and response exercises, through which each audience revised and rewrote and inhabited the poems in order to describe their own experiences and visions. Our performances of “A Litany for Survival” drew on Audre Lorde’s choice to convene an eclectic audience connected through shared experiences of marginalization and oppression in order to create poetic montages. We added poems that we ourselves had written, dedicated to political prisoners and people living in exile, dedicated to elders in our own families, dedicated to our little sisters. *For all of us.* As a key component of the performances, we printed the poem on worksheets that prompted participants to write their own invocations and definitions of survival and to make their own conclusions. Our understanding of Lorde’s intervention into the language of survival is dynamic, meaning that the continued life of her poem requires critical engagement and continued reinvention of the terms of that survival, because the term, and the poem are not products owned by Lorde; they are technologies of sharing.

In 2007 in response to the publicized sexual violence against Black women in the Dunbar Village gang rape and the rape and torture of Meagan Williams, a group of young Black feminists created a youtube video and blog instigating viral campaign to raise awareness about violence against women of color called Be Bold Be Red, encouraging all people who agreed to stand against gendered and racialized violence to wear red on October 31st. Rallies of women of color and allies wearing red emerged in Detroit, Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City and many other places. Women of color around the world posted pictures of themselves wearing red on their blogs and posted essays about “Why I

am Wearing Red?”¹³⁰ At the different rallies on in many online locations people shared Lorde’s Litany and a revised version specific to the campaign called “Out of the Silence We Come: A Litany.” Like UBUNTU’s work, the Be Bold Be Red Campaign identified itself as a movement hailed by the call of Lorde’s “Litany” insisting that “it is better to speak” and using poetry, connection, analysis, disclosure and visibility to transform the discourse about racial and sexual violence across space.

The example of the use of “A Litany for Survival” to instigate healing and conversation about sexual violence in oppressed communities, along with the many earlier examples of the use of the poem in a number of contemporary contexts, teaches a lesson about what an anti-capitalist poetics might be. The interactivity of the poem in its UBUNTU and Be Bold Be Red incarnations is part of the social life of the poem, and sees itself as linked to the alternative sociality that survival requires. In this sense the use of “A Litany for Survival” and the demands of responding to gendered and racialized violence required a socialist intellectual process, a poetics of production in which the relationship between the producers, consumers and administrators of knowledge is disrupted and conflated towards the development of a social relation that does not objectify people and their bodies. The “when” that repeats in the penultimate stanza of Lorde’s poem then, is alive in the instances of the poem’s social engagement across time. *When* the UBUNTU collective invokes and transforms “A Litany for Survival” towards a world free from sexual violence or *when* anti-police brutality organizers in New York City invoke the poem, *when* the poem gains new life from a specific context in which a group of people actually produces its own survival, when survival is an alternative meaning of

¹³⁰ See www.documentthesilence.wordpress.com.

life that contradicts the murder and violence of the state and the ruling class. Survival is a queer, non-linear link between moments of collectivized response to oppression across time. And space.

Artifact for Survival, A Geography: “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge”

In her 1986 collection *Our Dead Behind Us*, Audre Lorde once again redefines survival, this time with a sustained poetic intervention into the meaning of space. “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” is the most formally experimental of the poems I discuss here. In the poem itself the speaker describes this work as both a “route map” and an “artifact,” which means it is about the contingency of a particular place *in* time.¹³¹ Lorde uses space to articulate the fragility and possibility of a threatened future. The poem starts with the scene of Lorde’s own home, and her commute from Staten Island and goes on to link the threatened, unsustainable environment of Staten Island to a global relationship of racial and economic violence, and finally to a vision for a working relationship to the future. She achieves this journey through a number of moves that emphasize the use of space as a formal poetic strategy.

First, using a strategy that she rarely used, but which appears in more of her later poems, and her late revisions of earlier poems, she inserts spaces *within* the lines of this poem. The readers are charged with either passing over or making a bridge. The poem starts with the words

Leaving leaving

¹³¹ Audre Lorde. “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge,” in *The Collected Poetry of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 403-406. Originally published in *Our Dead Behind Us*. 1986.

suggesting an interruption, a restart. Throughout the poem, Lorde uses spatial language where space becomes an action, like “leaving,” “holding,” “circling,” “lowering,” “covering,” and “scanning.” Lorde’s insertion of spaces into many of the lines of the poem (or her placement of words around those pre-existing spaces) conscripts the reader into the action of bridging. The consonance between “leaving” and “love” asks the reader to relate the two. What is the relationship between loving and leaving?

For example in this set of lines

*oh love, if i become anger
feel me
holding you in my heart circling
the concrete particular
arcs of this journey*

the reader can decide whether the spaces between the words are pauses that allow the speaker to reset intentions or to distinguish between near repetitions. In the case of the space between “concrete” and “particular” the space asks the reader to think about the journey between the hard “c” sound in the middle of the words “concrete” and “particular.” In one sense they are almost synonyms, often used in progressive political discourse to distinguish between abstract ideas of oppression and specific lived experiences of oppression. But the space between the words reminds us that “concrete” has another meaning, like the literal substance out of which sidewalks and bridges are made.

In fact the spatial shift of the poem operates in the first stanza through alliteration. Along with the repeated “l” sounds (leaving, love, landscape, lost) The cumulative tendency of the “s” in the stanza, (sands, South, silhouette, sliding, circling, slips, shuttle) all add up in the final word of the stanza: “possible.” The slide of the

repeated “s” sound makes the land unstable. Of course the “s” sound as it continues throughout the poem also creates a context for our key word: survival. Lorde makes the poem itself both concrete and particular, providing a bridge between the general political situation of late capital by naming specific places including,

South Beach, New Jersey, Hylan Toll Plaza, Grymes Hill, Roseank, Staten Island, Park Hill Projects, Poland, Soweto, Tomkinsville, Zimbabwe, Chad, Anzania, Bay Street Women’s Shelter, Marazan, El Salvador, Pretoria, Philadelphia, Atlanta, San Francisco, London, the Alps, the Adriatic, Capetown, Crossroads, and Noxolo. And the places are placed. In two instances, Lorde combines the concreteness of place with the strategy of internal line breaks of connecting them

here:

*from the dull wharves of Tompkinsville
to Zimbabwe Chad Azania
oh Willie sweet little brother with the snap in your eyes
what walls are you covering now*

The reader is left to piece together the bridges that connect these three places in Africa. And the connection must not only move across space, but also time. While Zimbabwe is the post-colonial name for the land borders that once demarcated colonial Rhodesia, Azania is the pre-colonial name for a larger region of sub-saharan Africa that would include Zimbabwe, but not Chad. Azania is also a name that some Black radicals used starting in 1958 to rename South Africa in order to assert an anti-colonial, anti-apartheid vision. Zimbabwe and Chad are nation-states, but Azania is a memory and a vision. Zimbabwe and Chad were both colonized but not by the same European powers, and their revolutions and their post-colonial politics have been different. The bridge that Lorde offers between these three places in time is the figure of a ‘little brother’

making graffiti with “visions of revolution.” The creativity of youth, the work of presenting an illegal counter-normative vision is what makes the connection. Similarly

in the next stanza when Lorde mentions

*the once-Black now wasted old people
who built Pretoria
Philadelphia Atlanta San Francisco*

the bridge between the spaces is the dynamic of forced labor starting with Pretoria in South Africa to three cities in different regions of the United States. But the spaces or cuts within Lorde’s lines are not healed. The bridges are not visible enough to make the spaces irrelevant. Lorde’s strategy here makes the broken-ness of the contemporary world visible. There are spaces where people fall through, and these are the same spaces of possibility for a poetic intervention into the meaning of space in a time where land is owned, invaded, neo-colonially controlled and in environmental danger. Fred Moten’s work to theorize the “bridge” in Black expressive culture is helpful here.¹³² In conversation with his key concepts of the break and the cut that characterize spaces of reproduction and resistance within the context of the objectification and commodification of Black people, Moten’s definition of the bridge is relevant to the bridging work of Lorde’s poem. The poem, placing Black bodies, like Willie the young graffiti artist and the “once-black now wasted old people” who provided the forced labor for the infrastructures of power (like bridges) that Willie now defaces, maps the Black body itself as a landscape upon which the violence of colonialism is (still) written. In *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Fred Moten describes a

¹³² Fred Moten. *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 18.

“bridge of lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom,” that recurs throughout his study of the Black radical aesthetic.¹³³ Moten analyzes the work of the musical bridge in the work of jazz musicians, and the conceptual bridge that connects, without suturing, the spaces, gaps, cuts, and breaks, that a capitalist relation places on and between our bodies. I want to assert that Lorde’s poem, asks for and begins the work of theorizing the significance and function of the bridge in a way that addresses the existing and potential relationships between spaces and people. Moten’s argument is that people become commodities through a process of “reproductive reproduction,” where their status as object is reproduced through a maternal trace.¹³⁴ As I will discuss in detail in the next chapter on maternity, this reproduction of commodity status through race is what makes the figure of the mother so crucial, both in the narrative of global capital and the poetic, pedagogical and publishing interventions of radical Black feminists. The work of the bridge is important here because, for Lorde, the question of the bridge is a question of relationship. In “On My Way Out,” she theorizes what Edouard Glissant would call a poetics of relation by creating breaks between the words in her poetic lines and leaving the bridge as a question. The bridge is the social relationship. Throughout the poem the bridges that connect the different locations and people Lorde references are both literally polluted and conceptually dirty. Great cities have the use of forced labor in common, occupation in common, war in common, and their differences are mapped by the production of profit through the differential evaluation of the labor and lives of different people across space.¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ See Gayatri Spivak. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

But to the extent that the different spaces linked through this poem have creativity in common, the poem instigates, and demonstrates the possible creation of a different relationship. The terms of the distance and the dynamics of the connection between people and spaces, the bridge, is a crucial question raised by the gaps in the lines and how the reader will connect them. The bridge is the social relationship. If a globalized racist relationship through capitalism is an inadequate and unacceptable bridge, then another relationship must be produced. The formal strategy of creating gaps within the line in this latest poem is distinct from the dashes that Lorde uses in “Prologue” the first poem we discussed. Moten evokes Nathaniel Mackey’s characterization of the dash as a “rackety bridge” that eventually collapses and cannot do the bridging work it is placed there to do.¹³⁶ So after placing dashes in the places demarcating the “rackety,” loud and unstable relationship between Lorde’s speaker and the Black Arts movement context, Lorde, in this later poem leaves the spaces open, and the bridge remains a question. The social relation, the mode of connection is yet to come. As Moten asks, towards an understanding of Adrian Piper’s performative work, I would ask us with this poem to “think the bridge as translation or transportation where matter and desire are both lost and found.”¹³⁷ The loss, bodily and spiritual required by the pre-existing bridge of a global capitalist relationship, and the desire for another sociality speak in the silent gaps between the words of this poem.

Therefore, the gaps in the poem are about the distance between the poet and the subjects of the poem, a request for the reader’s collaboration in the action of producing

¹³⁶ Ibid, 83.

¹³⁷ Moten, 237.

the poem to provide a bridge of accountability between people located on opposite sides of a matrix of power. For example, in a stanza that begins

*Picture small-boned dark women
gun-belts taut over dyed cloth*

and goes on to describe the revolutionary response of and traumatic violence against women in South Africa in particular. She ends with the questions:

*which one
saw her two-year-old daughter's face
squashed like a melon
in the pre-dawn police raids upon Noxolo
which one writes poems
lies with other women
in the blood's affirmation*

This set of questions, intervening against the dominant press, which would cast South African mothers as a monolithic group, questions the ability of the poet to reach or describe the lived experiences of Black South African women fighting for freedom. The poet can only ask, and seek to identify. There are spaces that the poem can only attempt to bridge. While the poet has not seen her own “two-year-old daughter” killed due to police brutality, she has written a number of poems about the New York Police Department’s murders of children. The last question about which one of the women is also a poet, also loves women sexually, *which one writes poems* is interrupted by spaces that exhibit the longing and the effort of Lorde’s desired connection, and explicit solidarity with women engaged in armed struggle against apartheid. I read Lorde’s technology of the bridge to trouble the contest between whether direct experience or representation is the primary means for learning and transformation. Focusing on the crucial role of connection in survival, Lorde’s practice argues that by reaching for

language to connect our experience across the gaps in our articulation both experience and representation are vital.

Lorde's queer relationship to space, here demonstrated as a poetic engagement with the visibility of space as structure, provides a connection beyond her diasporic solidarity work in with Afro-German women, South African Women and the people of Grenada, positioning her as a theorist of transnational feminist potential in her poetic work. The acknowledgement of unbridged space between Lorde and a mother in South Africa, example raises questions that transnational feminist theorist M. Jaqui Alexander asks:

How do we continue to be rooted in the particularities of our cultural homes without allegiance to the boundaries of the nation-state, yet remain simultaneously committed to a collectivized politic of identification and solidarity?¹³⁸

Audre Lorde's poetic relationship to location engages this survival question, in both content and form. The multiplicity of place names she offers, exceeding, and preceding national boundaries at times, yet not forgetful of the political meaning of named places, makes the struggle Alexander articulates visible, and palpable for the reader. For Lorde, the nation-state is not the locational form of survival. If Lorde's vampire poet is undead in relationship to Black Arts Cultural nationalism, the poet's own interracial lesbian household in Staten Island is as well. In part, it is expulsion from the form of the nation (an act of heteropatriarchal reproduction that cultural nationalists, like the members of Jordan's audience at Howard would justify with a narrow definition

¹³⁸ M. Jaqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University, 2005, 268.

of survival) that impels both Jordan and Lorde to create a queer spatial practice of survival as accountability, speakability in language.

As in “Prologue,” Lorde has created a poetic structure that allows her to be critical of the function of poetry itself. Again, using the strategy of space, in this poem about the spatialization of difference, Lorde creates two indented spaces within the poem. This is the only poem by Lorde where I have seen this strategy. These set apart spaces are the asides that are central to the poem. Indeed they are indented stanzas, pushed to the side, that as a result of their indentation are actually more centered than the left aligned majority of the poem. Lorde places a debate on the relationship between poetry and history in these spaces. The first indented stanza offers the first appearance of our key word “survive” in the poem.

*by our act of not thinking
of taking
only what is given*

*Wintry Poland survives
the bastardized prose of the New York Times*

Here the poet makes explicit her challenge to those who own and disperse the narrative of the dominant relationship after the next indented stanza she will target *Newsweek* as well. The “bastardized prose” of the dominant narrative of global relations, articulated from a US centered vantage point, is part of the faulty bridge that connects different locations on the planet through an uneven relationship of power and representation. But poetry is an intervention in meaning, a threat to this narrative.

That same stanza ends:

*and the blood of my sister Winnie Mandela
slows and her steps slow
in a banned and waterless living*

her youngest daughter is becoming a poet

The potential of poetry in the daughter of the freedom fighter Winnie Mandela is a challenge to the hegemony represented and reproduced by the *New York Times*. As Winnie Mandela finds it difficult to travel across literal space and the added spaces Lorde places in the line, both for reasons of age and due to targeting from the apartheid government, the poetry, Lorde suggests, will be able to travel differently.

In the second indented stanza is the already discussed scene where Lorde spaces and links cities through the bridge of forced labor/oppressed labor forces, asking after she argues this connection back to the Roman Empire,

*so where is true history written
except in the poems?*

Poetry, this question suggests, is the only way to make the connections between differentiated people and places evident, without making them inevitable. The suppressed histories of the invisibilized labor forces connecting the existing and remembered great cities survive in this poem as traces, and that survival intervenes into the meaning of these places in the production of spatial difference. Lorde's performance of spacing participates with Henri Lefebvre's project in *The Production of Space* to reveal the production of distance and differential power, possibility and signification as a political process enforced by violence.¹³⁹ Lorde characterizes the poem itself as "an artifact for survival" and survival here means an intervention against the meanings of space and time enforced by dominant modes of both journalism and history. Here, in this poem, survival is a poetic intervention against a global capitalist (neocolonial,

¹³⁹ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1974.

neoliberal) organization of space, necessary, because the prior definition of space says “we were never meant to survive.”

Or in Lorde’s words in the penultimate stanza of the poem

*History is not kind to us
we restitch it with living
past memory forward
into desire
into the panic articulation
of want without having
or even the promise of getting.*

The “restitch”ing of a different, perhaps quilted,¹⁴⁰relationship between space and time is a response to the unkindness of history to “us” the oppressed audience convened by Lorde’s “Litany for Survival.” The desperate need articulated by this poem and the violence that it re-presents is a “panic articulation” with major gaps to bridge and no promises or ground to walk on the way. The closest we come to filling the space are the two gasps “oh love” and “oh Willie” that seek to create intimacy or accountability between the speaker and the person who she addresses. This poem participates in the production of desire and sketches towards a possible relationship, appropriately filled with blank undetermined spaces.

Lorde ends the poem with a vision:

*And I dream of our coming together
encircled driven
not only by love
but by lust for a working tomorrow
the flights of this journey
mapless uncertain
and necessary as water.*

¹⁴⁰ For a contemporary experiment in “stitching” together movement see www.cyberquilt.wordpress.com. (accessed 2/2/10)

This vision offers an epistemological moment past the poem itself where what was a “a route map” becomes “mapless uncertain,” a relationship to space she asks *us* to bridge for our own survival, “necessary as water.”

Wrong is Not My Name

Lorde and Jordan theorize survival as a threatened technology through which to transform the meanings of life, embodiment and death through a rigorous engagement with time and space. Both theorists invoke survival as a queer temporality. Jordan’s definition of survival depends on an intergenerational pedagogical imperative. Between generations, she argues, we can interrupt the social reproduction of systems that devalue life and spirit through a critical and poetic practice of renaming. Lorde, introducing an undead social perspective that redefines the value of a lifetime, makes visible the reproduction of fear as a temporal function. In each case the argument for survival is temporal and spatial. Jordan highlights the United States’ use of political doublespeak and its impact on the nations that the US relates to through military and economic violence to argue that differential value of lives across space is a form of denial that threatens the survival of the planet. Lorde, especially in “On my Way Out” offers bridging as a survival strategy that offers a transformed relationship to spaces linked through systems of oppressive knowledge and limited understanding. The works I engage with above offer the term survival as a critical tool through which to examine the production and signification of life, embodiment and death, but of course the lives and practices of the theorists and their collaborators demonstrate this lesson more holistically. The significance and queerness of the survival of this form of transnational,

anticapitalist Black feminism is still to be determined, through our evolving relationship to the terms of our own survival.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ For a contemporary engagement with June Jordan's phrase "Wrong is not my name," from her "Poem About My Rights," see an interactive anthology published by UBUNTU through BrokenBeautiful Press: <http://brokenbeautifuldownloads.wordpress.com/interactive-anthology/> (accessed 2/2/10)

2. The Ante-Essence of Black Mothering: Authority and Queer Danger

We knew better. We had been Black children. And each of us had given birth to a Black child here, in America. So we knew the precious, unimaginably deep music and the precious unimaginably complicated mathematics that our forbidden Black bodies enveloped.

- June Jordan in her Memorial letter to Audre Lorde (Feb 1979)

What does Black mothering mean, before, besides and despite its criminalization? What is the preceding essence of the Black maternal threat that makes the abjection of Black mothers so necessary, not only to the state, but also to the discourses of Black cultural nationalism and white second-wave feminism? What is the content of that dangerous Black mothering casting a shadow on the narrative of the state? From 1968 to 1992, June Jordan, Alexis De Veaux, Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith “taught” the contours of a rival Black mothering in classrooms, in workshops, at conferences, and in magazines, building a language of feminist Black diasporicity in unlikely places. For example Alexis De Veaux, Audre Lorde and June Jordan all wrote pivotal work on alternative forms of mothering for the unlikely audience of *Essence*, a Black women’s fashion magazine. Though *Essence* magazine has never been an explicitly Black feminist magazine, since its inception in 1970 the magazine has reached a large audience of Black women, targeted as consumers both as a result of a tradition of successful middle-class Black women’s magazines in the U.S. and the tension between Black nationalist and white feminist discourses emergent in what the pages of *Essence*

Magazine called “today’s Black woman.”¹ Founded by four Black male entrepreneurs in 1970, *Essence*’s “roots” could be most accurately located at the intersection of Black capitalism and Black cultural nationalism. The first creative director of *Essence* was Gordon Parks (who directed the blaxploitation film *Shaft* during the same period) and in its first decade *Essence* was more likely to print regular articles on Black womanhood by Amiri Baraka or Louis Farakhan than by Florence Kennedy or Elaine Brown. You could also find an order form for an “authentic’ Black power afro wig in the pages of the magazine during its first decade. The magazine capitalized on the commodifiability of Black female sexual expression. Epitomizing this point, the owners of the magazine sold a 10% interest in the magazine to Playboy (the highest percentage they could legally sell to anyone), provoking controversy and causing the first female editor to leave the enterprise. By 1979 however, perhaps motivated by the rise in visible Black feminist activity on the East Coast in the late 1970’s or the addition of Toni Cade Bambara to the advisory board, *Essence* magazine became a possible, if ironic, platform for Black feminist writers such as June Jordan and Audre Lorde. Each of these poet, mother, activists were already challenging the norms of Black patriarchal family through their publicized private romantic relationships with white men and women and their published writings on motherhood in the context of social justice. The revisions of mothering that Jordan and Lorde inserted into the pages of *Essence* stand in stark contrast to the mothering “tips” that graced the magazine’s pages before and since, none of which question patriarchy and all of which seek to reinforce the consumer unit of the

¹ For more on the tradition of Black women’s magazines since the Reconstruction, see Noliwe Rooks. *Ladies Pages: African American Women’s Magazine and the Culture that Made Them*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

middle-class Black family. Alongside images of what the magazine would promote as “the essentials” of Black mothering practice, Jordan, Lorde and De Veaux generated an alternative mode of mothering as a political relationship to the transnational and intergenerational production of Blackness. Jordan and Lorde, with the facilitation of erstwhile executive editor Cheryll Greene and poetry editor Alexis DeVeaux, engaged *Essence* as a platform through which to have an explicitly intergenerational impact.

This chapter contextualizes the queer definitions of the work of mothering that Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux and June Jordan published in the unlikely pages of *Essence* magazine within a biopolitical discourse where Black mothering names the threat of the transformation of what life means and how it can be (de)valued in the terms of neoliberal capitalism and within a rival discourse of collective practices and articulations of mothering within Black lesbian feminist and third world feminist movements during the Reagan Era. Starting with Lorde’s bold proposition that “we can learn to mother ourselves” I argue that the intersubjective relationship she proposes is queer and threatening within a dominant narrative that targets poor and racialized mothers as the pathological cause of the very poverty and racism they experience and frames them as scapegoats for a global scarcity which justifies the expendability of Black life. I then look at the ways Black cultural nationalists and white second wave feminists complied with this dominant narrative and argue that responding to this pathologizing narrative of Black mothering actually generated the articulation of a Black feminist political stance which centered around the issue of *authority*. I demonstrate how the *authority* of Black mothers has been made illegal within the narratives of slave code, abortion law and welfare policy. Finally, I argue that the danger of Black mothering is real and the fear of the transformative power of Black mothering as authority is justified,

citing examples of Black mothers organizing for housing, education and reproductive labor more generally as communal concerns when neoliberal capital would want them to remain individual failures. I also invoke June Jordan and Alexis DeVeaux's insistence on the poetic potential of reproductive labor and the work in language and practice of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers as evidence of a possible alternative future promised by the bad teaching, misplaced value and insistent persistence of Black life on poetic terms.

“To Mother Ourselves”

In 1983, Audre Lorde published an article in *Essence* entitled ‘Black Women and Anger’, later republished in her 1984 volume of chapters *Sister Outsider* as “Eye to Eye: Black Women Hatred, and Anger.”² The main suggestion of Lorde’s article is that as Black women “we can learn to mother ourselves.”³ 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 (almost) 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 the intersubjective production of a rival mothering that does not reproduce familial relations, but rather disperses the admittedly difficult labor of mothering.

² Audre Lorde. “Black Women Hatred and Anger” in *Essence* October 1983, 90-158.

³ Lorde, 158.

Lorde argues that Black women “eye to eye” reflect the defense and hatred that we feel for ourselves onto each other. Therefore responding to the hatred that we have learned to metabolize after being forced to consume routine ideological, physical and sexual violence must be a coproductive process. She states,

If we can learn to give ourselves the recognition and acceptance that we have come to expect only from our mommas, Black women will be able to see each other much more clearly and deal with each other much more directly.⁴

Simply put, Lorde is describing the queer act of loving ourselves despite everything, as the same act that enables us to love each other (and our own otherness) across difference. This is a queer desire enacted. This love should be impossible even between mothers and daughters. Economic inequity, the persistent enslavement of women of color, the normalization of sexual abuse, the unsafety of being a Black woman anywhere on this planet, joined with a continual desire by Black women for something else, makes it impossible to be a mother, impossible to have, to be a daughter. The central violence of an old and continuing capitalist global order means that to be a Black mother, to be a Black daughter, to invoke family at all, is to keep on keeping on falling apart. To create a girl, to be a girl to love a girl is to confront the totalizing logic of a world structured on rape. Notice that my verbs have become infinitive. We live in a world in which it is impossible to love your mother, and we do it anyway. We live in a world in which it is impossible to love ourselves, but we do it somehow. We live in a world in which it is impossible to love a woman, but I love you. That is the queer thing. Or as Lorde says,

⁴ *ibid.*

“we are worth wanting each other.”⁵ Queer, as I use it in this chapter, therefore exceeds the marking of homosexuality activity itself, or the project of problematizing the reproductive narrative forms implied by the patriarchal family, though it includes both of these things. Queer here refers to the project of calling into question the co-constitutive narratives of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism, especially in this case a gendered narrative of racism, by demonstrating that something else is possible and desirable in our relationships to each other. This is a project of revaluing and even eroticizing the practice of navigating difference.

Lorde describes this process of speaking across difference as a linguistic reach asking: Am I not reaching out for you in the only language I know? Are you reaching for me in your only salvaged tongue? If I try to hear you across our differences does/will that mean you can hear mine?⁶

and continues “I am hungry for Black women who will not turn away from me even if they do not agree with what I say. We are after all, talking about different combinations of the same borrowed sounds.”⁷

Lorde makes a number of moves here. First, she notes that the problem of relating across difference is a problem of language. Different Black women do not speak the same language or are not on the same page. However, Lorde also takes this opportunity to challenge the meaning of language from a critical Black feminist diasporic position. Are these not “borrowed sounds” from a colonizing language in which Black women seek to approach each other? She suggests that language has to be appropriated

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, 90.

⁷ *ibid.*, 92.

and transformed in order to subvert the “grammar book” that (five years later) Hortense Spillers will describe as narrating Black women into a trap of violability. At the same time that this can be read as a critique of the wide reaching empiricism and Empire-making of the English language, Lorde’s earlier question, “Oh sister, where is that dark rich land we wanted to wander through together?” gives the later questions a diasporic element.⁸ This conversation is not only one between Black American women, it is also a conversation between Black women in different spatial (and ideological) locations who queerly desire a space where they can relate to each other freely. This move interpolates the audience of *Essence* magazine into the Black multiplicity that the title *Essence* already masks. In that sense the fact that Black women are challenged to speak to each other in *different* “borrowed sounds” or a variety of colonizing languages is further impetus to create a language based on these survival skills of “reaching,” “salvaging,” “borrowing”: a responsive mode of production in which difference produces the capacity for accountability, *who will not turn away*. Mothering becomes a technology for relationship and accountability or *speakability*, within difference.

Lorde’s ‘Black Women and Anger’ 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 lesbian romantic love. The explicitly diasporic tone of DeVeaux’s peice brings Lorde’s latent diasporic vision of mothering into view. De Veauxopens her piece with a quintessentially diasporic statement: “I am a Daughter of Africa.”⁹ However to make space in this diasporic vision to include her sexuality, class and gender De Veauxexplains that she must “dress myself in my own words,” subtly

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Alexis DeVeaux. “Sister Love” in *Essence* October, 1983 82-153.

indicating that, unmodified, a diasporic self-identification dispossesses her on the level of the body.¹⁰ Similarly Lorde, writing a piece that addresses the internalized hatred and anger that makes sisterhood between Black women difficult, agrees with De Veaux that the articulation of transnational love and partnership between Black women is a radical and poetic act of translation. The analytic that makes this translation possible for Lorde is called “mothering,” that queer practice of valuing the contradiction of Black life as the reproduction of a different meaning of life, or the meaning of life as difference.

My assertion is that the key role of the pathologized Black mother in the narrative justification of economic, eugenic and state violence, “queers” the term *mother*, to the extent that it ruptures the term. In the context of this queered Black mothering, mother is not merely a name, role or even a subject position, and is certainly not a coherent person with natural biological kinship, affinity for and claim to a certain patriarchally-linked set of children. Mother, in the context of the devaluation of life through racism, is split into relationships severed by slavery and the state where some “mothers” are severed from their children through sale and state accusations of neglect and denied the ability to be social mothers for their biological children. Mothering, in the context of appropriated affective labor, is the labor that so many poor women of color have performed in the homes of wealthy families, is the plantation nursing of property and proper heirs alike. In this chapter, I will look at the ways in which the term *mother*, in the collaborating narratives of slave code, abortion law and welfare policy, is split into at least two functions, the literal labor of social reproduction for the dominant class, and

¹⁰ *ibid*, 83

the continued reproduction of expendable otherness (m/othering), which again, reproduces a social relation in which life is differentially valued.

Therefore Audre Lorde's use of the word "mother" as a verb in her assertion "We can learn to mother ourselves," draws on the disrupted status of the term "mother" as a coherent carrier for patriarchal social values which the constructed oxymoron of Black mothering in the racist social narrative has already destabilized, towards the use of the character (and caricature) of the Black mother as a hinge, first in the production of people as property and second in the production of a state without a social contract (also known as neoliberalism). Drawing on the queered status of Black mothering in the production of non-humanity and anti-social capitalism, Lorde's intervention offers a queer alternative, where the survival of the term mother, requires a(n) m/othering action: the production of a form of difference which can produce an ethical social relationship to each other. M/other is a verb. Black mothering, the production of radical difference, when done for "ourselves" as a reclamation of labor and a reflexive intervention against the reproduction of sameness, is an alternate mode of production.

This chapter offers Black mothering as an undervalued and threatening way of (re)producing Black life. For the length of their careers, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Barbara Smith and Alexis De Veaux embodied and invoked this bad mothering in their work as teachers, as poets and as theorists of radical mothering by inhabiting the impossible space of discipline, timeliness and order exactly when they were needed most. On their terms, the danger of Black mothering is a revolutionary danger, a subversion of power, a threat that we might learn to make something different out of the world. *Black mothering is out of control*. 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

women 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 rival social world adverse to the violence of capital.

Black Mothers are Dangerous

In 2005, when former U.S. Secretary of Education and officer of Drug Policy William Bennett publicly stated that aborting every Black baby would decrease crime¹¹, he was speaking into a well-established narrative familiar in the American context. *Black mothers are dangerous.* According to the National Council of Negro Women, at least one pregnant civil rights worker in North Carolina was sentenced to a forced abortion after her arrest during a protest in the early 1970s¹². The discourse that Daniel Moynihan's 1965 pronouncement of Black matriarchalism and Ronald Reagan's 1976 coinage of the term "welfare queen" perpetuate is what Wahneema Lubiano would call a "cover story" for the structural policies that reproduce poverty through dramatic cuts in welfare while subsidizing wasteful corporations and providing tax cuts for the wealthy few.¹³ *Black mothers are dangerous.* This story shifts the blame for economic disparities onto the reproductive capacities of Black women, who (so the story goes) create crime, poverty and deviance through their bad behavior and dangerous mothering. This demonization of Black motherhood emerged in the globalizing 20th century economy of

¹¹ September 28 broadcast of Salem Radio Network's Bill Bennett's Morning in America.

¹² National Council of Negro Women, editorial *Black Woman's Voice* 2, no. 2 (Jan/Feb, 1973). Also cited in Loretta Ross "The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice" in *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, Boston: South End Press, 2006, 61-62.

¹³ Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Chapters on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* ed. Toni Morrison New York: Pantheon, 1992, 323-363..

the United States in collusion with the coordination of nationalized eugenics and global population control.¹⁴ Today, it goes on unchecked.

In the face of this 20th century history of vilifying Black motherhood, Black feminists from 1968 to 1992 re-appropriated motherhood as a challenge and a refusal to the violence that the 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 mothering, 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.

This chapter applies a queer theory of the potential meaning of mothering to the literary historical context of Black feminist literary production. And while the figure of the impoverished Black mother is a fictional character created to teach and perpetuate national and economic narratives of death, there are also poor Black women who do the labor of mothering their communities. As Cathy Cohen points out, poor Black mothers and Black mothers who receive public assistance are queered, criminalized and marked as deviant within the popular imagination.¹⁵ As Premilla Nadasen documents in *Welfare Warriors*, poor Black women also mobilized the term “mother” within the

¹⁴ Remember that for feeding Black children through the Free Breakfast Program, the Black Panther Party had been called the “greatest threat to internal security of the country” by J. Edgar Hoover in 1968. Washington, Linn Jr. “Revisited: The Black Panther Party” in *The New Crisis* Sept/Oct 1999.

¹⁵ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” in *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1997): 437-65.

welfare rights movement in order to draw attention to the labor of mothering.¹⁶ In *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community and the War on Poverty*, Nancy A. Naples contextualizes the work of women in community action programs of the war on poverty programs in the context of activist mothering that is not necessarily biological.¹⁷ It is important in this chapter and in the project as a whole not to conflate the Black feminist literary workers, who had a privileged level of educational access, with the impoverished Black women who are most impacted by the economic violence that the pathologization of the figure of the Black mother justifies. However, the way in which Lorde, Jordan, De Veaux and Smith engaged and disrupted the dominant narrative of Black mothering is not merely theoretical and should be understood with the context of this wider rhetorical, if not literary, use of the term mother as a mobilizing term for Black women who insisted on an alternative logic during the rise of neoliberalism. While each of the writers that this dissertation focuses on had access to intellectual connections and resources that other women did not have at their disposal, each of these writers also suffered economic consequences for their decision to challenge the literary and academic means of production in which their work was uneasily and problematic situated. After her divorce June Jordan really was a single Black mother with no money for food, waiting for freelancing checks to come in and contemplating keeping her young son with her parents so that he could eat. Alexis De Veaux's refusal to travel the path of least resistance with in the publishing, writing and teaching industries left her without stable healthcare, resulting in a number of late-diagnosed tumors and ulcers which she was

¹⁶ Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2005, 31.

¹⁷ Nancy A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activists Mothering Community Work and the War on Poverty*. New York: Routledge, 1998, 191.

only able to treat because she was nominally on Essence Magazines staff even at a point when she was not on the payroll. Audre Lorde worked in toxic and radioactive conditions in a factory in order to earn money to survive and to go back to school. Though she never had an excess of money she continually sent her tax returns as contributions to Joseph Beam for Black/Out magazine, to Pat Parker for workshops in prisons, to the Combahee River Collective for photocopying costs. Barbara Smith describes literally rolling coins from change she searched for in her home to be able to pay the expenses of Kitchen Table Press. These examples are not intended to provide class “cred” to writers who clearly had and have a different level of class mobility from many Black women. I offer these examples to contextualize the choices these women made to identify with their accountability to their communities against the norms of capitalism, and to remind readers that the consequences in terms of health, career and marketability are not coincidental, but are part of the narrative that punishes Black women for creating products and processes that exceed and disrupt the narrative that rebirths inequality in economic terms.

In this chapter I argue that (queer) Black mothering is dangerous because it has the potential to disrupt global capitalism at the point of reproduction. The demonization of Black mothering plays a central role in the normalization of the anti-social logic of neoliberalism, which operates through the deprivation of public social resources such as education, food and housing. The criminalization of Black mothers not only justifies the reallocation of public resources towards the private interests of the wealthy, it also creates and enforces a mythic narrative that responsibility for food, social education and housing are individual problems instead of community concerns. As Patricia Hill Collins points out in *Black Feminist Thought*, the criminalization of Black mothers “diverts

attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home.¹⁸ She also pointed out the Black domestic workers who participated in Bonnie Thornton Dill's 1980 study taught their children *not* to defer to white people, and not to become domestic workers, refusing to reproduce their role as an exploited labor force.¹⁹ In other words Black mothers are dangerous if they teach Black children to *value* themselves and not to revalorize racism. The criminalization of Black mothering is constructed but the threat of Black mothering is real.

Black mothering is a threat because it enacts a queer alternative to the social reproduction of heteropatriarchy. Black mothering as a form of queer literary production is a threat because it challenges the values of western capitalism, starting with one of its central value statements: some lives are valuable and some are not. This dissertation examines queer Black feminist literary production as a space for alternative meanings for (Black) life based on the survival of dangerous and devious bodies (of work). I argue that it is no coincidence that the central Black feminist texts, including the groundbreaking anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, June Jordan's anti-imperialist poetic text *Living Room* and the autonomous women of color run and lesbian centered *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* all signify at the point of reproduction, the pathologized feminized Black home. These literary manifestations were part of a broader intervention into the meaning of Black life, at the point of reproduction (the pathologized Black mother), which were the *raison d'être* for the contemporary Black feminist movement. Exploring the narratives of racialized

¹⁸ Collins p74.

¹⁹ Cited in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. New York:Routledge, 1991, 73.

mothering written in the legal and political rhetoric of the United States in its domestic and global enactments of neo-liberalism, this chapter contextualizes the poetic break theorized by June Jordan, Alexis De Veaux and Audre Lorde in their reclamation of the term “mother” and the tropes of housework, childcare and other labors of sustenance for a Black queer survivalist worldview.

In the ground breaking Combahee River Collective Statement, a Black feminist lesbian socialist collective made up of many of the figures who would be central to Black feminist literary production and teaching in the northeastern United States, lists “sterilization abuse” as the first issue that they chose to work on. Similarly, it was growing awareness of forced sterilization that led Frances Beal to present the 1968 SNCC position paper that would lead to the formation of the Black Women’s Alliance, which eventually became the Third World Women’s Alliance.²⁰ It was also the gap in white feminist and Black nationalist responses in the debate on Roe vs. Wade that led the founders of what would be National Black Feminist Organizations to call a press conference declaring the existence of a national organization for Black feminists.²¹ It is clear that the problem of coercive sterilization practiced on women of color in this period as an element of the biopolitics of the war on poverty²² was a major focus of radical Black feminists. This focus of Black feminist organizing was clearly articulated in the theoretical documents that accompanied the growing movement. In her introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* Barbara Smith (also one of the main authors of

²⁰ Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, p47.

²¹ *ibid*, 51

²² Dorothy Roberts “Feminism, Race and Adoption” in *The Color of Violence: The INCITE Anthology* Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006

the Combahee River Collective Statement) starts her laundry list of Black feminist issues with “reproductive rights, access to abortion, sterilization abuse, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled.”²³ This set of priorities was typical for self-declared Black feminists of the period, and marked one of their most marked disagreements with the ways both the white feminist and Black nationalist movements approached the debate over self-determined mothering. This was a prototype for what Black feminists would later develop into a movement for self-determination through the concept of reproductive justice.²⁴ By looking at the redefinition of Black mothering in the feminist literary productions of queer ancestors and elders June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux and Barbara Smith we can reframe Black feminism as an intervention into the meaning of (Black) life and survival especially at the points where it was called to dissent from (white) feminist and Black (male) cultural nationalist definitions of Black mothering that collaborated with the logic of a neoliberal project.

It is important to note here that while this analysis is urgent because of the deadly supremacy of a neoliberal biopolitics in the contemporary world, the utility of this analysis of the queerness of Black feminist literary production is not useful merely because it teaches us about the contours of neoliberalism. Although our current

²³ Barbara Smith ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, xxxvii. (Originally published in 1983 by Kitchen Table Press)

²⁴ Indeed in Atlanta the National Black Women’s Health Project, which was one of the first organizations to respond to the limits of the reproductive choice framework with a holistic approach to reproductive justice which prioritized full self-determination for women of color of their bodies, communities and relationships created *Vital Signs* one of the longest running autonomous newspapers controlled by Black women. Black lesbian poet Nikky Finney was the editor of the paper during the 1980’s when the pages were filled with images of healthy and radiant young Black babies, young people and women and articles about how to address the stress brought on by multiple oppression as a health issue. Additionally, Smith, Patricia Bell Scott and Gloria (now Akasha) T. Hull suggested that the classrooms that Black feminists were occupying from the mid-1970’s on would be places for ‘the investigation of Black women’s mental and physical health in a society whose ‘final solution’ for us and our children is death.’

academic climate fetishizes newer, better, stronger deeper analyses of neoliberalism in a way that replicates the consumer logic that neoliberalism itself reproduces, in this work I seek to centralize the rival logics produced by Black feminists for the survival of their communities and the expression of their visions. Emerging neoliberalism is the context for the period of Black feminist literary production I focus on here, but it is not the object of this study. This study faces the complexities, intricacies, urgencies and possibilities produced by Black feminist literary bravery and experimentalization.

Black feminists in this time period were by no means unaware of the consequences of the narrative pathologizing Black bodies and Black women's agency. But instead of denying the threat of Black motherhood, many Black feminists (especially Black feminists in lesbian and bisexual communities) inhabited the space of that threat, insisting that the pedagogy of Black feminism was precisely about teaching and practicing a way of being that would be detrimental to the systems of capitalism, racism and patriarchal oppression. I read the queer redefinition of Black motherhood that occurred in Black feminist literary production between 1968 and 1992 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 because of the successes and failures of the Black cultural nationalist movement and the white radical lesbian/feminist movement. These social movements produced both "Black" and "feminist" positional markers for social transformation, but at the same time clarified the bankruptcy of single issue organizing for Black lesbian and bisexual feminists. 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. The figures centered here were

vigilantly in conversation with Black women's literary and political expression in Europe, Southern Africa and the Caribbean. If a growing neo-liberal world order required the example of Black women and children to teach the supremacy of development and population control, then this literary movement, at its most radical, taught and practiced an alternative to 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. Black mothers and a queer embrace of Black mothering are dangerous because they teaches a bad lesson. What if all life is valuable, what if anyone can participate in the production of the future by parenting, teaching, surviving? What if the meaning of the world was open to the entire population of the planet? Population control is exactly what it sounds like.

These Women are Out of Control

When 21st century environmentalists, economists and 'family planners' decry overpopulation as an environmental problem (conveniently overlooking the corporate abuse of natural resources) and advocate "population control' in the developing world, they are complying with World Bank official Richard Rosenthal's 1977 suggestion that 1/4 of the women in developing nations should be sterilized to prevent economically disruptive revolutions.²⁵ Immediately after World War II the reconfiguration of economic stability for western powers was based not only on US economic and political colonization of the Western Hemisphere but also on limiting the reproduction of people of color around the world. For example in their 1947 tract *Human Breeding and Survival* Guy Irving Burch of the Population Reference Bureau and Elmer Pendell an

²⁵ Luz Rodriguez, "Population Control in Puerto Rico," Conference Presentation at *Let's Talk About Sex* the SisterSong 10th Anniversary Conference, May 2006.

economist and member of the American Eugenics Society, advocate sterilization in China, India and Puerto Rico as a solution to “reckless overbreeding.”²⁶ Sterilization was further promoted as a development goal through corporations like Fomento in Puerto Rico that emphasized sterilization and therefore decreased maternal leave as an avenue towards company saving, in an “overpopulated” setting such as Puerto Rico where “public health” officials and U.S. researchers collaborated to argue that there was a “conflict between reproduction and production.”²⁷ In other words, reproduction beyond the needs of a reproduced labor force for capital was pathologized and medical agendas prioritized the convenience of corporations over the reproductive choices of women.

Attention to the explicit targeting of the bodies of women in what we now call the global south for the maintenance of the type of economic stability and disruption necessary to create a global capitalist relationship where the global north could retain supremacy, and its impact on the meaning of the reproduction of race across global sites suggests an intervention into the meaning and deployment of a diasporic critical lens that might center, instead of mystifying the bodies of Black women, which, along with the bodies of other women of color, have conscripted into a narrative about national instability, overpopulation and scarce resources that is coterminous with the global capital order. This chapter participates in a Black diasporic critique by outlining and examining the economics of dispersal: the narrative technologies through which economically powerful institutions and states seek to save their economies from

²⁶ Guy Irving Burch and Elmer Pendell. *Human Breeding and Survival*. New York: Penguin, 1947. Cited in Annette B. Ramirez de Arellano and Conrad Seipp. *Colonialism, Catholicism and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, 138.

²⁷ Annette B. Ramirez de Arellano and Conrad Seipp. *Colonialism, Catholicism and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, 143.

disruption, while violently displacing and disrupting the livelihood of women and children of color all over the world.

In this context, while feminist family planning, globalized through Planned Parenthood and other agencies, characterizes birth control worldwide as a step towards women's autonomy, empowerment and reproductive health, the disproportionate funding for sterilization and invasive birth control methods that erode women's reproductive *choice* threatens this mission, and allows the work of family planning clinics and initiatives in the "developing world" to be incorporated into a development narrative that emphasizes population *control* and minimizes *choice* for poor women of color. The long history of birth control testing on women of color has revealed that what is called "family planning" often serves the plans of first world nations to achieve "stability" at the expense of the life-plans of women and families in developing nations.²⁸

In *Colonialism, Catholicism and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico*, Annette B. Ramirez de Arellano and Conrad Seipp admit that in the testing of birth control in US colonized Puerto Rico the "need for a stable experimental population took precedence over the particular desires of the persons involved." For example, "feminist" researchers and proponents of birth control in the United States including Margaret Sanger and Katherine Dexter McCormick saw Puerto Rican women

²⁸ The common FDA approved "birth control pill" marketed to many women in industrialized nations today was tested on women in Puerto Rico and Jamaica before it was ever used in the United States causing sterility, blindness, severe bleeding and other drastic health problems for the young women of color in the Caribbean who served as test subjects under extremely unethical circumstances. Furthermore women in Puerto Rico, Brazil and other "developing nations" have been forced by multinational companies to undergo sterilization as a prerequisite for receiving factory jobs.

as an answer to their need for what McCormick called “a cage of ovulating females.”²⁹ In Puerto Rico, mainland research projects first attempted to use female medical students as test subjects, but they resisted. Then they sought to impose testing on women in prison, and were unsuccessful. Finally they were able to conduct their experiments on women living in housing developments that were marked as blight and slated for “slum clearance.”³⁰ The relationship between the clearing of “slums” and the political acceptability of targeted population control in poor communities is apparent. Researchers working in the Rio Piedras housing development went on to ignore women’s complaints of side effects by attributing them to the “emotional superactivity of Puerto Rican women.”³¹ Meanwhile breakthrough bleeding, cervical destruction and blood clotting that were later proven to be linked to the birth control tests resulted in pain, sterility and death for Puerto Rican women.³² Similar practices have continued into the 21st century, where pathologizing and limiting the reproduction of particular populations serves capitalist economic goals.³³

In a speech at the 10th anniversary conference and celebration of Sistersong, a reproductive justice organization founded by and centering the voices of women of color, Cara Page, former director of the Committee on Women, Population and the

²⁹ Annette B. Ramirez de Arellano and Conrad Seipp. *Colonialism, Catholicism and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, 107.

³⁰ *ibid*, 113.

³¹ *ibid*, 116.

³² *ibid*, 118, 123.

³³ The above is a discussion of moderate manifestations of the pathologizing narrative of racialized mothering. There are also extreme right wing manifestations of this narrative such as the work of MAIA: Mothers Against Illegal Aliens who mobilize a revisionist reading of the 14th amendment that criminalizes immigrant mothers and pregnant immigrant women, accusing them of a plot to “repopulate” the United States and arguing that their children should be denied citizenship.

http://mothersagainstilllegalaliens.org/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=29 (domain name expired as of 1/2/2010. Let’s hope they’ve changed their minds.)

Environment pointed out, that today in the United States immigrant and refugee women are being coerced to take “sterilization pills” such as Progesterex and Quinacrine and that Depo Provera, a contraceptive injection known to cause terrible side-effects including sterilization, severe internal bleeding and organ failure is disproportionately prescribed to young people, poor people, transgendered and queer people and people of color. Page describes the functioning of the narrative that exempts the state and multi-national corporations while criminalizing the sexuality and fertility of oppressed people thusly,

We are blamed for being the root cause of environmental degradation and burdening all natural resources; instead of the top 1% of the wealthier population being accused for the amount of resources they waste or the devastation of war, or toxic waste of weapons....

We are targeted for racist fertility control programs instead of the government being defied for wasting our natural resources; bottling up and selling our water back to us, and re-developing our lands to sell it back to us on toxic waste dumps.

Under the guise of national security we are shamed for having children of color. Blamed by the ‘youth bulge’ mythology that purports terrorism is on the rise because of single mother households, and young males being raised on their own in Africa and the Middle East. Instead of looking at terrorist acts of imperialism, and domestic and international militarization on communities of color and developing nations; or the systems of trauma and violence manifested in the prison industrial complex, or the impact of Christian fundamentalism, war, and generational eugenics.³⁴

Page demonstrates the domestic and transnational narratives that eclipse state and economic violence by blaming environmental and political problems on racialized birth and mothering. Within this narrative of blame, targeting and shaming, the value of the reproductive agency of women and trans people of color and the lives of the children

³⁴ Cara Page, “Controlling Our Communities through Our Bodies” at the Sistersong “Let’s Talk About Sex Conference.” Available online at <http://www.cwpe.org/node/223> (accessed 2/24/08).

born to or raised by these dangerous subjects becomes infinitely less than the value of the “control” proliferated through these well-funded programs.

Black Mothering is Sick

And this narrative about racialized reproduction itself is reproductive, reproducing the status quo through shifting, but linked circuits of pathologization.³⁵ In *Erotic Welfare* Linda Singer explains how at the beginning of the continuing age of the HIV/AIDS crisis, teenage motherhood and single motherhood were called “epidemics,” a pathologization which Singer explains justified the denial of services to young, poor, single mothers and increased regulatory and punitive action designed to squash the “outbreak” of these “social ills.”³⁶ The mass media and policy narratives of “epidemic” justified wars on poverty and drugs that combined to situate disease and enmity in the bodies of poor women, represented through the earlier referent of the Black welfare queen. This rhetoric of Black mothering as a disease follows global health assumptions that Priscilla Wald explores in her work on “outbreak narratives” which she explains developed during the Cold War struggle over “third world” or “developing” nations. Cindy Patton points out that while transnational narratives of disease track it from “third world” sites to “first world sites,” on the domestic scale diseases are imagined to move from oppressed populations within a country to privileged populations within the same political unit. In this narrative, diseases including HIV/AIDS and I argue, racialized mothering as well, originate in the chaos of the ‘developing world’ and threaten the stability of industrialized nations. “Health” Patton argues, is a rational force moving

³⁵ Here I am following Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978 (trans. Robert Hurley).

³⁶ Linda Singer. *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*. New York: Routledge, 1992, 25-28.

from privileged sites to “other” sites that need controlling. In this version of the story, the “social illnesses” associated with the “inner-city” domain of the welfare mother, pose a threat on privileged populations through tax burdens, crime and the generally erosion of quality of life. As Wald points out, outbreak narratives leave out the important factor of poverty imposed on “developing sites” by economic policies. I argue that the insistence that the behavior of “diseased” Black mothering (not simply the biological work of birthing) fosters social illness allows the unequal distribution of educational and health resources to continue unabated and reproduce a social narrative that erodes the actual quality of life by differentially valuing some lives over other lives, teaching us that life is something that can we can put a price on.

Necessary Expendability

In her 2005 article “Feminism, Race and Adoption,” Dorothy Roberts tracks the pattern through which the state denies services and enacts punishment on Black mothers specifically through foster care practices. Roberts reveals that according to the United States Department of Health Services, Black children are more likely to be placed in foster care even when they have the same family circumstances as white children and that in Boston the factor that determined whether children were placed in foster care was not statistically linked to the care or lack of care they were receiving in their primary homes, but to whether or not the families in question were poor enough to be eligible for Medicaid. Roberts documents that once in foster care Black children are often called “orphans” whether or not their parents are alive and foster care agencies hurry to sever the legal rights of Black mothers to facilitate the adoptability of these children into other families instead of facilitating the processes through which mothers could retain or

regain the rights to their children.³⁷ This continuing state practice extends attempts to control the biological reproduction of Black women into an intervention into their ability to socially parent children, cementing the pathologization of Black motherhood *and* mothering simultaneously. Once we can see the narrative of dangerous Black mothering *as a narrative*, however, the shadow value of the pathologized bodies of racialized and gendered people, formerly obscured by state machinations, becomes visible. The criminality of these bodies is necessary to teach neo-liberal economic sense. The benefits of control are learned through the “mistakes” of racialized fertility. And learning is an act of development. The function of the pathologization of potential mothers of color in the development narrative can (almost) be understood through what Achille Mbembe calls “superfluity.”

In “Aesthetics of Superfluity” Mbembe seeks to explain the biopolitics (or politics of life and death) during Johannesburg, South Africa’s transition from a “racial city” under apartheid, to a cosmopolitan city in which racism persists in other forms.³⁸ For Mbembe, superfluity is a way of describing the simultaneous indispensability and expendability of Black life in the construction of Johannesburg. Mbembe draws his use of superfluity from Karl Marx, who in *Grundrisse* explains that commodities gain value not because of their usefulness as objects of consumption or of production, but because they “serve the needs of exchange as such.”³⁹ Mbembe is using the Marxist economic characterization of superfluity to create a link between economic theory and

³⁷ Dorothy Roberts “Feminism, Race and Adoption” in *The Color of Violence: The INCITE Anthology* Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006

³⁸ Achille Mbembe. “Aesthetics of Superfluity” *Public Culture*, 16(3): 373-405.

³⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1973), 186.

psychoanalysis. Superfluity is the hinge of the fantasy that produces “value” without usefulness. For Mbembe the aesthetic of superfluity demonstrates how Black life in South Africa can be expendable while the idea of Black life remains crucial to the perpetuation of a security state designed to dispense with Black life. As Fred Moten explains in *In The Break*, a value that cannot be used is also a criminal trace that not only exceeds but also precedes materiality. Or as Audre Lorde claimed famously “This instant and this triumph/we were never meant to survive.” So while in Mbembe’s framework superfluity explains how that which is not useful in the commodity sense becomes useful on an aesthetic level, the criminality of Black survival, the fact that Black life somehow continues, exceeds both his argument and the neo-liberal system he examines.

I argue that the “somehow” of the criminal act of Black survival is actually the crucial locus for our examination of the relationship between biopolitics and narrative violence. Somehow, Black life continues, and it is that survival of Blackness both in terms of population and aesthetics, that remains a problem.⁴⁰ One way of describing that “somehow” of Black survival is what I am calling “Black mothering” in this project, which includes not only the biological and domestic reproductive labor of Black mothers, but also a mode of survival that redefines productivity, a productivity that is dangerous because it produces a rival world in its criminal presence. My reading of the necessary expendability of Black life departs with Mbembe’s on the point of reproduction. I argue

⁴⁰ In *The Witches’ Flight* Kara Keeling creates “Another Litany of Survival” an instructive discussion of how Black survival is a problem within the filmic narrative, even ironically within Black nationalist or third cinema texts. I will further engage Keeling’s insight in the chapter entitled “A Poetics of Survival.” Please read Kara Keeling. *The Witches’ Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme and the Image of Common Sense.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

that the narrative of superfluity is *not* simply a feedback loop in the collective psyche of the cosmopolitan and racist city triggered by the neutered idea of Blackness. The site of the perpetuation of racism in the post-racial state operates at the very site of the production of Black life. It is that danger that both hinges and threatens the cycle of differentially valued life under capitalism. And the production of Blackness is characterized, criminalized and demonized through the figure of the Black mother.

There is no Black mother in Mbembe's analysis. Although he argues that "reproduction of the racist social formation" in Johannesburg operates through sexual fantasy and repression, he explores this through instances of hysteria attached to the perceived hypersexuality of Black men.⁴¹ Later, when he discusses how the positionality of Black domestic workers and nannies is an instance of disruption that requires spatial "restratification" in the racial city through the carceral placing of nannies in cells in the backyards of their employers, he fully attributes the need for the separation between Black nannies and the "families" they service to a "logic of servility" without any attention to the impact that gender might have on the managing of Black female bodies in the urban space.⁴² Mbembe's argument about the biopolitical operation of spatialized racism to reproduce apartheid in South Africa could be usefully extended by a gendered reading that examined the danger of Black nannies in the white domestic space, and the contradictions between their mothering work in white homes, for white families, and the need for their containment in cells or "maid's houses" in order to reproduce the logic of racial difference. Furthermore, the biopolitical link between what Mbembe describes as the "individual body of the migrant worker" and the "racial body of the populace" is the

⁴¹ Mbembe, 383.

⁴² *ibid* 385, 387.

narrative function of Black reproductivity in the fear and fantasy of the racialized state. When Mbembe describes the way “graphism” operated upon a “site of inscription (that) was the Black body itself” and how “public and private powers traced their signs on the naked *flesh* of the Black body” within an androcentric analysis that does not include mothering, he writes over the maternal analysis of Hortense Spillers that gender is undone through the necessary and bereft body of the Black mother.⁴³ Spillers' analysis is maternal in subject matter but also, I would argue bears a foreclosed maternal relationship to the production of Mbembe's argument. The Black maternal figure, dangerous and necessary, is unnamed, but critical to Mbembe's conclusion that the “unconscious” of the racial city is constituted by fantasy and repression that leads to an aesthetic of Black superfluity. Underneath the narrative of Black expendability is a story about the meaning of Black reproductivity, inscribed on the gendered bodies of Black people, and particularly on Black mothers. This project seeks to reveal and examine the deviant Black productivity that makes the reincorporation of Black life into a narrative of continuing racism necessary. This project inhabits the threat of Black mothering, a criminal or queer productivity that persists as the threat of another world.

Hortense Spillers described this tension in the necessary killability of Black bodies as a narrative function linked to the danger of racialized mothering when she opened her 1987 chapter “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” with a list of mythical names for dehumanized sexualized Black women, explaining “I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I

⁴³ *ibid*, 390. Emphasis added. Mbembe does not cite Spillers.

were not here I would have to be invented.”⁴⁴ Black women, and racialized mothers more generally serve as an object lesson: a lesson in objectification. The marked racialized, feminized, but also masculinized maternal body is crucial to the fantasy that different lives have inherently different worth. Which means in a post-slavery and post-industrial moment in the United States when the labor value of Black people decreased to almost nothing and the Black population became expendable, the criminalization of Black mothers became even more necessary in fueling the policies that would justify the expendability of Black life and continuing logics of imposed inequity on a global scale. Hortense Spillers theorized the slandered presence of Black mothering as a constitutive site at which to intervene in the grammatical reinscription of expendability of Black “flesh.” Spillers points to “the intervening narrative” of African American literature, as a mode through which to reveal the violence of the narrative of the flesh and to create another form. In this project, Black mothering as a mode of literary production, though not always in narrative form, is a site of intervention into the reproduction of Black life as waste.

In other words, my use of the term “mothering” uses the modifiers queer and Black in order to disrupt the normative incorporation of mothering into a narrative of patriarchal family. It is clear from the political discourse on Black mothering in the United States that “Black mothering” is 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 the threat born in the moment Spillers invokes. Black mothering has always been about production (in this

⁴⁴ Hortense Spillers. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in Winston Napier ed. *African American Literary Criticism*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000, 257.

American Grammar Book), or more explicitly the reproduction of abjection, instead of family, but as Spillers elaborates in a later chapter, the law that child would follow the condition of the mother “did nothing to establish the maternal prerogative for the African female.”⁴⁵ My argument here is that behind the demonization of Black motherhood in a neo-liberal narrative structure is a true danger in Black mothering that precedes and invokes its own criminalization. As Fred Moten would say, the criminalization of Black motherhood is constructed, but its threat comes *before* that criminalization reminding us of a queer possibility that the narrative of pathology struggles to foreclose. By adding the term queer, I am invoking the status of Black mothering *outside* the narrative of heteropatriachal “progress” and 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.

Your Mama

An intersubjective idea of Black mothering outside of a heteropatriachal frame was not only a threat to the dominant forces benefitting from the expendability narrative of emergent global capitalism. Masculinist ideologies within the Black power movement and the middle class white feminist movement for abortion and sterilization rights also depended on the pathologization of Black mothering practices. It is crucial to examine the symbolic work of the term “mother” within an analysis of Black feminist survival 1. because the definitions of mothering produced in radical Black power and white feminist

⁴⁵ Hortense Spillers. “The Permanent Obliquity of the In(phall)ibly Straight: The Time of the Daughters and the Fathers” in *Black White and In Color: Chapters on American Literature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

movements provoked Black women to articulate a complicated political position (i.e. Black feminism) that diverged from both pre-existing movements and 2. because the Black feminist articulation of mothering can illuminate the ways in which both Black cultural nationalism and white middle class feminism became collaborators with capitalism and a heteropatriarchal neoliberal system. As Robyn Weigman points out in *American Anatomies* “sameness functions in as feminism’s most intense reinscription of patriarchy’s own illusory logic.”⁴⁶

Though the Black cultural nationalist agenda of the 1970’s and 80’s had almost nothing in common with a white feminist agenda, their limits on the dangerous choices of Black women converged. Both movement had an investment in the reproduction of sameness and the queerness and criminality of Black mothering is the production of difference. Black cultural nationalists opposed access to any forms of birth control for Black women, because the role of Black women was to reproduce a Black patriarchal nation based on their duty to Black men, not their choices about their own bodies.⁴⁷ Though towards the later stages of their work, women in leadership in revolutionary nationalist groups such as the Black Panther Party and the New York City Young Lords party advocated for women’s autonomy of their reproductive choices, many Black *cultural* nationalists, attacked any access to birth control in Black communities as genocide.⁴⁸ But, while a cultural nationalist stance on birth control could not have been

⁴⁶ Robyn Weigman. *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 180.

⁴⁷ See “‘An Instrument of Genocide’: The Black Nationalist Campaign Against Birth Control” in Jennifer Nelson. *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*. New York: NYU Press, 2003.

⁴⁸ For an extensive examination of the stances of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and the Young Lords Party on reproductive choice in their respective newspapers *The Black Panther* and *Palante* see Jennifer Nelson. *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*. New York: NYU Press, 2003. Chapters 3 and 4.

more different than the white feminist approach, each avidly attacked and suppressed the danger of Black women's authority over their own lives and over the labor of mothering. Whereas early white feminism in the United States was complicit in a eugenic movement that targeted Black women and poor women generally for coerced sterilizations and experimental or forced abortions and second wave middle class white feminists opposed Black women's mobilizations against routine sterilization practices, Black cultural nationalist rhetoric attacked Black women's freedom NOT to have children, or worse yet to have children on their own terms.

For example, in 1968 a group of Black women in New Jersey circulated a pamphlet entitled *Poor Black Women* in response to the actions of a local Black nationalist group against the development of birth control clinics in Black communities. The authors of this pamphlet argue that Black men have no right to limit the reproductive choices of Black women, especially when their concern for the production of Black children starts and stops at the womb. The authors argue that since there is no similar initiative to enforce male support of the children they help to produce, it is inappropriate that Black women are given no authority over whether or not or when to have children that they will often be solely responsible for supporting. It is unfair, they argue, to impose the labor of mothering while limiting the authority of Black women to decide when and if they want to give birth.⁴⁹

The attack on Black female authority is a catch-22 built out of a simultaneous requirement for and attack on Black mothering. Black women who choose not to become mothers are blamed for Black race suicide and Black women who practice

⁴⁹ *Poor Black Women*. Boston: New England Free Press, 1968.

mothering by heading their own households are pathologized as matriarchs. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 decree in "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" that the failure of the Black community was the result of a matriarchal family structure that was not viable in the patriarchal society of the United States was not only used to justify policies that punished Black single mothers and took away their ADFC benefits, but was also incorporated and elaborated on in masculinist Black cultural nationalist rhetoric which claimed that by maintaining, supporting and achieving the unlikely miracle of survival for Black families, Black mothers who exercised any form of authority were "castrating" forces, causing the ultimate failure of the Black community. Black women were encouraged to perform the labor of mothering, but not to exercise any maternal authority within the Black social world. As Amiri Baraka elaborated in his collection of chapters entitled *Home*, failure to live up to either side of this paradox effectively emasculates Black men and prevents them from playing their destined patriarchal role.⁵⁰

Therefore, Bill Cosby's recent blame-the-victims-of-racism-campaign, which collaborates with CNN's "Black in America" series and the ongoing political conservatism of anti-welfare Black conservatives such as Ward Connerly and Clarence Thomas has a long history in 20th century ideological history. These contemporary arguments that disparities in educational achievement, health and life expectancy and outcomes in the Black community are not the result of structural inequity or racism, but rather a result of the failure of Black communities to properly value patriarchal family structures rehearse a long-standing campaign against Black maternal authority. This argument, which

⁵⁰ See Amiri Baraka. *Raise Race Rays Raze: Chapters Since 1965*. New York: Random House, 147-154.

illogically supposes that if Black women were to *stop* supporting men, other women and children in Black communities, and were to *stop* struggling to build and support institutions in the Black community that do the work that the state refuses to do on behalf of Black people, somehow the situation of Black people would improve, gains its salience not from logic, but from repetition. As early as the Civil Rights movement when Andrew Young was an aide to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) this pathologization of Black maternal power was applied not strictly to the biological situation of mothering but also to the participation of Black women in social movements. Young explained that men “had a hard time with domineering women in SCLC...This is a generality, but a system of oppression tends to produce weak men and strong women.”⁵¹

In a new preface to the Combahee River Collective Statement written in 1986 Barbara Smith points out the perpetuation the assumption that Black female authority is Black male castration in the male-led Black affirmative action movement of the 1980’s. Smith cites a New York Times article that reports on Jesse Jackson’s Operation PUSH sponsored boycott of Chicago’s CBS affiliate while demanding the hiring of two Black male anchors to replace a Black female anchor. The New York Times quotes Chief Negotiator Reverend Henry Hardy saying

That Black woman is fine, she’s a fine person” said Mr. Hardy, but he added his belief that the employment of Black women impeded the progress of Black men in white-dominated businesses, such as the news media. “The

⁵¹ Quoted in Nick Kotz and Mary Lynn Kotz. *A Passion for Equality*. New York: Bantam Books, 1977, 252. Cited in Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Black male has always been castrated by white America.” Mr. Hardy said. “Black women have always been used to keep Black men in their place.⁵²

According to Hardy by merely being employed, Black women participate in the castration of Black men. Notice that even in Hardy’s serious accusation of Black women’s complicity in the castration of Black men, the Black woman is not an author of even her own supposedly harmful actions. Hardy refers to “the employment of Black women” and historically theorizes that “Black women have always been used.” Like the strategy of pathologizing Black matriachalism, Hardy’s framing of the role of Black women complies with a set-up in which a “white-dominated” system is the only possible agent of power and Black women are and must be pawns, not active subjects of sentences, let alone their authors. Amidst this climate in which the authority of Black women, as mothers or workers was understood to be a threat not only to the state but also to a patriarchally imagined movement for Black political and economic progress, Black feminist authored motherhood into a meaning that was everything their detractors should have feared.

Intertwined with this fear of Black matriarchalism was a sustained demonization of Black female sexuality by patriarchal Black leaders. Like matriarchs, Black lesbians were understood to be a threat to the survival of the Black family. In a letter collected by Barbara and Beverly Smith and excerpted in their important article “I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978,” Cheryl Clarke complains that on a panel she was on a Black audience asked several “immature” questions about homosexuality, suggesting that

⁵²New York Times, March 27, 1986.. Cited in *The Combabee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986, 6.

homosexuality prevents the Black community from reproducing. Clarke replied that “Being gay don’t mean you lose your reproductive capacity.”⁵³ This answer may not have comforted an audience that had difficulty reconciling the ideas of Black motherhood and lesbian sexuality. As discussed in Chapter 1, the audience at the 1978 panel “Black Women Writers and Feminism” at the 4th Conference of Afro-American Writers at Howard University, was met with a similar homophobic response. The first comment, by Frances Welsing was that “if we endorse homosexuality, then we have endorsed the death of our people.” This comment was met with applause.⁵⁴

Stigmas against lesbianism and matriarchalism within Black movements were linked by their shared threat to the (re)production of a Black patriarchal model, which Black cultural nationalists and the more mainstream Black leaders that have followed them believe is necessary to the success of Black communities. I would suggest that this fear of the alternative socialities of households led by women within Black political movements is in line with a consent to capitalism. Adopting Moynihan’s liberal analysis that the Black community would need to adopt patriarchy instead of matriarchy in order to succeed in the patriarchal United States is a mistake that many Black male leaders continue to make, undercutting the possibilities for a truly radical Black sociality.⁵⁵ Toni Cade Bambara addresses this tendency in her chapter “On the Issue of Roles” in her groundbreaking anthology, *The Black Woman*, explaining “It perhaps takes less heart to

⁵³ Barbara and Beverly Smith. “I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand” in *Conditions Four*, 1979.

⁵⁴ “Black Women Writers and Feminism Q&A Session” in *In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora and Lorraine: Chapters and Interviews on Black Women and Writing*. Washington D.C.: Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, Howard University, 1979.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that revolutionary nationalist organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party had a critique of cultural nationalist organizations (such as Ron Karenga’s US organization) that included this collaboration with the dictates of capital.

pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a self, perhaps and androgynous self via commitment to the struggle.”⁵⁶ Maybe the danger of queer Black maternities was that they would require the Black community as a whole to practice a sociality that was fully incompatible with white heteropatriarchy, making deviant Black maternities and Black feminists a threat to movements that challenged only select parts of heteropatriachal capital.

In *Living for the Revolution* social movement historian Kimberly Springer points out that the charge of matriarchalism was what organized Black feminists were most likely to be accused of by Black organizations and even by some white feminists who agreed that Black feminists were betraying their own communities.⁵⁷ Rickie Solinger argues that the myth of the deviant Black matriarch transformed into the myth of the Welfare Queen, the beloved stereotype of policy makers in the 1980’s leading up to the drastic welfare reform of the 1990’s and enabling policies that moved massive amounts of government spending from public services to private sector bailouts and military invasions. Solinger points out that Ronald Reagan, following up on his invention of the term Welfare Queen also coined the term “sob sisters” to characterize people who spoke out against the dismantling of welfare and other public services. This gendered narrative of government spending gives us a clue as to why the narrative pathologization of the poor Black mother was so key to the normalization of neoliberalism. The Reagan administration was symbolically arguing that the state should spend money on masculine pursuits such as the military and the business sector, devaluing state services

⁵⁶ Toni Cade Bambara. “On the Issue of Roles.” in *The Black Woman*. New York: Penguin Books, 1970.

⁵⁷ Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 35.

that were associated with nurturing or sustaining human life such as housing, healthcare, food, schools and or hospitals. The figure of the Welfare Queen allowed lawmakers to make the neoliberal argument that health, well-being, education etc. were individual tasks not community concerns, and that they were failing because of the individual bad choices of poor mothers, not because of the divestment of state support. In a time when state school, healthcare and social service budgets are undercut by the costs of a long-term military invasion, public housing is being dismantled city by city and Congress has approved a 700 billion dollar bailout for banks, it is important for us to look out how the narrative of individual responsibility and the responsibility of the state to the interests of capital over the basic needs of people operates through a particular story about deviant mothering.

Authority and Labor: Writing Mothering

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 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 been compelled to perform despite their exclusion from the domain of proper “motherhood.” This was a crucial intervention for Spillers to make in 1987 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. This section examines the racialized grammar of mothering in the United States in order to contextualize the queer position of Black

mothering and the redefinitions of mothering in which Lorde, Jordan, De Veaux and Smith participated.

Writing Mothering I: The Condition of the Mother and *Roe v. Wade*

The post-civil rights demonizations of Black mothers and accusations of “matriachalism” can be understood as refractions of the racialized capitalist meaning of the term “mother” within the narrative of American law dating from the slavery era and surviving in the language of the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. I find that it is not mere coincidence that made *Roe v. Wade* the catalyst that caused the first Black feminist organizations to distinguish their politics from white feminism and Black cultural nationalists. The trajectory of the term “mother” in American law operates as a key term in the reproduction of labor without autonomy for Black people and women, and for Black women in particular.

One of the earliest functions of mothering in U.S. law is the slave code language of “*partus sequitur ventrem*” a carry-over from classical Roman slave law meaning “the offspring follow the condition of the mother.” *A Law Dictionary* from 1839 written by John Bouvier explains that “This is the law in the case of slaves and animals, but with regard to freeman, children follow the condition of the father.”⁵⁸ *Partus sequitur ventrem*, adopted as law in slave-holding states in the United States (with a brief exception in Maryland) meant that “mother” was the function through which slavery was perpetuated across time, moving from an individual condition to a reproduced state. “Mother” in slave code, is the writing of the condition of slavery onto the bodies of the

⁵⁸ John Bouvier. *A Law Dictionary, adapted to the constitution and laws of the United States of America and of the Several States of the American Union*. Philadelphia: T. and J.W. Johnson, 1839, 303.

unborn. The process of this inscription is visible in the language of the law. According to William Goodell's *Slave Code in Theory and Practice* "The law of South Carolina says of slaves, 'All their issue and their offspring, born or to be born, shall be, and are hereby declared to be, and remain forever hereafter, absolute slaves, and shall follow the condition of the mother.'⁵⁹ This rather overwritten code ("issue *and* their offspring" "born *or to be* born" "shall be, *and* are hereby declared to be") performs the reproduction of slave status in its very structure. This law and its establishment of the "condition of the mother" refers to 1662 'Act Defining the Status of Mulatto Bastards' in Colonial Virginia which says "all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the Mother."⁶⁰ This was a departure from British slave law in which the status of the child, bond or free, followed the condition of the Father. As Rickie Solinger points out, this legal difference encouraged and established the use of enslaved Black women to increase the property of slaveholders through coerced "breeding" with enslaved men and through rape by white slaveholders and their white relatives, guests and employees.⁶¹ Similar laws were adopted in Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, Kentucky, and Louisiana. The language itself seeks to perform an infinite infinitive, where the "mother" is the means of the transmission of the state of slavery across generations. Whereas "mother" becomes the means through which one can be born an "absolute slave," the paternal inheritance line, where slaves are inheritable property, is the means through which one can be "born a slaveholder," a "condition" that

⁵⁹ William Goodell. *Slave Code in Theory and Practice*. New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853, 248.

⁶⁰ Cited in Rickie Solinger. *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America*. New York: New York University Press, 2005, 30.

⁶¹ *ibid*, 31

according to Goodell many slaveholders cite to claim their “innocence” even as they benefit materially from the perpetuation of slavery. The repetitive language of the law was also bolstered by the speech of legislature and the language of court decisions. In 1831 a slave-owning legislator named Gholson repeatedly compared his female slaves to “brood mares,” before the Virginia Legislature.⁶² Judge Jay, author of *Jay’s Inquiry* explains that “A slave has no more legal authority over his child than a cow has over *her* calf.”⁶³ This definition of mothering as the transmission of slavery reinforces patriarchal authority and coincides with the impossibility of maternal authority. The mother passes on her condition, but since she cannot own property, she can merely pass on the naturalized *property of being* a slave. In fact not only does an enslaved mother have no right or access to her children, who can be sold or bartered away from her at any point, but the free mother of an enslaved minor also had no right before the law to sue if any harm was enacted against that enslaved minor.⁶⁴ “Mother”, then, accrues an oppositional definition to “authority” where the primary labor of the mother is to reproduce a patriarchal system of ownership that includes and reproduces gendered inequity.

This loaded definition of mother, haunts the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision because the Texas law that *Roe v. Wade* disputes was enacted during slavery, when the Slave Code definition of motherhood was still in effect. The text of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision usually uses the term “pregnant woman” or simply “woman” to describe *Roe* or the hypothetical subject of the law that abortion policy applies to under the Constitution.

⁶² Goodell, 35

⁶³ *ibid* 113

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 125.

However, in particular cases the text of the opinion itself reverts to the term “mother” as used in the 1854 Texas penal code articles 1191-1194 and 1196. Texas was one of the eight states to criminalize abortion before the Civil War, most other states followed suit immediately after the Civil War. Though Justice Blackmun did not address this in his historicization of precedent in abortion law, I assert that the fact that the criminalization of abortion in the United States occurs in the period immediately before and after the Civil War is not mere coincidence. A national question about whether a human being could or would be property, I argue, requires a question about what the rights and limitations of mothering are as well. The Texas law that criminalized abortion and the Roe v. Wade decision that must refer to this law uses the term “mother” as a space of exception. Abortion, the Texas law decrees, is a criminal act unless it is for the “purpose of saving the life of the *mother*.” Roe v. Wade though declaring the Texas Code unconstitutionally vague, maintains this exceptional use of the term “mother” in the language of the decision. Elsewhere the decision discusses the rights of a “woman” or a “pregnant woman”, but when it comes to the matter of saving the life of this woman she is (must be) not merely a woman, but a “mother.” The language of the Texas statute suggests that the life of the “woman” is valuable (only) to the extent that she is a “mother.” Ironically, since in this exception the “mother” is not going to give birth because abortion is medically justified, she is not necessarily a biological mother at the moment of the laws utterance. She is valuable, worth saving as a *potential* mother, where “mother” retains the slave code meaning of the mechanism through which an uneven propertied order is reproduced. It is worthwhile to save the life of the “mother” so defined, not of the mere woman.

Once again mothering as the labor of reproducing the status quo is split from the agency of any particular woman. A mother is a means of production, *partus sequitur ventrum*, not an agent. So in 1973 when Black nationalists and white feminists reacted to the *Roe v. Wade* case in ways that addressed only (respectively) the function of the Black woman as “mother” and the freedoms of the white woman as “woman,” Black feminists invented a language of mothering as feminist agency that could refuse the reproduction of a state of inequity, nurturing an alternative sociality.

Writing Mothering II: Black Mothering as the Production of Non-Value in Welfare Policy 1900-1996

If slave code offers a definition of racialized mothering in and through the language of late 20th century reproductive choice, the policy and political rhetoric of (and against) welfare in the United States is a collaborating narrative through which the acts of birthing and mothering Black and/or poor children (collapsed in the anti-welfare media and political rhetoric) are portrayed as the production of false or negative value. As Dorothy Roberts explains “Welfare is no longer a system of aid but rather as system of behavior modification that attempts to regulate the sexual, marital, and childbearing decisions of poor unmarried mothers...” and as Anna Marie Smith argues, welfare reform serves a disciplinary role in the lives of poor mothers by seeking to regulate their sexual practices.⁶⁵ I also argue in the section that follows that welfare policy seeks to teach a

⁶⁵ Dorothy E. Roberts, “Race, Gender and Genetic Technologies: A New Reproductive Dystopia?” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34: 41, 2009, 796 and Anna Marie Smith, “Reproductive Technology, Family Law, and the Post-Welfare State: The California Same-Sex Parents’ Rights “Victories” of 2005.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34: 41, 2009, 832.

racialized meaning of motherhood and therefore to regulate the narrative about what life and the nation mean.

Welfare policy and the political rhetoric surrounding the development of an anti-welfare state portrays the maternal authority of poor women as criminal, and literally criminalizes and punishes poor mothers for giving birth to children, and enforces work requirements and social mechanisms aimed to prevent such mothers from passing on dangerous values to their children. Keeping in mind the welfare rights, public housing and healthcare movements led by poor mothers during and after the Reagan administration, I argue that the dangerous values that poor mothers are criminalized for teaching their children and inculcating in society are indeed dangerous values inasmuch as they are incompatible with neoliberal capitalist priorities. Criminalizing the poor mother in the post civil rights era casts the labor of mothering, which includes healthcare, housing, and childcare as individual responsibilities instead of community concerns. This narrative, deployed through the trope of Black mother as welfare queen, enabled the redistribution of public funds and space for private use that we see in its full manifestation in the contemporary moment. In this section I will trace the criminalization and queering of poor/racialized women who choose to have and attempt to raise children in the language through which welfare for dependent children developed starting at the very beginning of the 20th century.

The First National Congress of Mothers in 1898, long before the social security act that would establish American welfare, presents an interesting case in the negative definition of normative mothering and parental culpability for social inequality. Mrs. Theodore W. Birney, president of the National Congress of Mother's introduces the first gathering with a telling aside. She notes that the eve of the 20th century is an "age of

movements” about “every conceivable interest, from the clothing of the Hottentot to occultism.”⁶⁶ In a climate of imperialist classifications of otherness, merely five years after the Columbian Exposition in which displays of “Hottentots” were sensationalized, Birney can joke about these “other” topics before getting down to the “reverent consideration” of “motherhood” which is the most normative and therefore most important of all possible topics. Motherhood should be a normalizing practice in Birney’s view because the children of poor people and criminals are not destined to reproduce the deviance of their parents.. She encourages all of the normal (read white upper middle class) mothers gathered at this congress to think of the “children...born into surroundings which develop the inherited tendency to crime...” and to intervene to place them in “a better environment to secure improved results.”⁶⁷ If these children are taken outside of what will later be called the culture of poverty, they will have the chance to learn and reproduce normative values.

Ten years later Theodore Roosevelt agrees with Briney’s argument. In 1908, at the First International Congress in America on the Welfare of the Child, Roosevelt speaks in very strong terms that some parents, particularly mothers, should be despised. Creating a binary between a woman who knows her proper role in the reproduction of society and a woman who “shirks her duty as wife and mother,” Roosevelt encourages the audience that is gathered to “fulfill his obligations” to the former, but to despise the

⁶⁶ Mrs. Theodore Birney. “First National Congress of Mothers: Address of Welcome” in Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger eds Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics. New York: NYU Press, 2003, 17.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 18.

deviant woman who has “earned our contempt.”⁶⁸ In full agreement with Birney, Roosevelt calls for a “Conference on the Care of Dependent Children” the same year in which he encourages that “neglected or destitute” children belong not in the direct care of orphanages or the state, but rather in the private homes of middle class families so they can reproduce the values of these normative families.⁶⁹

These ideas about the normative family setting in which the act of child-rearing contributes to the national well-being emerge in another form in the 1939 Amendments to the 1935 Social Security Act. By creating a specific form of benefits for widows and child survivors of a father’s death and distinguishing that from the aid received by unmarried women with dependent children this set of policies begin a system through which state support of some children can be distinguished from the support of others, a difference mediated by whether or not the mothers fully participate(d) in heteropatriarchal family forms. This establishes the behavior of mothers as a factor in the relationship of the state to children in need.

By 1960 the Bureau of Public Assistance releases a report that responds to a number of media vilifications of the use of state resources to support “illegitimate” children and/as the poor choices of their poor mothers. The statistics released in this report directly address a number of stereotypes about the implications of welfare. Pointing out that 87 percent of “illegitimate children” were being supported by their parents and communities and that “nonwhite” communities in the United States were

⁶⁸ Theodore Roosevelt. “Fist International Congress in America on the Welfare of the Child: Address to the Delegates,” in Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger eds Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics. New York: NYU Press, 2003, 20.

⁶⁹ Theodore Roosevelt. “Conference on the Care of Dependent Children: Call for the Conference and Special Message to the Senate and House of Representatives,” Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger eds Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics. New York: NYU Press, 2003, 22-24.

supporting 1.2. million dependent children who could qualify for public assistance without actually using public funds while only 200.000 white children are being supported without public funding., challenges the perception that poor children are mere excuses for people of color to siphon public resources. In fact while 30% of white children born out of wedlock received public aid, only the 16% of nonwhite children received aid.⁷⁰ The report also points out that while less than half of one percent of mothers on welfare have 6 or more children out of wedlock, this is the segment of the population “to whom attention is most frequently called” in critiques of welfare, putting forward the false perception that this extreme minority is the typical welfare recipient. In fact the typical recipient had only one or two children.⁷¹ This tendency remained consistent into the 1990’s when welfare was dismantled by the Clinton administration. As Gwendolyn Mink points out in Welfare’s End in the 1990s 72% of mothers on welfare had 2 children or less and 61% never had more children while on welfare.

According to these statistics, alternative (if not ‘legitimate’) family structures within “non-white” communities in the United States that fell outside of the patriarchal system were actually doing a better job sustaining the children of their communities than their white counterparts. So with these clear statistical indicators that the birth of illegitimate children was not causing on undue burden on the program to give aid to dependent children, how did politicians manage to demonize mothers on welfare as anti-mothers, prostituting themselves and producing children in order cheat the state? One factor is a mass media campaign to associate the word poor and especially the specter of

⁷⁰ Bureau of Public Assistance, “Illegitimacy and the Impact on the Aid to Dependent Children Program,” in Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger eds Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics. New York: NYU Press, 2003,177.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 181.

the undeserving poor with Black people. One study shows that while in 1964 only 27% of images of “the poor” in newspapers were African Americans, by 1966 it had increased to 53% and by 1967 72% percent of the images of the “poor” were African American even though only about 30% of poor people were actually African American at that time. The same study says that “pictures of African Americans were disproportionately used to illustrate the most negative aspects of poverty and the least sympathetic subgroups of the poor.”⁷²

Another factor allowing the narrative of the pathological Black mother to emerge for the use of politicians interesting in divesting from public services is a section of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous 1965 report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” In a section of this report titled “The Tangle of Pathology” Moynihan blames the survival strategies of Black communities for their continued poverty. Starting with a back handed and offensive comment “That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary” and adding insult to injury by referencing the successful genocides enacted on American soil, “a lesser people might simply have died out, as indeed others have,” (!)⁷³ Moynihan goes on to blame the labor of mothering, nurturing and community care that have allowed Black communities to survive despite literal attempts at their decimation through coercive sterilization, political disenfranchisement, racist violence, exploitative labor practices and a disproportionate deprivation of resources for their continued oppression, instead of the oppressive conditions levied against them. Moynihan’s thesis in this section, that a matriarchal family structure retards the progress

⁷² Rickie Solinger. Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion and Welfare in the United States. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001, 143.

⁷³ If this is a reference to the genocide enacted on indigenous people on the American continent it becomes even more offensive.

of Black communities in patriarchal America, exceeds the structural formation of individual families. Moynihan depicts the values that automatically hinge to this structure as contagious influences that reach beyond actual female-headed impoverished families to unsuspecting middle class Black children with fathers who may be in the general proximity. Deviant Black mothers and their dangerous sociality is evidently attractive and charismatic enough to draw people into it across class. Of middle class Black people in normative families who live in proximity to working and lower class Black people Moynihan says “They are therefore constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constant in danger of being drawn into it.” In other words socialization among Black people (as Willie Lynch made clear centuries earlier) is dangerous because it cuts across class, while white class stratification remains in place and therefore poses no danger to the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of the United States. This socialization leads to what Moynihan ironically calls “anti-social behavior” meaning criminal actions. However it is the effective socialization of Black communities for survival that Moynihan must criminalize in order to put forth a liberal argument for an anti-social state (“national action”) that will take resources away from poor Black mothers and children. The queerness of the Black female headed household and the potential of contagion as the motivating fear of Moynihan’s argument becomes even more clear when we realize that his indicators for success are linked not to positive life outcomes for Black individuals or families but rather to social reproduction in the most basic terms. Citing a study by Robin M. Williams about Elmira New York, Moynihan laments the sad fact that the majority of Black respondents did not know the occupations of their father’s father. This patriarchal failure of Black children to know their “family occupational traditions” is the reason “Negro children without fathers flounder and fail,”

because white children, on the other hand can draw on a rich tradition of “Carpenters, Wainwrights, Weavers, Mercers, Farmers, Smiths.” Of course Moynihan doesn’t question the instability of “occupational traditions” in a population that migrated out of a declining agricultural economy, used for unskilled labor that is explicitly interchangeable for the uses of industrial capital. A glaring analytical gap in a report about those who are impacted most by deindustrialization in the United States and those who have been traditionally excluded from guilds and unions even when they were trained as artisans. Knowing, and reproducing, the occupation of the father is the measure of “success” that Moynihan looks for, privileging social reproduction and pathologizing a form of socialization that will not and cannot reproduce the strong fatherly legacy of the Wainwright.

Once poverty in America is deceptively and disproportionately linked to Black life and Black family forms are pathologized by well meaning liberals, a political discourse in which poor mothers on welfare (once again deceptively coded as Black in the public imaginary) are making reckless choices that drain the American taxpayers purse strings is available. The argument against welfare, as Rickie Solinger points out, depends on the criminal *agency* of the matriarch figure that Moynihan constructs.⁷⁴ This argument is bolstered by studies that sensationalized welfare fraud without being able to point to actual data or instances of that fraud. According to Solinger, one 1974 study “affirmed that welfare policies created incentives for poor families to break up, for poor women to have babies and for poor mothers to avoid work. The study could not

⁷⁴ Rickie Solinger. Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion and Welfare in the United States. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001, 155.

show that actual persons took these actions in order to obtain benefits.”⁷⁵ Even more sensational statements by politicians bolstered these baseless conclusions.

Representative Frederick Richmond of New York references “a woman, a young girl with no job, a high school drop out has only one easy (sic!) out and that’s to have a child....She figured her only future was to go ahead and become the head of her own household so that she could go on welfare. Now, we all know these facts.”⁷⁶ The transubstantiation of anecdotal “knowledge” about motherhood as a deceptive strategy to cheat the state had widespread political currency across parties and even races during the end of the 20th century. For example despite studies that showed that Aid to Families with Dependent children did **not** have an impact on family structure, marriage age, stability of marriages or marital status at all, but politicians continued to assert that welfare policies posed a danger to the reproduction of normative family structures in the United States. Solinger cites one Republican representative who both pathologizes poor mothers and argues that funding should not be spent on childcare for poor children saying “Increased day care funding is of marginal use if the real problem is mothers ignoring their children.”⁷⁷ The problem with welfare, in this discourse, was the problematic set of choices made by poor women. In the New York Times an editorial suggests “an increasing number of unmarried Black teenagers are choosing poverty by choosing to become mothers.”⁷⁸ The state of Louisiana went so far as to constitutionally (of course unconstitutionally) deny women who had children outside of marriage the right to vote, because their ability to

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 158.

⁷⁶ *ibid*.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 168.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 169.

make choices was so poor.⁷⁹ Poor mothers who did not “choose” abortion or sterilization despite its legality and state efforts to make sterilization **more** affordable than abortion, were making the reckless and selfish choice to produce children that would have no proper father (according to an article in McCall’s), and therefore be a constant burden on the surrogate fatherhood of the state.⁸⁰ The disavowal of the father, or non-participation in heteropatriarchy seems to be the most dangerous choice these women could make. That choice made poor women the queer purveyors of a set of values so inimical to the reproduction of the nation that they could not be understood to be mothers. The campaigns to get poor women “back to work” fully realized during the Clinton era, were based on perceptions that poor women could not be adequate mothers. For example proponents of daycare framed them not as assistance for hard working poor mothers but rather as places to teach “values to the child that the marginal mother cannot provide.”⁸¹ In other words if you cannot provide money or consumer goods to your child, you are also not able to provide them with a sense of self that will make them consent to capital. In the analysis I am putting forward here, that is the good news. And the whole force of the law and the media machine comes down to try to prevent the potential for the transmission of values that do not reproduce capitalism. Welfare workers are given the means to police the homes of poor women looking for bad behavior. Even the temporary residence of an adult in the home of someone receiving ADC can cause them to be charged with grand theft from the state for continuing to receive benefits.⁸² One mother

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 189.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 195, note 58.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 191.

⁸² Gwendolyn Mink. Welfare’s End. New York, NYU Press, 1999, 103.

on welfare in California was sentenced to sterilization for the minor infraction of being in a room where she marijuana was being used.⁸³

Solinger argues that the discourse of “choice” allows a capitalist economy to make motherhood a class privilege. I would argue that the specific characterizations of these choices (Black unmarried motherhood as choosing poverty, poor Black women having babies in order to siphon money from the state) goes a step further. These characterizations of Black mothers and their problematic choices also offer the most damning definition of Black life since slavery. Black life, these accusations insist, is the production of false and negative value. Black women choose to produce Black life to get undeserved money from the state and those Black lives the products, the children and the concept of life, have a detrimental effect on society at large. For example, Gary Bauer, chief aide to Ronald Reagan, and a proponent of abortion and sterilization targeted at poor women said that because of their “reckless choices” “there will either be no next generation, or a next generation that is worse than none at all.”⁸⁴

Representative E. Clay Shaw agreed, arguing for the need for “sterilization of some of these women,” saying “but when they start having these babies one after another, and the terrible thing they are doing to the next generation...something has got to be done to put a stop to it.”⁸⁵ What is “worse than no next generation at all” for a neoliberal politician? This is a queer futurist riddle. It is the negative value of Black life under capital that makes a queer critique more than a simple injunction against a reproductivity narrative. *Some* biological reproductivity can be understood within the narrative of

⁸³ "Woman Battles Sterilization Ruling," Harry Trimborn Los Angeles Times, May 31 (1966)

⁸⁴ Solinger, 194.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 198.

heteropatriarchal capital to be anti-reproductive. That is to say, Black life, thanks to the deviant contagious maternal traces of poor Black women, threatens social reproduction so fundamentally, that late capital seeks to move from the ownership of Black labor to the prevention and containment of Black life itself. This is the threat that inspires this dissertation project. Black mothering, pathologized through the specter of the agency of poor Black women, is queer because it disrupts the social reproduction of capital by offering an alternative social framework.

If the slave code use of the “condition of the mother” used “mother” to write the absence of authority, and welfare policy and politics redefined motherhood as a class privilege pathologizing Black mothers as matriarchs and welfare queens, queer Black feminists exercised and outlawed authority when they rewrote the meaning of mothering, disrupting a capitalist relationship by refusing the split between the labor of mothering and the authority over its significance. One of expression of this stolen authority appears in the literary production of queer Black feminists like Barbara Smith and June Jordan who couched their feminist critique in the language of maternal labor. The name for their autonomous women of color led publishing initiative is, “Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.” June Jordan’s collection of anti-imperialist poems is entitled, “Living Room: New Poems.” Smith call the groundbreaking Black feminist anthology, “Home Girls.” In Essence Magazine interview, Jordan explains to Alexis De Veaux “Poems are housework.”

The form of mothering that Jordan, De Veaux and Lorde theorize in conversation with the economic and feminist activism they were involved in is more than a legitimacy that counteracts the legal and social illegitimacy of Black life. Against a state narrative that insists that Black life means nothing (or less than nothing), survival is an

insurgent meaning, namely that Black bodies are the writing of spirits transforming the world. Mother is key term because it is the authority of Black mothers (in the sense of this intergenerational writing against the social reproduction of Black life as non-value, that makes an alternate meaning legible, if never legitimate. We were never meant to survive, but if we do, it will be through a dangerous and disruptive maternal trace.

Another Form of Writing

“Mother” is the key term that must be rewritten if Black women are to have authority over their lives. This writing in the Derridean sense. The narrative production of the bodies as flesh, which Spillers describes in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, is coterminous with the portrayal of “writing” (which Derrida points out in *Sassure*) as a deviant, monster-producing Blackness which threatens to unhinge language’s assertion of itself as natural and eternal. However, I also argue that to the extent that Black women’s bodies must be made visible as deviance in order to reproduce the monstrous social condition that violates us, that very visibility writes on the social narrative revealing the fiction of originality such that the process of inscription on Black women becomes visible as violence, requiring the production of a dialogic mode of response.

If the narrative work of the pathologization and criminalization of Black women who choose to reproduce biologically enables the nation to cover up its own role as a producer of inequality, Jacques Derrida argues that the pathologization of writing as the deviant counterpart to spoken language enables the normalization of language, such that its tenuous state of constant reproduction becomes invisible. In *Of Grammatology*

Derrida points out the way in which Rousseau distinguishes between good and bad writing, explaining that for Rousseau, good writing “is the divine inscription upon the heart and soul”, bad writing is the “perverse and artful” act that I am engaging in right now, “exiled in the exteriority of the body.” (10) Thus, Rousseau, in Derrida’s reading, reproduces the gendered distinction between mind and body, defining the act of writing itself as a profane counterpart to inspiration, mere manual labor, in order to emphasize that language itself is not produced in human relationships, but is rather received from God. Derrida goes on to cite the linguist Saussure on the perverting effect of writing on upon the “universal” language that he would envision. As Derrida points out, the work of writing is problematic for this “universal language” because writing, as a productive act, problematizes the dream that language could have begotten itself instead of being the work of multiply related producers creating ever inadequate (or at least contingent) descriptions. It is exactly the theory of language that Derrida rejects which enables the narrative that essentializes Black women as non-authors and makes their labor hyper(in)visible through a narrative of deviance, by enabling the mythology of a (god given) norm against which these deviant Black female *characters* emerge. In other words the narrative that reproduces racist violence as the status quo is written on and as the bodies of Black women.

Instead of activating a policy of “inscription” (an obscure legal use of the term inscription which requires the one who accuses to suffer the punishment for the crime he accuses if proven wrong) or constructing Black female authority as mere indictment of the status quo, I instead seek to develop a theory of the Black female would-be author as producer, in the Benjaminian sense. This analysis of narrative production prioritizes the

recuperation of the working will of Black women as creators (biological, literary and otherwise).

The prevalence of public narratives about Black women as an “issue” (never as agents with authority over their “issue” in the 19th century sense) stifled the marketability of Black feminist literary critique. 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

[P]ractically 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.⁸⁶

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. The success of the cover story depended on its ability to completely eclipse the possibility of Black women’s authority, or their self-determination over anything they created in every sense. In order to produce subjectivities in which Black women could be imagined as creators, Black feminist critics, from Gloria Josephs in her 1981 essays on Black mother daughter relationships in

⁸⁶ Barbara Christian, “But What Do We Think We’re Doing: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History” in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women* ed Cheryl Wall, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989, 172.

Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives to Carol Boyce Davies in “Mothering and Healing in Recent Black Women’s Fiction” in 1985, generated revisionist uses of mothering that they distinguished from patriarchal and capitalist definitions of motherhood and appropriations of “mothering.”

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, transforming their bodies into flesh and their offspring into slaves. The reproduction of slavery required that Black maternal production was delinked from and opposed to Black female authority over any person or product they had produced. Fred Moten builds on Spillers’ analysis by emphasizing the shared root *mater* in the words “mothering” and “materiality” explaining that the (Derridean) 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 a the history of Black subjection in the United States could seriously destabilize functions of gender and family.⁸⁷ This creation of a new vocabulary, and a new grammar through which to speak disruption, required Spillers to radically reassess the terms mother and mothering. I will invoke the term “mothering” modified by queer and Black to describe the material intervention of Black feminist literary production: a queer appropriation of the production of difference wherein difference, instead of acting only as a dehumanizing mark, enables the co-production of a radically different future.

⁸⁷Hortense Spillers, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Saidiya Hartman, Shelly Eversley and Jennifer Morgan. “Watcha Gonna Do?: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35:1, 2, Spring/Summer 2007, 300, 304.

It is even more key for those of us interested in a livable world to pay attention to the work of Black feminists who centralized the labor of mothering and defended a sociality that prioritized and valued survival by relating to health, housing, food and the ability to care for ones own children as rights while welfare policies increasingly attacked the ability of poor women to access any of these resources. Key to the redefinitions of mothering, housework and home created by queer Black feminist literary figures is the dangerous alternative that Black mothers suggested by organizing for welfare rights, healthcare, community controlled education and housing rights to claim public resources for community processes of sustenance and survival.

For example, as Rhonda Williams outlines in *The Politics of Public Housing*, at the exact moment that public housing itself began to be pathologized leading up to the contemporary reclamation of these public spaces for private development, Black mothers led a movement based in these housing projects to demand their right to affordable housing.⁸⁸ Similar to the narrative about the dangerous queerness of Black mothers, predominantly Black public housing units were pathologized for their deviant reproductivity. As early as 1962 the *Baltimore New-Post* lamented “Families bred in slums possess other *built-in* problems, and often a radically different set of values,” (emphasis added).⁸⁹ Not an uncommon way to characterize public housing projects, the reproductive terminology of this specific instance places the danger back on the deviant teaching practices of Black mothers, who create an environment in which “a radically different set of values” emerges. This pathologization is once again a cover story for what

⁸⁸ Rhonda Williams. *The Politics of Public Housing : Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Equality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁸⁹ “Cliff Dwellings for the Subsidized Poor,” *Sun*, February 26, 1962. Cited in Williams, 126.

was actually “breeding” in these public housing projects, which was a movement led by Black mothers to claim public resources with dignity and militancy.⁹⁰ The “problem” of the diseased cultures breeding within public housing is the growth of a worldview in which housing is not an individual dream but rather a communal expectation.⁹¹

Impossible Domestication

In April 1981, *Essence* poetry editor Alexis De Veaux conducted an interview with June Jordan called “Creating Soul Food.”⁹² Coming after *Essence* had already published “Where is the Love?” Jordan’s speech from the National Black Writers Conference and a review of her poetry collection *Passion* (which includes a poem dedicated to “the Poet Alexis DeVeaux”), this article was one of a number of articles published between 1979 and 1990 by Black feminists in *Essence*. This set of articles, including Jordan’s later article about the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, Audre Lorde’s “Black Women and Anger” and a number of articles by noted Black lesbian feminist poet, journalist and scholar Alexis De Veaux about solidarity with Haitian refugees and the role of women in the freedom struggles in South Africa and Zimbabwe, was part of an interventionary practice spearheaded by De Veaux and Cheryll Greene who was executive editor and special projects editor of *Essence* during that period. De Veaux and Greene used their

⁹⁰ *ibid*, 212. Williams points out that public housing projects became organizing bases for Black mothers fighting for rights broader than housing as well.

⁹¹ For more examples of poor Black mothers organizing for healthcare and welfare rights respectively see Deborah R. Grayson “Necessity was the Midwife of Our Politics: Black Women’s Health Activism in the “Post” Civil Rights Era (1980-1996)” in Kimberly Springer ed. Still Lifting, Still Climbing: Contemporary African American Women’s Activism. New York: NYU Press, 1999, 131-148 and Joseph E. Paull. “Recipients Aroused: The New Welfare Rights Movement” in Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics 264-268.

⁹² Alexis De Veaux. “Creating Soul Food” in *Essence* April, 1981, 82-150.

positions at *Essence* to disrupt the magazine's usual narrative of Black consumerism and encouraged the large Black female audience of *Essence* to think about Black freedom and gender diasporically (beyond the "Freedom Curl" activator the magazine advertised monthly).

"Creating Soul Food," describes an intimate conversation between De Veaux and Jordan about Jordan's theorization and practice of poetically producing her life. Jordan makes it clear in the interview that poetry is neither a job nor a product. For Jordan poetry is a critical form of mothering. Early in the article, De Veaux explains, "For June, poems are housework."⁹³ This short statement, written in a moment influenced by an international Wages for Housework movement and in a magazine published in the New York City home of the headquarters of "Black Women for Wages for Housework" is no simple metaphor. Though it seems to be an accessible definition of poetry, this equation actually redefines Black women's production within capitalism. However, Jordan's definition, as represented by DeVeaux, did not merely reproduce the socialist feminist argument; they were part of a Black feminist project revealing Black women as creative producers of a criminalized domesticity. In another sense, the framing of poems as housework could and could not fall in line with a longstanding Black nationalist assertion that role of Black women is "in the home." As Kevin Gaines elaborates in *Uplifting the Race*, Black male leaders contemporary with (and exemplified by) W.E.B. DuBois expressed incredible anxiety about the work of women outside of patriarchal homes, an anxiety which has survived and which is very linked to contours of the

⁹³ *ibid*, 82.

campaign against so-called Black matriachalism.⁹⁴ Countering this view in her 1949 chapter “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” Black Communist organizer Claudia Jones points out that the fear of Black matriarchalism and refusing to acknowledge Black women as workers is a capitalist fear. She explains, “The bourgeoisie is fearful of the militancy of the Negro woman and for good reason. The capitalists know far better than many progressives seem to know, that once Negro women undertake action, the militancy of the whole Negro people, and thus of the anti-imperialist coalition, is greatly enhanced.” The project of *Essence* magazine, while drawing on the performativity of Black Power as a beauty aesthetic, drew ideologically on these anxieties of the reproduction of the Black family as a site of capitalist reproduction and did not encourage the “militancy” of Black women. On the contrary, the magazine, a site for advertising beauty and cleaning project to an emerging market, was directed at the bourgeoisie and reflected and taught the values of that class to its readers. And *Essence* magazine was at that time committed to selling a form Black female subjectivity to its readers that would comply with capitalism and succeed within its terms, advertising cleaning products and food products alongside makeup and hair creams. To this day, the magazine insists that though Black women work, their work outside the home should never replace their role within it and that women’s labor outside should never replace or threaten the messianic role of the Black patriarch if he should ever appear.⁹⁵ The fact that Lorde, Jordan, De Veaux and Greene took a militant and anti-

⁹⁴ Kevin Gains. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the 20th Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 169-170.

⁹⁵For example, in August 2004 (the year I started graduate school) *Essence* featured an interview with Jill Scott which explains that secondary to all of her success, her new marriage is her best achievement (“Still Jill” p130) and a huge cover spread with the question “Do Black Men Still Want Us?” consisting of a demonization of

imperialist stance in line with the threat that Jones pointed out decades earlier, within the pages of this particular magazine, is remarkable.

The specific statement “poems are housework,” resides in a dangerous and strategic location. Invoking both socialist feminist and Black nationalist investments in Black women’s domestic labor, this invocation comes after prominent Black women writers have juxtaposed creative labor with domestic labor. The statement, “Poems are housework,” attributed to Jordan through DeVaux, comes after Toni Morrison’s assertion (through the characterization of *Sula*) that Black women are faced with being “artist(s) without an art form,” forced to choose between creating babies and creating themselves (1973) and Alice Walker’s conclusion in “In Search of Our Mothers Gardens” that the confinement of generations of creative Black women in the United States to unrewarded domestic labor is a consequence “cruel enough to stop the blood,” (1974).⁹⁶ In this context the statement is double-edged. Walker attempts to build belief in a tradition of Black women’s creativity by suggesting that somewhere in all the housework rural Black women did, especially in the quilting and the gardening, there was art. DeVaux inhabits Walker’s intervention when she explains that poems are “done at home like women’s more traditional work, raising children, making quilts, tending collard

Black male sexuality through the discourse of the “down low” and tips for how women can “repair” their marriages. The January 2010 issue released the month before my dissertation defense features an article, which is the start of what will be an ongoing column with Steve Harvey, where he expands on his book *Act Like a Lady, Think Like A Man*, where he advises women on how to keep their men by strategically withholding sex. (The December 2009 issue features Harvey and his wife, on the cover presenting them as a model of successful relationship practice.)

⁹⁶ Alice Walker. “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, 1984, 231-243.

green gardens.”⁹⁷ Whereas DeVeaux, the writer, places Jordan within a legible Black feminist literary tradition, I argue that Jordan herself emphasizes the everydayness, presentness, and ephemerality of poetic production. Jordan says she is proud when her poems have the effect of a “good breakfast” but she does not say that she creates these poems *in addition* to housework.⁹⁸ Her statement is a *replacement*. The “housework” of Jordan’s poems works to create a life un beholden to patriarchy. Though this “home” retains accountability to children, it rejects patriarchal control. For Jordan poetry is both work done in the “house” and also the work of creating home as a livable space that is an alternative to the patriarchal family. Jane Jaffer’s definition of the single mother as a “domestic intellectual” on the cusp of the 20th and 21st centuries says that “Single mothers are domestic intellectuals, operating within the usually denigrated realms of child care and house work to rearticulate these realms as ones of political, economic and social possibility.”⁹⁹ Jordan’s work, decades earlier reimagines the labor of mothering and the space of the “house” as an intellectual and creative zone.

The interview/article that these two poets dialogically produce aligns on a redefinition of poetic labor. If De Veaux starts the laundry list of “more traditional women’s work” with the process of “raising children,” Jordan herself refers to “nurturing young people” as the function of the poem.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, De Veaux introduces the readers to Jordan’s work by relating that she first discovered Jordan’s work when she bought one of Jordan’s first published poems “Who Look at Me?” (dedicated to Jordan’s

⁹⁷ DeVeaux, 82.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Jane Jaffer. *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press, 2006, 3.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

son Christopher) as a gift for her younger sister. Poems are intergenerational work in the sense that they are the result of accountability to younger people and also in the productive sense of “generation.” These poems are intended to make a conversation possible. “Who Look At Me?” one of the few poems mentioned in the article, explicitly challenges the function of the gaze in the social reproduction of racism. “Who Look At Me?” directly confronts the criminalization of Black people in the United States and answers the criminalizing gaze with the confrontational, “I am Black alive, and looking back at you.”¹⁰¹ So if “poems are housework” and housework is poetic, than the work of mothering (“nurturing young people”), for this Black feminist poet is not (only) an assimilation, or a disciplining function but rather (also) a fighting stance that makes a rival sociality possible.

This rival sociality is exemplified by the slippery intersubjective relationality that Jordan demonstrates in the article. According to DeVeaux, “June has developed a way of integrating her life so that all her roles and activities feed and support each other,” in a way that is synergistic and holistic but not necessarily self-contained.¹⁰² DeVeaux’s very characterization is a study in the slipping subject: “Whole She is the woman who is the poet who is the community who is the friend.”¹⁰³ This is a poetics of relation¹⁰⁴ through which De Veaux emphasizes the social alternative that the “housework” of poetry makes possible. This rival sociality, an alternative to capitalist alienation, is not only possible as a collective future to be achieved through class struggle, it is an alternative that is intergenerationally present as a relationship that June Jordan lives, when observed by

¹⁰¹ June Jordan. *Who Look at Me?* New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1969.

¹⁰² DeVeaux, 148.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Edouard Glissant (trans Betsy Wing). *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Alexis DeVeaux. Further, when De Veaux describes Jordan as “ (also) a sovereign nation, a people, a woman nurturing and sustaining our lives by living her own,” in 1981 on the cusp between the anti-colonialist moment and neocolonialist economic transcription, she is not making a nationalist statement. De Veaux is advocating a sustainable model of community where work is the collaborative production of life.¹⁰⁵ The term “sovereign nation” is a term that De Veaux uses in her representations of the freedom struggles in Zimbabwe and South Africa and the resistance to U.S. influence in Haiti and which Jordan would later use to protest Reagan’s militaristic disruption of “people’s power” in Nicaragua and Grenada in the pages of *Essence Magazine*. DeVeaux’s description of Jordan as a “sovereign nation” is actually a statement critical of empire and evocative of a relationship that combines solidarity and self-determination. Using the trappings (or even the trap) of domestic Black female subjectivity, De Veaux and Jordan steal back the energy of Black mothering as neither reproductive perpetuation of pathology nor as an affective reproduction of a capitalist labor structure, but rather as a discourse within which to generate the community they desire through their representations of each other as inhabitants of the future they want. Sovereign. Whole. Community. Poet. Friend.

“Outriders for a Queendom Not Yet Assured”

What enabled Jordan and Lorde to make such untimely and queer contributions to the discourse on Black mothering in a mainstream forum like *Essence* in the 1980’s? I would argue that the work of revising mothering was a Black feminist project that started

¹⁰⁵ DeVeaux, 150.

before Jordan, Lorde and DeVeaux's invocations (though not without their participation) and on a geographic scale much larger than the United States.

In 1978, in a keynote speech at the northwest Regional Conference of the Child Welfare League of America, Jordan expressed the political stakes of intergenerational intention, invoking her son, her students at the State University of New York, the young people in her neighborhood and the children being ignored in middle class white homes around the country. Jordan reminded the audience that intergenerational relationships between adults and children were indicative of a sick relationship to the environment and the future, expressed as much through the perpetuation of war as through the abuse and neglect of individual children. Jordan, who survived an abusive household as a child herself, articulated in this speech an ethics of intergenerationality and nurturing linked to Lorde's advice to "mother ourselves." The generative and generational slippage in Jordan's closing statement are pronounced¹⁰⁶:

To rescue our children we will have to let them save us from the power we embody: we will have to trust the very difference that they forever personify. And we will have to allow them the choice, without fear of death: that they may come and do likewise or that they may come and we will follow them, that a little child will lead us back to the child we will always be, vulnerable and wanting and hurting for love and for beauty...¹⁰⁷

Once again the act of nurturing children here resists the reproduction of the present and argues for the creative power of difference in a possible intergenerational relationship where an intergenerationality is not only a relation of accountability between people of different ages, but also marks a generative relationship of desire between multiply

¹⁰⁷ June Jordan in "Old Stories: New Lives" in *Civil Wars*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, 139.

present modes of time. In this project I use the term “intergenerational” to mean that which is *generated* by desire *between* bodies, moments, texts and times.¹⁰⁸

In 1979, Audre Lorde published an article in the feminist journal *Conditions* “Manchild: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response” in which she articulated her role as a mother of a daughter and a son in terms that revised the limits of lesbian feminism, and recontextualized mothering as a politically transformative act, instead of a nationalistically reproductive one. Lorde’s work here is intergenerational in every sense of the term. Lorde opens her article with a gesture to the future. “I leave the theory to another time or person,” she says, while underlining the importance of her personal experience of parenting with her son because, “Our children are outriders for a queendom not yet assured.”¹⁰⁹

Careful to distinguish between “being” a mother and “doing” mothering, Lorde points out that “raising children, male and female, in the mouth of a racist, sexist suicidal dragon is perilous,”¹¹⁰ and devotes the rest of the article to the political implications of raising a son as a lesbian, focusing on the way that parenting as a Black lesbian in an inter-racial relationship teaches her children about the interconnectedness of racial, gendered and homophobic oppression. Lorde uses “Manchild” as a place to characterize herself, her romantic partner and her son as stakeholders, with a larger progressive

¹⁰⁸ More on this revised definition of “intergenerationality” in the section “Queer.Intergenerationality.”

¹⁰⁹ Audre Lorde, “Manchild: A Black Feminist Response” in *Conditions Four*, New York: Conditions Collective 1979, 30. Note that in the same issue of *Conditions*, Barbara and Beverly Smith make a linked move, presenting contemporary letters between Black feminists as historical documents threatened by the exclusionary practices of academic memory. In their groundbreaking “I Do Not Deserve to Be Alone And Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1971-1978” they insist, “We must document ourselves now” positing letters between Black feminists as theory now and in the future. More on this in the chapter “Publish this Letter”.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, 31

community in the crucial action of creating a livable space in the present and the future through the continual disruption of existing power dynamics.

In “Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986,” which Lorde first released in an anthology on lesbian parenting published by gay and lesbian publishing company Firebrand Press, and then republished in her 1988 collection of chapters *A Burst of Light*, Lorde is even more explicit about the politics of parenting. Stating explicitly that with the onset of the AIDS epidemic and the violence of apartheid in South Africa gay and lesbian parents and parents of color are facing genocide, Lorde defines parenting as “fashioning (the future) with a vision rooted in human possibility and growth.”¹¹¹ Far from a queer anti-futurity like the one exemplified by Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future*, Lorde participates in the radical practice of *claiming* the future from the position of those whose lives were devalued and threatened even in the present from which she wrote.

Jordan and Lorde’s articulations of an anti-imperialist poetics through the discourse of mothering precedes and generates a critical feminist diasporic literary critique, committed to producing a viable Black solidarity and political change without *reproducing* the patriarchal requirements of nationalism. The type of collectivized futurist mothering that these mothers theorized was directly influenced by a living example of the “cheap and dangerous socialism” that DuBois was afraid would be produced by the labor of Black women outside Black homes. Outside of the “home” of the Black arts and Black nationalist movements, Black lesbian and bisexual feminists were socializing in socialist ways, sharing mothering as a mechanism in a desired future

¹¹¹ Audre Lorde, “Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986” in *A Burst of Light: Chapters*. Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988, 42.

livable in the present. The sociality that Black lesbian feminists were producing was exactly as dangerous as DuBois would have feared, not because these women were forced to do domestic labor in the homes of lecherous white people (though they were often doing that work, in private homes, in the university and in the publishing industry), but because they were engaged in the alternative domestic work of creating Black feminist space through a mothering relation.

Lorde's radical definition of parenting was not simply a result of her singular prescience.¹¹² Lorde had been participating in a Black lesbian feminist movement that was already defining parenthood on terms that challenged the dynamics of the capitalist family and the reproduction of oppression, individualism and consumerism through the unit of the family. Starting in July, 1977 Lorde was a participant in the Black Feminist Retreats hosted in Boston by the Combahee River Collective, a Black socialist lesbian feminist collective of which Barbara Smith was a founding member. Though none of the responding participants at the first retreat brought their children, the registration forms that Smith sent out each had spaces to indicate how many children the women might be bringing with them, and whether or not they needed support in paying their way to Boston. These were practical measures that actively responded to the persistent complaint by feminists of color that the work of feminism seemed to exclude women who could not afford childcare and travel expenses. In fact one of the major ways that organized Black feminists grappled with class difference was through the navigation of

¹¹² By 1985 Barbara Christian would offer a reading of Alice Walker's *Meridian* that understood it to participate in the creation of a definition of mothering that describing "those who create, nurture and save life on social and psychological terms."

travel and childcare.¹¹³ The structure of the Black Feminist Retreats, down to what might seem like mundane details was oriented towards collectivizing childcare and the expenses it took to bring everyone to the table.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, most of the participants indicated that they wanted to discuss family and parenting at the first retreat. Lorraine Bethel, who would be co-editor with Smith of the foundational *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* in 1979, wrote that it would be crucial to discuss Black mother/daughter and father/daughter relationships at the retreat. Cheryl Clarke, who went on to republish her self-published book of poems, *Narratives: In the Tradition of Black Woman* through Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which was founded as an outcome of the Black Feminist Retreats and who also secured a space for a Black lesbian feminist focus through a decade of work on the editorial board of *Conditions*, wrote that she wanted to discuss “extending the definition of family.” At the second Black feminist retreat in November 1977, the notes from the discussion record that “one woman stated that being a lesbian makes her feel closer to her mother,” and that “as radical Black lesbian feminists it is important for us to be revolutionary role models.”¹¹⁵

These Black feminists, central to the Black feminist alternative publishing movement that would emerge in the early 1980's, included the organizers of the First

¹¹³ The participation of young and working class mothers of color remains a concern in the contemporary movement of feminists of color. For example SPEAK: Women of Color Media Justice Collective (www.radicalaction.wordpress.com) is currently engaged in a fundraising project specifically to support the travel and childcare costs of young working class mothers who are part of the collective and whose voices are crucial to the conversation, but who find it more difficult to attend national and regional gatherings because of economic and childcare concerns.

¹¹⁴ Today SPEAK a media collective of radical women of color is echoing this stance by the Combahee River Collective, launching a CD fundraising project specifically to fund the participation of young mothers of color and their children in radical community building events. www.speakmediacollective.com.

¹¹⁵ All of this is documented in Barbara Smith's manuscript collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York. Box 2 folders 12-20.

Third World Lesbian Writers Conference who also attended and facilitated a workshop at the First National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference in New York City in October, 1979. Audre Lorde was the keynote speaker at this historic conference where she declared an avowedly socialist view of parenting. Lorde said “We are redefining our power for a reason and that reason is a future, and that future lies in our children and our young people. I’m speaking here not only about those children we may have mothered and fathered ourselves, but about all our children together, for they are our joint responsibility and our joint hope.”¹¹⁶ This keynote address came after a controversial conversation over the wording around motherhood in the Third World Women’s Caucus. According to “Doc,” a Black lesbian feminist who covered the conference for *Off Our Backs Newspaper*,

I came into the Third World Women’s Caucus when it was well under way. The women there were discussing the caucus resolution to be presented to the general conference. There were Asian women, Latin women, Native Women and Afro-American women. The discussion when I came in was around the controversial issue of motherhood and how the wording of the resolution could best reflect the feelings of those present. It was especially heartening to hear other women affirm that not only should lesbian mothers be supported but that all third world women lesbians share in the responsibility for the care and nurturing of the children of individual lesbians of color...Another woman reminded us of the commitment we must take to each other when she said ‘All children (of lesbians) are ours.’

Mothering, on practical and political levels for these activists was a combination of simultaneous commitments to a just future and to shared accountability in the present. Patricia Hill Collins points out the “revolutionary” potential of women centered networks and other/mothering in childcare to create a rival economy and disrupt the

¹¹⁶ Audre Lorde. “When Will Ignorance End: Keynote Speech at National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gay Men,” in *Off Our Backs*, November 1979, 8.

reproduction of the family as a property relationship, I want to point out the queer impact of these relationships as they were claimed by lesbians of color (Collins, 123). “Doc’s” representation of the Third World Women’s Caucus at the conference and the structure of the Black Feminist Retreats that generated so much of this activist and literary activity develop a concept of mothering that is as much about an ethic of shared responsibility and socialist relation between women as it is about an intergenerational impact on the future. Learning to “mother ourselves”, in the sense in which Lorde expressed in *Essence*, is a call for the production of a rival sustainability, providing a system to produce a livable world. This project will focus on the place where the invocation of Black mothering in the content of Black feminist literary production meets the process of Black feminism *through* “third world literary” production to reveal an alternate mode of productivity that is indeed dangerous to the status quo.

Kitchen Table Press used exactly this mode of productivity, namely the \$1 pamphlets they released as part of their Freedom Organizing Series, to explicitly shift the narrative of the pathological Black mother. In their 4th pamphlet *It’s a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers* by Barbara Omolade, Kitchen Table Press, founded by Smith, Lorde and other members of the lesbian of color led literary movement they were part of, supported Omolade’s argument that “by daily demonstrating that they can survive and succeed without marriage, that they may even be better off without it, they (Black single mothers) challenge the basic patriarchal ideal.”¹¹⁷ Omolade provides content to the alternative to neoliberalism that Lorde, Smith, Jordan and De Veaux argue for with their revised definition of Black mothering.

¹¹⁷ Barbara Omolade, *Freedom Organizing Series #4: It’s A Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers*. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Press, 1986, 12.

Validating her fellow Black single mothers as experts on their own survival and key resources for each other, Omolade rejects a patriarchal definition of family and instead valorizes collaborative mothering taken on by her extended family of community members, including the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers in Brooklyn and other friends and loved ones. Describing how these alternative structures address housing, food, education, celebration and sanity, Omolade proves the lie that patriarchy is necessary while also insisting that sustenance and wellness are not individual responsibilities but rather community concerns. After outlining the increased criminalization faced by Black single mothers who are also lesbians, Omolade enacts a queer reading of the situation of Black single mothering when she asserts that all Black single mothers who are not in visible heterosexual partnerships are read as “Social lesbians, regardless of their sexual preference,” because of their non-conformity within a heterosexist society. Omolade’s work collaborated with Kitchen Table’s mission to allow the production of a rival narrative about Black mothering outside of patriarchy in this pamphlet and also in her work as a founder and supporter of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers. As Khadijah Matin elaborates in her article “Adolescent Pregnancy: The Perspective of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers,” a major piece of their strategy was their alternative *reading* of the meaning families led by Black women. They propose four key poetic revisions to the narrative of the pathologized Black mother:

- Not *unwed*: No one should be defined by their particular marital status, or be forced into substandard living because they do not choose to remain in unhealthy relationships.
- Not *illegitimate*: Regardless of the circumstances of a child’s birth, he or she is here. To impose a negative label on a child is to say to that child that you do not

expect much from them. Positive descriptions coupled with high expectations are key to motivating our children.

- Not *fatherless*: Simply stated, why define a household by who is not there? A family does not cease to exist because one parent isn't there. How about *motherful*?
- Not *powerless*: The Sisterhood teaches women that they are not powerless; that despite their struggles they are not helpless, and that for the sake of their families they can say, "No!" to unhealthy relationships, to substandard living conditions and inequality in education.¹¹⁸

This intervention against the key terms of the narratives criminalizing single mothers and their children is not only a "think positive" affirmation of the self-esteem of the mothers and children involved, it also provides a structural critique and insists that because they are powerful, motherful, families they have the right to criticize the narrative of economic inequality that impacts their lives and demand social equity.

Mothering ourselves is also a queer intergenerational reading practice. This dissertation repeats the question that Toni Morrison's protagonist and occasional narrator asks in her 2008 novel *A Mercy*. "Can you read?" Ultimately in Morrison's novel the answer to that question depends on an intergenerational relationship: whether a mother and daughter can interpret each other's significance in a way that does not reproduce slavery. My reading practice in this dissertation, or *our* reading practice since you are reading this now, focuses on the dilemma of Black mothering and the narratives that circulate around and through the figure of the Black mother in order to ask the same

¹¹⁸ Khadijah Matin, "Adolescent Pregnancy: The Perspective of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers," *Journal of Community Health*, 11: 1 Spring 1986, 50-51.

question. Can we, across time and space, arrive at a meaning of life that rejects the reproduction of the process of devaluing people and their labor and their time? Can we learn something else here?

P.S. (Never Meant) To Survive

Today the normativity of the heteropatriarchal family structure persists, despite the fact that the number of Black mothers who are not married and the proportion of single mothers across race continues to increase, and in some communities forms a clear numerical majority. As CNN's *Black in America* miniseries just happily affirmed, any family structure that does not consist of a heterosexual, homoracial married Black union is a tragic problem which causes suffering and poor life chances for Black children. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's conclusions about the unviability of anything other than a patriarchal Black family survive, despite the changing demographics of the family in the United States generally.

Even U.S. welfare, a relatively capital-friendly system of social support was never meant to survive in the environment of the neoliberal order that emerged in the post – civil rights era. But the idea that nurturing, healthcare, housing and the general well-being of the whole community are community concerns survives through a queer intergenerational transmission. For example, Martha Benton a Black mother and the leader of a second generation of Black women organizing for their right to public housing in Baltimore says of her mentor Goldie Baker "I am her creation."¹¹⁹ Or the declaration by the founder of the National Black Women's Health Imperative and Sister Care and

¹¹⁹ Rhonda Williams. *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 151.

other sustainable health collectives for Black women saying "necessity was the midwife of our politics."¹²⁰ And the women who founded the Georgia Hunger Coalition who I literally saw chant down the evil EBT/food stamp policy makers at the Jimmy Carter Library when I was 18, or Rosemarie Mitchell at Low Income Families Fighting Together who told me last weekend that her 7 years working for LIFFT is the pursuit of happiness made real even though she cries late at night sometimes. The audacious belief that the undervalued labor of survival for oppressed people can be a community concern and not simply a series of countless individual failure survives despite neoliberalist meritocracy.

Socialist mothering is even more doomed, but it survives anyway. The radical experiments by radical socialist lesbians of color in the 1980's also while nowhere near dominant, also survive in the practices of radical childcare collectives and women of color who continue to revolutionize the meaning of motherhood. Initiatives like Pacha Mama: The Bushwick Childcare Cooperative and the New York City and Atlanta childcare collectives, often with no explicit access to the women of color led radical redefinitions of motherhood developed by women of color feminists in the 1980's, continue to insist that mothering can be a political relation, and childcare can be a long-term community practice of transformation, not merely an undervalued individual task.¹²¹

Autonomous Black feminist literary producers are re-envisioning motherhood as well. For example Revolution of the Lilies Press recently published a limited edition

¹²⁰ Deborah R. Grayson "'Necessity Was the Midwife of Our Politics': Black Women's Health Activism in the 'Post'-Civil Rights Era (1980-1996) in Kimberly Springer ed. Still Lifting, Still Climbing: Contemporary Black Women's Activism. New York: NYU Press, 1999, 131-148.

¹²¹ See Regeneracion Childcare Collective. "Once Upon a Time in Brooklyn" in Left Turn, April 01, 2007. (<http://leftturn.org/?q=node/583> accessed 7/24/08):1

zine entitled “Revolutionary Motherhood” with articles that honor the work of mothering in the women of color survivor led coalition against gendered violence UBUNTU and ones that elaborate a theory of erotic childbirth derived from Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: Power of the Erotic.” Despite the economic and structural factors that threatened the emergence of a radically different function for racialized mothering in the United States, radical women of color and their allies are still engaging mothering as a means through which to halt the reproduction of the status quo by making a different, autonomous sustainable intergenerational relationship possible.

3. Teaching Us Questions: The Black Mutha...and the Transformation of Discipline

“The teaching of poetry... is the teaching of survival.”

-Audre Lorde “Poetry Makes Something Happen”¹

Black Mother as Bad Teacher

The Problem of Language in a Reproductive State

Before the term “ebonics” was invented, June Jordan, daughter of Jamaican immigrants, was advocating for what she called “Black English” as a right and a necessity for the cultural and linguistic literacy of Black children in the United States. Jordan insisted that Black English was no less “standard” than Shakespearean english and argued that if the latter could be taught in school, the former should be taught as well, particularly in predominantly Black schools, because this was the “first” language being spoken in Black homes. Jordan was developing an analytical and literary use of Black English at the exact same time that the U.S. mass media and political machines were developing a language through which to normalize the “culture of poverty analysis” and criminalize the post-industrial Black population with terms like “welfare queen,” “high-risk youth” and “inner-city.” One of the most available markers for insisting that young Black people were poorly raised and incompatible with so-called “society” at large was their use of Black English. Jordan’s justifies her argument for Black English by referring to a generalizable idea of indigenous language production and social reproduction in Black homes. In this section I argue that Jordan’s use of Black English is actually a

¹ Audre Lorde. “Poetry Makes Something Happen,” in Rudolph Byrd, Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall eds. *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 185.

utopian futurist practice that allowed her to create intergenerational possibility and a rival public through her presence.

In her 1982 essay “Problems of Language in a Democratic State,” Jordan protests the way in which “Most Americans have imagined that problems affecting Black life follow from pathogenic attributes of Black people and not from malfunctions of the state.”² Jordan argues that Black urban illiteracy is not proof that Black people are naturally unintelligent, but rather an example of the structural disenfranchisement of Black people based on the refusal of public institutions to reflect the language practices of the people. In order to launch this argument there must be some such thing as “Black English” spoken by Black people. In her July, 1985 essay, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You,” Jordan argues against the supremacy of American “Standard” English arguing that within a condition of “forced poetics,” democracy is impossible.³ Jordan laments the reproduction of the state of Black oppression, explaining, “we approach our maturity inside a larger social body that will not support our efforts to become anything other than the clones of those who are neither our mothers nor our fathers.”⁴

This is a passage worth examining for its complexity, its openings and the questions it teaches us for the present. On a first reading we notice that Jordan is continuing her earlier argument that the “social body” is not supportive of the growth of Black people. She goes on to suggest that this social system, made evocative of a natural environment of growth through her use of the word “body,” seeks to create something

² June Jordan. “Problems of Language in a Democratic State” in On Call: Political Essays. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 27.

³ It is the status of reproductivity in Glissant’s articulation of the concept “forced poetics” that causes me to intervene. See Alexis Pauline Gumbs. “Deglear Magalama: A Blue Airmail Letter” in *MaComere* Volume 8.

⁴ June Jordan. “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You: And the Future Life of Willie Jordan” in On Call: Political Essays. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 123.

unnatural, “clones,” and worse, clones of strangers, “neither our mothers nor our fathers.” One reading of this question, probably the one that the author intended, would suggest that it would be more “natural” for Black children to become clones of their actual parents and not their culturally insensitive teachers. This would be supported by her reference in the same paragraph to the “community intelligence” provided by Black English as an “endangered species” which goes extinct along with “our own proud, and singular identity.”⁵ Jordan’s articulation of Black English here is consistent with both Glissant’s articulation of Natural Poetics and Brathwaite’s examples of Nation Language, but Jordan’s classroom deployment of Black English is a different type of “community intelligence” altogether.

If we reread Jordan’s multiply negative passage about “not” being supported to “become anything other” (or “not”) those who are “neither our mothers nor our fathers” we can see a connection more nuanced than the perceived binary between the natural cultural production of Black communities and the racist social oppression that impedes this natural cultural production that matches more closely the position from which Jordan spoke, as a teacher and poet called to respond to racist oppression from within institutions designed to perpetuate its normalcy. Jordan’s use of clones, reveals an interstice within which we can glimpse the politics of reproduction that this project seeks to disrupt. Society seeks, but fails, to make Black students into clones of their white teachers. Society’s racism succeeds when it uses this failed project of racist literacy to force young Black people into the dehumanized conditions that Black people have survived before them. In this sense the literacy project is successful on its own terms. It

⁵ *ibid*

reproduces oppression, and makes it seem natural. Jordan's discussion of "clones" suggests that reproduction is not natural, but rather social. Racist social institutions reproduce the absence of family sustainability for Black people. Jordan's argument, within this forced poetical situation, rests on the supposed existence of mother and fathers who are actually empowered to "support" the "maturity" of young people, a condition that the statement itself laments. An alternative system of community support for young Black people, managed by older Black people is not an accessible past that Jordan can return to, nor an endangered species to breed in captivity, but rather a public to generate, a utopist project in the making in Jordan's practice.

In order to understand the system of survival and intergenerational production that Jordan sought to initiate by teaching a critical Black English, we need a diasporic context.. The "Black English" that Jordan situates in the urban African American context is not the language spoken at home by her Jamaican parents, aunts and uncles. Jordan cannot reproduce this language by cloning her parents in her own mouth. Though Jordan broke down standard English in the poetry and prose she dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr., Phillis Wheatley⁶ and even her own parents, she never wrote these poems in what she defined as Black English. To understand the function of "Black English" in Jordan's classroom, we need to recognize it as diasporic classroom, demographically and in vision a space wherein communication between Black people is a poetics of relationship that privileges the ontological potential of that relationship, more than the specific "dialect" spoken by some particular Black community in a particular geographic location. Jordan was not attempting to teach students fluency in a particular

⁶ Analysis of Jordan's poems about each of these figures appears in Chapter 4.

dialect, but rather to validate a deviant approach to American Standardized English, that reflected a critique of the economic and social logics implied and enforced through American Standard English. Through context, and by definition, the Black English in Jordan's classroom was not stable, in fact, one of the defining logics of Black English for Jordan was the dominance of the *present tense* and the responsiveness of the language to its continued criminalization in relationship to the standard. One could understand Jordan's lessons as fugitive language, lessons in how to create a language practice among a migrant student population, in the midst of a process of achieving educational mobility and on the run from disciplining logic of the university system. Poetry, would be another name for that language practice, a practice that honors the "otherness" of the student population while also holding out the possibility of an "other" future world for them to participate in. Jordan reaches forward in this gesture towards the otherness of her students. The presence of her students inspires Jordan's participation in Black English.

3.4.2. The Forced Poetics of Intergenerational Address

As Sylvia Wynter argues, poetics operates on the level of naming, as a practice of language production. Edouard Glissant uses the term "poetics" to theorize a mode of speaking and understanding Martinican Creole as a political language practice that reveals and intervenes in the colonial stifling of culture. I invoke "forced poetics" in order to place Glissant's discussion of "Free and Forced Poetics" (which he first articulated at the same First International Symposium on Ethnopoetics where Wynter offered her definition of poetry) alongside Jordan's theorization and use of Black English as what she described as an indigenous language or mother-tongue for an internally colonized population of Black people in the United States.

In 1976, Glissant proposed a poetic reading of Creole language practice based on the Martinican example. Arguing that “ethnopoetics,” the theme of the conference at which he spoke, was “of the future,” Glissant explained the distinction between what he called “free” or “natural” poetics and the condition of “forced poetics” under which colonized people struggled to express themselves. The condition of forced poetics was, for Glissant, the paradox of existing in a social structure in which self-expression was impossible because oppression made self-hood itself impossible. What Glissant called “counterpoetics” was the practice of speaking against the established system from within, an embattled process that I am reappropriating as a queer positionality because of Glissant’s arguments about the infertility and embattled character of “counterpoetics” as compared to the biologically naturalized “natural” poetics through which Martinican men could create a nation.⁷ Barbadian poet and theorist Kamau Brathwaite articulated a theory of what he called “nation language” a decade later, drawing on Glissant’s theory and applying it to a close examination of the language practices of oppressed Black people in the Anglophone Caribbean.

We can see the limits of natural, autonomous, original or authentic language production through a gendered reading of Glissant’s text. At base, Glissant’s essay is about the poetics of Martinican creole, a language generated through resistance to and exclusion from French linguistic and cultural norms as a function of colonialism. Martinican creole, therefore is cannot be considered an “original” or autonomously generated language because of its pre-existing subordination to ‘standard’ French. For Glissant the “situation of the spoken” under colonialism is characterized by the violence

of reproductive theft under enslavement. The use of reproductive labor to produce profit for the slave master is the epitome of dispossession.¹ However, whereas for Glissant forced poetics are a provisional and subordinate form that may lead to a “natural poetics,” I want to assert that what Glissant is calling “forced poetics” is actually a queer positionality which reveals language’s situated contingency and the “natural” is revealed as a desired fiction that perpetuates the theft of subjectivity and reproduces a relation of exploitation. The “natural” relationship between language and colonized peoples that Glissant imagines is still a procreative language, described through metaphors of biological reproduction in which men are properly national because they can own the products of their speech, but also because they can predict and claim the products of the formerly unpredictable feminized bodies of women. The violable body of the Black mother who “reproduces for the master” haunts Glissant’s schematic. The “natural” in this sense is “forced” to reproduce masculine power over violable feminized bodies with no more than a change in positions.

Glissant’s stated desire in his exploration of natural and forced poetics is national consciousness and self-determination, a future moment in which “the Martinican community is able to really speak for itself,” (Glissant, 134). In order to argue for the, somewhat messianic, possibility of this future moment of natural poetic alignment, he deploys a sustained analogy between the development of national consciousness and reproductive birth in nature. He tells us that “in the pace of Creole speech, one can locate the *embryonic* rhythm of the drum,” (Glissant, 124). This reference to a pre-natal rhythm implies heritage and reproduction forward and backwards. Not only does this phrasing predict the eventual birth of a natural poetics, it also contextualizes that birth as part of a naturalized African heritage. He goes on to explain that in regards to the

oral genre of the folktale, “National consciousness is budding in the tale, but it does not burst into bloom,” he thus appropriates natural imagery to illustrate the absence of landscape in the folktale which he describes earlier as “a place you pass through, it is not yet a country,” (Glissant, 131, 130). Thus Glissant creates a natural progression from crossroads to nation as from bud to flower. This reproductive analogy exceeds itself and reveals a masculinist heritage-based teleology that is a hidden desire within the logic of Glissant’s work.

The natural poetics that Glissant argues for as the goal and the apparatus of national consciousness and self-determined community expression is biological heritage itself. Natural poetics can only be derived from a fecund (and imaginary) past and will manifest itself as the ability of a community to reproduce itself through words. The example exceeds its exemplarity. In Glissant’s analysis, the ability of the community to express itself and articulate its own destiny is conflated with the ability to participate as owners in the process of biological reproduction. In this case a natural poetics, the logic through which community voice would emerge, exists within the context of a masculine subject who must produce a legitimate line (in the verbal, written, legal and genealogical senses). And the ability of masculine subjects to reproduce legitimate offspring requires the containment and control of women.

The problem of forced poetics becomes a problem of infertility. Glissant’s explanation of this infertility, through its subsumption of the feminine subject and the female body reveals his nationalist vision as a familiar negotiation of force. For Glissant, alienation from reproductive self-determination is the precondition for forced poetics. He explains the situation of enslaved speech: “Self-expression is not only forbidden, but impossible to envision. Even in *his* reproductive function, the slave is not in control of

himself. *He reproduces, but it is for the master,*” (Glissant, 122 emphasis added). In simple terms this scene of reproductive abjection is rape. I would agree with Glissant that the theft of bodily autonomy through reproductive exploitation is central to a capitalist framework that violently silences the oppressed. However, an important figure in this scene of reproductive theft, rape and the transformation of children into vessels of forced labor is missing. Glissant stalls on the figure of the shamefully feminized Martinican man and articulates a vision through which this feminized, colonized, enslaved man can become properly masculine. He does not address the trajectories of women, and indeed femininity can only be a liability in his analysis. The absence of the female subject within the context of foreclosed self-expression here is also significant because in Glissant’s utopia, a nationalist framework in which heritage is intact and male subjects have the ability to speak and to own their procreation, the woman is *still* in the position of reproducing for the master. The difference is that in this case the “master” is the Black nationalist patriarch. This patriarch’s self expression still depends on the profound bodily and vocal alienation of most Martinicans. Not all Martinicans will be able to speak for themselves in this model. Therefore the terms of Glissant’s vision disable the possibility of his vision; this is the epitomal case of the situation of forced poetics. The situation of capitalist rape *forces* Glissant to articulate his vision in a language that reproduces this situation of rape in another form.

Though Glissant imagines that there is some “traditional culture” in which the predicament of “forced poetics” and the strategy of “counterpoetics” can be avoided, I would make a Derridean intervention and insist that there is no pure or “natural” language practice to be derived from a pure culture somewhere, and while this lack of “natural” poetics may not be virulent in the masculinist sense it is not exactly as

“impotent” as he imagines (121). While Glissant claims that the situation of Martinican creole reflects the economic situation (a situation of neocolonialist consumption instead of autonomous nationalist production), I want to argue that counterpoetics is not the absence of production (127). Counterpoetics, even as Glissant himself describes it, is a queer intervention into the problem of ownership. Counterpoetics is not so much “impotent,” as it is incompatible with heteropatriarchal capitalist success. For example, read J. Michael Dash’s translation of Glissant’s description of “forced poetics or counterpoetics” with Lee Edelman’s definition of the “queer as negation” in mind⁸: “A forced poetics or counterpoetics...does not spring to life from a fertile past, but, on the contrary, builds up its ‘wall of sticks; against fated destruction, negation, confinement.” My assertion is that counterpoetics, which Glissant tells is an “insistence on attempting” to “liberate oneself fully” despite the impossibility of doing so is actually closer to a description of the warrior poetics that Audre Lorde demonstrates, or the fighting words that June Jordan launched throughout her career.

I assert that June Jordan’s articulations of Black English in the 1970’s and 80’s were not only influenced by the ongoing studies of linguists such as Geneva Smitherman, but also by the Caribbean nationalist links between language practice and cultural empowerment for Black people. I do not exempt Jordan from my critique of the gendered violence that these nationalist theories of language enable (remember Jordan claims to be “nationalist and anti-nationalist), but rather view Jordan’s use of Black English in the college classroom as an epitomization of the discursive position that forced those interested in Black freedom to engage the idea of nationalist language, while

⁸ Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.

at the same time providing a means through which to create an intergenerational practice that challenged the status of language as a tool through which to reproduce an already existing society. I will treat Jordan's pedagogical practice of Black English as a poetics, the development of a relationship through language that foregrounds the later, more widely known work she will do explicitly with poetry and pedagogy with her Poetry for the People classes at Berkeley

The Urgency of Intergenerational Address in the Queer Time and Space of the Classroom

Jordan, identifying as the mother of a young Black man, was consistently concerned with police violence and the criminalization of Black boys and men. As is discussed in detail in chapter 5 in 1979 Jordan framed her outrage of the racism within the *Chrysalis* editorial board within her sorrow and fear that every time she heard about yet another murder of an unarmed Black boy by a New York city police officer that it might be her son. In her "Poem about Police Violence" published in her 1980 collection *Passion* she highlights the absence of murder convictions in the repeated "accidental" killings of Black boys and men by police officers using a provocative question along the lines of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells's suggestion that she keeps a gun because if racist murderers come after her she intends to take as many of them with her as possible,

Tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a Black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a Black man
then we kill a cop

you think the accident rate would lower

subsequently?⁹

At the same time, elementary school student, Michael Goode a participant in Jordan's Voices of the Children youth program and anthology, had taught Jordan about the slippery links between the educational system and the prison system, describing his school as "not one of the best schools in New York city and it's not a jailhouse either." Jordan's student speaks here on the connection between the schoolhouse and the jailhouse as the landscape of discipline for Black children in post-industrial New York. Goode's statement not only implies that the schools in New York city run a continuum between educational success and incarceration, it also suggests the disciplinary function of the supposedly oppositional relationship between the educational and policing arms of the state, obscuring the fact that in fact policing violence and incarceration is designed to teach something and that schools are designed to discipline and keep people in line as well, creating a totalizing framework of discipline. By disrupting this opposition and emphasizing the connection between police violence and the problematics of their own classrooms Jordan and Lorde seek to create a space for and with Black youth that exceeds this paradigm.

Almost 10 years after police officer Thomas Shea was acquitted for the murder of 10-year old Clifford Glover , in 1983 June Jordan would struggle to create an intergenerational basis for Black English in a college classroom at SUNY Stonybrook. Jordan struggled to be accountable to the public university students in her classroom, many of whom told her they had relatives brutalized by the police and subject to

⁹ June Jordan. "Poem About Police Violence" in *Passion* (1980) also in *Directed By Desire: Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005.

incarceration with a response to discipline as it emerges in language use. The first rule in Jordan's SUNY classroom was: "Black English is about whole lot more than motherfuckin'."¹⁰ In "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," June Jordan describes the process of creating a shared language between herself and her Stonybrook students that can try to intervene into yet another police murder in Brooklyn. In notes for a presentation that she would do in 1988 in Berkeley Jordan would recall that the situation of that class at SUNY made her understand "language as an act resulting in suicide or providing for survival." Choosing to teach Black English in a University classroom was therefore a serious choice, between life and death. *A whole lot more than motherfuckin*. June Jordan was interested in articulating the politics of presence that Black English allowed. One of the most important rules that she developed for Black English was that everything happened in the present tense. And indeed the present in which the students calculated the value and risk of Black English was tense. In 1973 police officer Thomas Shea was found by a jury to be justified in killing Clifford Glover, an unarmed ten year-old Black boy. According to Audre Lorde, Shea was recorded as saying "die you little motherfucker" while firing the shots.¹¹ A quotidian usage of the queerness of Black youth, the deviant specter of Black maternity accompanies a routine police response to the problem of Black youth. The severe circumscription of Black lifetimes, places a pressure on the present moment. Jordan's guidelines for Black English reflect this tension "our language is a system constructed by

¹⁰ June Jordan. "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," in *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 128.

¹¹ Audre Lorde. "Power" in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 215. (Originally published in *Between Ourselves*, 1976)

people constantly needing to insist that we exist, that we are present.”¹² This is why “all action takes place in the present indicative.” The creation of Black English as mode through which to engage in her classroom came directly up against a repressive pedagogy in the home (ironically the exact opposite teaching that Black mothers were demonized for). Jordan explains “For most of the students, learning Black English required a fallback to patterns and rhythms of speech that their parents had beaten out of them. I mean *beaten*.” (Jordan’s emphasis.) And Jordan herself survived severe abusive beatings in her home. “I mean *beaten*,”¹³ she emphasizes.

So here we have it. These parents who Black youth are not allowed to be clones of are disrupting the process of cloning themselves. These parents apply the pre-emptive discipline in the homes to beat the beat of oppositional Black speech out of their students, hoping that this will save their children from future violence. And June Jordan wants the beat back. Or is it that Jordan wants an alternative intergenerational rhythm? Jordan’s practice seems to replace the temporality of trauma in which parents seek to scare their children away from the brutality that the state wages against people with Black parents, with an intentional queer intergenerationality through which a teacher and her students can co-develop a language that responds to the violence that they continue to survive. “Black English is about a whole lot more than mothafuckin’,” rule number one, develops out of an encounter between Jordan and a student who critiques the Black English she proposes as “too clean.”¹⁴ Jordan describes the “brawl” that ensued as the generative moment for the first rule of Black English: ‘Black English is

¹² Jordan, 129.

¹³ *ibid*, 128.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 128.

about a whole lot more than mothafuckin.” This classroom moment restages, in advance, the scene of familial violence in which parents and children struggle over appropriate language use, but reciprocates it. Whereas in one instance the parents beat the children in the other both the student and the teacher “brawl.” The conclusion is that Black English is not simply youthful rebellion, but is also a matter of terms. In fact the “mothafuckin” itself is the code word for the silent rule of maternally bequeathed worthlessness that silences Black expression to begin with. Thomas Shea says “Die you little motherfucker!” while killing 10 year old Clifford Glover.

The incest referred to in this colloquialism, has various etymologies. One story is that that it refers to breeding practices during slavery during which slave-owners were able to enforce sexual reproductive imperatives and ignore kinship ties between enslaved people.¹⁵ The fact that the cleaner version of the term “mothafuckin” is “cotton-pickin” points to the function of the language of a debased relationship to maternity to the possibility of exploited labor. Whether or not this is actually the etymology of the term which has been outside of American Standard English because of its obscenity, it does invoke the predicament of slavery that Hortense Spillers describes: the inability of mothers to claim any “ownership” of their children that could override a masters right to buy or sell them at will. Jordan and her students leave their intergenerational “brawl” in agreement that “Black English is about a whole lot more than mothafuckin” which has become a verb during the course of their conversation. Black English becomes a practice that includes but exceeds some other practice named “mothafuckin.” I offer that this

¹⁵ See “motherfucker” in the Urban Dictionary <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=motherfucker> “Historically, it was a vicious taunt, a damning insult -- and a veiled allusion to the destruction of Black male familial hegemony under chattel slavery.” (accessed 2/8/10)

relationship describes the situation of a queer intergenerational practice that exceeds social reproduction and offers the intentional, but unpredictable generation of something else.

This reappearance here of a casual reference to maternal incest comes after a veiled invocation of paternal incest. According to Jordan, she first thought to engage a pedagogical experiment with Black English in her college classes because of her students' negative and bewildered response to Alice Walker's use of a southern Black vernacular in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*., which she was teaching in her course "In Search of the Invisible Black Woman." The class actually translated the opening passage of *The Color Purple*, which is a prelude to paternal incest. The passage that the members of the class repeat differently through translation is the moment when fourteen-year-old Celie explains that after giving birth recent child, her mother refused the sexual advances of her father. What we do not hear repeated is the next action. The father rapes Celie routinely and impregnates her twice. The mother's refusal of imposed, loveless and violent sex is the invisible prelude to the rape that remains invisible in Jordan's recounting of the story. The haunting presence of the Black mother emerges through the italicized threat that precedes the passage "*You better never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy,*" which is what the father-rapist uses to silence the daughter-victim, creating the "invisible Black woman" who is the stated subject of Jordan's course.¹⁶ But this act of sexual and silencing violence is disavowed by the way Jordan and the students relate to their act of translation. According to Jordan, "Our process of translation exploded with hilarity and even hysterical shocked laughter," going on to parenthetically

¹⁶ *ibid*, 125.

confide that in their new translation their “favorite line” was the one in which the mother explains that it is too soon for her to have sex. “Once we could stop laughing,” Jordan pronounces that the student’s original negative response to the text, complete silence, was because of the displacement of Black English in classrooms in the United States.¹⁷

But what if this silence was more complex? What if the silence that this large class that Jordan describes as evenly mixed between young Black men and young Black women with a small number of white participants was similar to the silence and shame that Walker’s protagonist experiences in the text. What if the laughter during the translation was diffusing the discomfort of talking publicly about incest and rape. What got published in the classroom through affect, in the bodies of the students and the teacher, that is not published in the text? What if the difficulty and necessity of Black English is at once sexual and semantic?

“*It’d kill your mammy*” becomes “Your secrets could prove devastating to your mother,” in the class’s translation, but the deadly edge is necessary, as is the invocation of the debased mammy figure.¹⁸ *Black English is about a whole lot more than mothafuckin’*. Intergenerational address in the form of an invented Black English is created exactly in the silenced articulation of the debased Black mother, forced to reproduce against her will, unable to produce a future in which her children are safe from violence of any kind. In “‘The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight’: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers,” Hortense Spillers examines paternal incest as a trope of contemporary African American literature present not only in Walker’s work but also in that of Morrison, Ellison, Baldwin, and Angelou, arguing that this theme

¹⁷ *ibid*, 126.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 126.

of paternal incest represents the opposite side of the system that she examines in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” representing a linked paradox of failed ownership through which the literary tradition enacts the violence of the “fixing” western family model on Black bodies by representing the violence of ownership through the violation of the incest taboo.¹⁹ For Spillers, the illegitimacy, or illegibility of Black kinship structures is linked to the “illiteracy” of the dispossessed and excluded double subjectivities of African Americans. Through her title’s gesture to *Moby Dick*, Spillers is not only making cruel pun, but also placing the African American literary tradition in this struggle with illiteracy, arguing that there is no “indigenous” African-American language (the “endangered species” that Jordan would save), but rather only the profound loss through which the violence of African American subjectivity is reproduced in narrative form. The “time of the fathers and the daughters” is always now, Spillers argues, explaining the predicament through which African American literature exists at the violence limit of the patronymic. Spillers pleads with readers of this 1989 that the “romance” of African American literature, represented by figures such as Pauline Hopkins and Charles Chestnut whose stories depend on the reunions of lost family heritages is over.²⁰ The point, according to Spillers, is not to recuperate a lost family but rather to deal with the present struggle in which the ownership of Black bodies, in the guise of fatherhood remains a problem, remains a reproduced violence, “arising each day, as a precise diachronic unfolding, in a situation of blindness and overcoming.” And indeed Jordan’s

¹⁹ Hortense Spillers, “The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight?: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers” in ed Cheryl Wall, *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

²⁰ See especially Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988 (reprint of 1900 edition), and Charles Chestnutt *The Marrow of Tradition* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969 (reprint of the 1901 edition).

predicament is exactly this. How can Black people name themselves outside of the violence of the available language? Her strategy seems to be a return to an imagined family, but the fissures in her text reveal that this imagined family does not exist to be saved or reproduced. She is teaching us a question. The classroom becomes a space of production where the temporalities of the students and the teachers collide to produce “more than just motharfuckin’,” a struggle against the reproduction of abjection through a rival intergenerationality. And indeed Jordan’s text struggles everywhere with the patronymic. What does it mean, for example, that Jordan’s essay is dedicated to the “future life” of someone who has Jordan’s surname, but is not her biological relative, but rather her student. Nonetheless the elder Jordan’s kinship with the younger Jordan, who took multiple classes and wrote an independent study with her, is strong enough that she dedicates the entire collection of essays *On Call* to “the future life of Willie Jordan.” She imagines that his kinship with the rest of the Black youth she is accountable to is strong enough that this dedication can signify Black futurity broadly.

It is significant that this dedication like Jordan’s other engagements with Black English, *Dry Victories* and *His Own Where*, centers on the futurity of young Black males specifically, while standing in for a Black communal future. In *His Own Where* the male protagonist finds home in the adolescent companionship of a young girl in an abusive family. In my reading of the text, the girl herself is the only “where” that the protagonist Buddy, can “own.”²¹ In fact, the phrase “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You,” which a

²¹ June Jordan, *His Own Where*, New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1971. Ironically, the only contemporary use of the Jordan’s book that I know of is ironically in a curriculum designed by Carol Petuch of the New Haven Teacher’s institute specifically for students who hate to read. The curriculum, subtly entitled “I Hate to Read,” describes this text by former Yale faculty member June Jordan as an example of “how not to write,” and

reader might attribute to Willie J. Jordan' Jr's essay about his murdered brother which appears at the end of Jordan's text, was actually created by Monica Morris, one of Jordan's Black female students. Jordan punctuates the essay with the words "I am proud to dedicate this book to the future life of Willie J. Jordan Jr.," in case readers have missed the dedication page at the front of the book. Only readers who read the footnotes at the back of the book will see Monica Morris's name. Jordan's experimentation with Black English as a site of futurity, existed within a forced poetics of gendered labor in which the body of the abused Black girl, in the case of both June Jordan herself and Angela, the female love interest in *His Own Where*, becomes invisible. Jordan leaves us with a question about the predicament of "The Invisible Black Woman." Indeed her course in search of the former finds instead the future life of Willie J. Jordan Jr., beneficiary of the hidden labor of Monica Morris's linguistic invention. So while Jordan struggles to make the abuse that girls experience within the domestic space visible, the survival of the race through the figure of Black boys covers over the top of the labor of women, including Jordan, in the published version of her teaching, just as the classroom laughter covers over the sexual abuse that the students distance themselves from in their standard English translation of *The Color Purple*. Jordan's essay about what can and cannot be represented in an existing social language leaves us questioning exactly that. Glissant exemplifies the situation of forced poetics in his reproductive engendering of natural poetics, depicting the central violence of slavery and colonialism as institutional rape that he is able to describe without directly referencing the body or presence of a

suggests that the major value of this text is to teach students to translate all of the passages into "proper grammar." (<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1980/1/80.01.06.x.html>)

woman²² Jordan demonstrates the need for Black English even as she covers over the failure in the classroom. No one is ready to talk about the sexual abuse Black girls survive. Instead, this discussion, generated by the vulnerability of a Black girl, Celie, and attended by the silence that perpetuates this plight must shift to an acceptable subject, the Black boy, vulnerable to the more visible, more articulable problem of police violence in Black communities. But the violence, the halted, translated subsumed voices of the invisible Black women remain. Question taut with the contradiction of Jordan's re-presenting her own classroom representations of Black English in American Standard English. Question taught by June Jordan's willingness to inhabit the fraught space between motherfucking and the queer potential of the Black mother.

“Nobody Mean More to Me”: Black English and a Poetics of Relation

June Jordan's intergenerational experiment with Black English is both a response to and an example of the violence of owning that, in Spiller's argument, makes Black family pathological and incestuous when spoken in English. Jordan explains that Black English is not about ownership. This imagined language for a dispossessed people “scarcely ever” uses the possessive case, and notes that even if this does appear in the Black vernacular, the user has “wandered outside the underlying worldview of Black English.” Jordan's contradictions are instructive. Not only do the contradictions in

²² “Even in his reproductive function, the slave is not in control of himself. He reproduces, but it is for the master.” Glissant, (122). I too am writing from within a forced poetical gender dynamic. I have sought to foreground my examination of Jordan and subordinate my intervention into Glissant's framework through an unorthodox use of footnotes. I could simply be that I am authorized to critique Glissant (a man, alive) then to critically examine Jordan's work (a prematurely dead Black woman). This could also be my way of deflecting my suspicion that my colleagues in general are more attracted to the close examination of Glissant that appears in this work than my accountability of Jordan and Lorde.

Jordan's work reveal the contours of the structure that she was intervening in, but the stakes of creating a language practice in a context in which unspeakable things remain (unspoken), reveals Jordan's work as productive of a poetics of relation useful for reading her work and for creating an intergenerational reading practice.

In his book of the same title, Edouard Glissant describes a "Poetics of Relation" as "a dialectics of rerouting, asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred."²³ In Glissant's earlier work on *Forced and Natural Poetics* and in Jordan's experiment in *Black English* we see the limits of this ideal. How does *one* articulate a "multiple relationship with the Other"? How do the gendered politics of labor, the differing spatializations of the violence experienced by Black girls and Black boys, the production of coherence out of trauma complicate and constitute the relations that poetry (almost) describes? Glissant is suggesting the creation of an "epic" a founding text that could do the work of "asserting" these multiple relationships, but Glissant himself had already said, at the Ethnopoetics conference in 1976, that "ethnopoetics," meaning the language in which a community can speak and name itself, "is of the future." The present, Glissant argued at the time, was fraught with the situation of forced poetics, the difficult miracles of counterpoetics. Not fifteen years later, Glissant, proclaiming to be echoing and reflecting on his early works, is ready for new "founding works." I would assert that the creation of a language that does not reproduce, in its own iteration, the violence of the existing

²³ Edouard Glissant, trans Betsy Wing *Poetics of Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 16.

relation has a more complicated temporality, requiring us to look at literary production itself, the relationship between work and “works.”

Intergeneratively, I have been imagining the relationship between what happened in June Jordan’s SUNY Stonybrook classroom and what she could represent in her published version of the situation. 5 years after the publication of the essay Jordan herself calls it “The Failure of a Pretty Good Try” in a 1988 presentation at Berkeley.²⁴ Her essay, which she believes was true to the students mentioned and the situation was almost illegible to an all white group of students she taught at University of Wisconsin. In Jordan’s evaluation the essay fails because she wrote it to heal her own heartbreak, Willie Jordan and her other students were her imagined audience, not the people who disagree with her radical moral stance (that Black life is valuable in itself.)

I have been seeking to inhabit the tensions between what Jordan’s language practice itself elides and what her relationship to language teaches. My argument is not that it is impossible to write a grammar for the language practice that Black people in the United States have used to challenge the logic of American Standard English. My revision operates on the level of temporality. Some of the examples of “Black English” that Jordan documents are recognizable in this moment, others seem dated and all may have been particularly regional. The production of oppositional vernaculars often requires a rapid time scale. In order to keep secrets from elders, young people revise the language; in order to combat incarceration, the criminalized invent codes. But the Black English that Jordan imagined was already a language of the future, or more explicitly an ethic of language practice designed to create a democratic future in which Black people

²⁴ June Jordan. “Failure of a Pretty Good Try.” June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 56, Folder 4. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

could be present to each other, and involved in a shared practice of liveable production, not ownership.

In the 1990's the state of California had a problem. Again, it was a problem of migration and public resources. The impact of US trade interests in Central America had increased migration into California markedly. In 1986, California legislators amended their constitution to make English the official language of the state, beginning a series of "English only" legislative acts that continue to impact public education. And in 1994, the state sought to respond with Proposition 147, which would have legally required local police officers to collaborate with Immigration and Naturalization Services and denied health services to anyone not able to prove legal residence. At the same time, California was engaged in population control via the largest prison build-up in the country.²⁵ Proposition 147 was defeated, but the growth of prison funding by billions of dollars continued (and continues). Once again this disjuncture between the proper public and the emergent public had an impact on the University manifested in the so-called "Culture Wars" of the 1990s.²⁶ Preceding the current moment, during which California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger increases funding for prisons and border control decreases educational funding, the University of California decided to dismantle affirmative action admissions. This era also introduced a wave of discussion on the meaning of the public sphere invoking and deviating from the Habermasian concept of the bourgeois public sphere. Much of this literature challenged the supposed unity of the concept of the public sphere arguing that the diversity of social institutions resulted in

²⁵ <http://www.datacenter.org/research/cjca/cjca3.htm>

²⁶ See Roger Chapman ed. *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints and Voices*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2010.

multiple publics. These arguments pointed out the exclusion inherent in the idea of one normalized (de-racialized, de-gendered) public.²⁷ This essay looks at June Jordan as an example of how the public space of the classroom can be constructed such that it produces a differently embodied public accountability.

June Jordan, once again an employee of the state via the University, protested the anti-affirmative action policies of the University in person, with students and published a collection of essays confrontationally entitled *Affirmative Acts* during this period, and in her classroom she defied the monolingualism of the state by creating a poetics of the people, increasingly diverse and based on the principle that good poetry is a reflection of “the people,” not the policy. My examination of Jordan’s letters, reveals that Jordan had visited Berkeley periodically and even served as a visiting professor in the more than fifteen years that she attempted to gain a permanent position at Berkeley so that she could leave the East Coast. Jordan, who left Barnard College before she graduated, finally received a tenured position at Berkeley towards the end of her life, with letters of support from a number of scholars including Barbara Christian and Toni Morrison.²⁸ At Berkeley, Jordan built on the idea of classroom poetics that her earlier experimentation with Black English gestured towards. On the syllabus for the “Reading and Writing Women’s Poetry” class in the late nineties, Jordan requires her students to

²⁷ See for example Russel Ferguson, Marther Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha, Cornell West eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990. and Black Public Sphere Collective ed. *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

²⁸ The merit review appears in Box 78 Folder 8 in the June Jordan Archives at the Schlesinger Library, Harvard University. Assorted letters between Barbara Christian and other administration and faculty appear in boxes 86-91 of Jordan’s Professional Correspondence starting with a recruitment letter in 1976 from Carol Christ.

conduct a performance of their own poetry.²⁹ But the challenge that being present to the diverse mix of students that she encountered at Berkeley (in comparison to the mostly African-American and few white students who had taken her courses on the East Coast), pushed Jordan into an even more dialogic poetics of presence and production.³⁰ She taught “Blackstudies” courses housed in the African American studies department at Berkeley that required students to purchase readers that Jordan created on African American poetry, Asian and Asian American Poetry and Xicana/Latino Poetry.³¹ In her most famous “Poetry for the People” classes, which Jordan describes as “the arduous and happy outcome of practical, day-by-day classroom failure and success”³², she team taught alongside a collection of “student teachers,” creating a collective that sometimes struggled to maintain love and support even through difficult circumstances such as when a visiting speaker verbally attacked Jordan.³³ These students also conducted a high school version of poetry for the people at the local public high school, Berkeley High.³⁴ The ground rules for Jordan’s course, as they appear on the 2000 syllabus and in the course packet are as follows:

Poetry for the people is a program for political and artistic empowerment of students. It is motivated by the moral wish to mitigate the invisibility and the imposed silence of those less privileged than we. Originating inside a public institution, and enjoying full academic accreditation, there are certain ground rules that must be respected inside this experimental and hopeful society:

²⁹ June Jordan Manuscript Archives at the Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Box 79, Folder 1.

³⁰ June Jordan in “Introduction” in *June Jordan’s Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* edited by Lauren Muller and the Blueprint Collective, New York: Routledge, 1995, 4.

³¹ Box 80, Folders 1,3,4,5,6 in June Jordan Archives at the Radcliffe Library.

³² Jordan *ibid*, 4.

³³ Box 78, Folder 14, in the June Jordan papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

³⁴ Box 80, Folder 7 and Box 82 folders 3 and 4, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

1. “The People” shall not be defined as a group excluding or derogating anyone on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, class or age.
2. “The People” shall consciously undertake to respect and encourage each other to feel safe enough to attempt the building of a community of trust in which all may try to be truthful and deeply serious in the messages they craft for the world to contemplate.
3. Poetry for the People rest upon a belief that the art of telling the truth is a necessary and healthy way to create powerful and positive, connections among people who, otherwise remain (unknown or unaware) strangers. The goal is not to kill connections, but rather to create and to deepen them among truly different men and women.

All teaching and writing within this program shall seek to honor this

belief.

These ground rules, which are used in classrooms even today³⁵ can be read as a utopian manifesto, making a radically democratic future present in the classroom.³⁶ And the ways in which Jordan and her students made this poetic practice *public* were decidedly intergenerational and exceeded the boundaries of the Berkeley classroom. The students published anthologies of their own works. The course reader included a T’ang poem that a student wrote “in memoriam” of Barbara Christian after her untimely death in 1999. The students conducted readings as fundraisers with visiting “hot shot” poets who came to campus (many of which had been colleagues of Jordan and Lorde in the SEEK program at CUNY), and sold their collections to raise money for organizing against war and against the genocide in Bosnia among other causes.³⁷ Jordan’s students published an anthology called “Wrong is Not My Name” in honor of a surprised Jordan and encouraged her to complete the assignments of the course generating poems that find their first published homes in course readers.

³⁵ For example, the students in my class at Duke and my online course, both entitled “To Be A Problem: Outcast Subjectivity and Black Literary Production” used the Poetry for the People guidelines to build their own guidelines towards a “community of trust.”

³⁶ Box 80, Folder 4, June Jordan Archives, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

³⁷ Box 80, Folder 6, June Jordan Archives, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

When student/teacher Lauren Muller led a team of students to put together the “revolutionary blueprint” that remains in print from Routledge Books, Jordan had to fight for the intergenerationality that characterized the classroom production to remain in, (or resist) the form of the book. In a December 1994 letter to editor Jayne Fagnoli, Jordan insists that Lauren Muller’s name appear as ‘editor’ and that the students have decided to call the book a “revolutionary blueprint,” not a “liberal manual” as the editors suggest instead. Fagnoli seems to have suggested in an earlier letter to Jordan that the fact that most of the blueprint was “written by the students” was a “sensitive issue” , suggesting that the company was more interested in publishing a work by the famous June Jordan, than by her students. Jordan both uses and disavows the leverage that she has later in her career to reveal the labor dynamics of this literary production, insisting that the fact that the students wrote the blueprint is the whole point, “it is the students that make the course the course.” Of course. The fact that Jordan’s students generated this collection is in large part a measure of the success of the project, but the mainstream publishing word remains resistant to this intergenerationality. The publishing market depends on authority, but the Black feminist thing to do here is to refuse authority, arguing for the visibility of a democratic collective. This was a difficult enough feat in 1994 when Jordan, author of 14 books was able to generate enough support to take the students involved in the collection on a performance tour of the East Coast. This particular future, generated by the struggle of Jordan’s earlier classes is an example difficult miracle of Black literary production, not because progress occurs over time, but because the literary and academic clout³⁸ that Jordan accumulated over the intervening

³⁸ Note that in 1990 Jordan is a big enough name to grace a full page ad in the New York Times Book Review
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decade (a decade which she spent intervening as you will see in a later examination of her use of the letter form) changes the limits of what can be spoken. In this case Jordan, rebuffing a centuries-old tradition in which teachers have taken credit for the work of their students, refuses to own the practice that “the people” generated.

Poetry for the People is just one example of the practice of intergenerational communal literary production that the intergenerational poetics of radical classroom presences created. But this democratic practice of sharing poems, of being “the people” was never removed from the death threats that people of color faced on an off college campuses. One semester the theme for Poetry for the People responds to a contemporary case of police violence and racial profiling against Wen Ho Lee, and includes a collection of newspaper clippings about racial profiling through this particular case. One of the poems that appears first in the course reader for poetry for the people is Jordan’s T’ang for Amadou Diallo, murdered by police officers that claimed his wallet appeared to be a dangerous weapon. This poetics of survival is generated out of the democratic reach of teaching with and for the particular students Jordan met at Berkeley, but they also have a revisionist relationship and precedent in those first Black English experimentations at SUNY StonyBrook,

At the end of her essay “Nobody Mean More to Me than You,” Jordan reveals that the language practice that she calls Black English is embattled at every turn, and its necessity exceeds its present. Its victory is not in expression but rather in the creation of an alternative relationality in which kinship can emerge on terms that challenge the

status quo instead of reproducing it. Jordan's Black English is tested when the indescribable happens, Reggie Jordan, a 25 year old young Black man, brother to younger Black man Willie Jordan is murdered by police officers. And nobody cares. The class ponders the differential defeats they face as they try to respond to the tragedy in the languages available to them. To write in American Standard English, they decide, would be to align themselves with the murderers, with the logic of the system that decided Reggie Jordan was expendable. To write in the Black English that they have created together is the only choice, they decide, but they suspect, correctly, that none of the publications they approach will publish their statement in Black English. The victory is not in the legibility of their statement, the victory is in the rival kinship that these students, who Jordan tells us have all experienced police brutality themselves or through a loved one, have created through their shared engagement in a critical language practice. "At least we don't give up nothing else," they reasoned, "And stay all the way with Reggie." Black English becomes a language practice that validates ignored kinship across death and on the front lines. Likewise, the relevance of Jordan's work is not (only) its prescience, not (only) its beauty, not (only) its unlikely survival, but (also) in its failed perfection. An act called poetry, produces "the people." A practice called "Black English" means Black people can brawl across generations and maybe live to tell a different story about it later. The public space of the classroom, the production of poetry for the multiple generations present, creates a temporal intervention into what "public" means. What can be spoken? What can be heard? What can remain visible? The poetics of survival, a queer relationality is key to the practice of Black feminist production. An intergenerational poetics of presence threatens authority and enables publication otherwise.

“The difference”: Audre Lorde, Power and the Problematic of Black Futurity

Everyone who knows about Audre Lorde knows that she was a poet. People remember Audre Lorde as an activist and a public speaker. Audre Lorde’s articulate insistence on multiple identity positions has proved useful in scholarly contexts as varied as Anne McClintock’s discussion of South African nationalism and NYU graduate students’ explanations of the politics of going on strike within a private university. Some people may know that Audre Lorde was involved in the student takeovers at the City University of New York in the 1960’s, but not many people remember the intersection that Lorde lived most of the days of her career. In addition to teaching in the SEEK program along with fellow soon-to-be literary legends June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, Toni Cade Bambara, Addison Gayle and Barbara Christian, Lorde devoted time and labor to the conflicted aftereffects of the transformation of the New York public university system that she helped change.³⁹ Audre Lorde was the very first Black professor in the English Department of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, she co-taught the very first women’s studies course at this college of police science, populated by mostly male students. But primarily, Lorde was hired to teach “composition” to the newly “opened” student population, a course in which the administration advised literature should not be taught, but rather only the mechanics of writing.⁴⁰ The “composition” that Lorde was hired to teach must have refracted intensely against a background in which police officers were becoming more and more notorious for losing their cool and brutalizing the protesting

³⁹ Without the diligent and miraculous work of Alexis De Veaux in *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004, 102-103, I would not know any of this either.

⁴⁰ Details on John Jay from Helen S. Astin et. Al. *Open Admissions at City University of New York: An Analysis of the First Year*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975, 184.

middle class sons and daughters of the middle class, not to mention young people of color. John Jay itself was founded in 1964 at the height of the controversy over the prospect of the Civilian Review Board in New York City. It may have been believed that professionalizing the police force with a college of “police science” would restore the police force as a symbol of order. Audre Lorde was hired to teach in this environment six years after the founding of John Jay College, when the campus had been moved to 2 converted factory buildings and the makeup of the students replicated the racial tensions of the police force generally (which by this point had organizations of Black and Puerto Rican officers protesting racist police action from *within* the force) in the classroom. Between 1969 and 1974 the population of student at John Jay college shifted from 86% white and 14% Black, Puerto Rican and “other” to 56% white and 44% Black, Puerto Rican and “other.” The percentage of Black students more than doubled and the percentage of Puerto Rican students was six times as large.⁴¹ Due to the open admissions policy, students from the lowest performing high schools in the city, which also were most impacted by police violence, were now training in police science alongside members of the longstanding working class white recruits into the force.⁴² Reading the classroom as a space of Black feminist literary production means acknowledging Audre Lorde’s work in public universities as form of publication, and as a crucial generative site for her theories of difference. While producing the complicated and emerging publics of her classrooms, teaching middle-class (pre-Open Admissions) teachers-in-training at Lehman College to teach underclass New York City public school students, and then

⁴¹ Women’s Club of New York. *The Privileged Many: A Study of the City University’s Open Admissions Policy, 1970-1975*. New York: The Club, 1975.

⁴² See also David Lavin. *Right Versus Privilege: The Open Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York*. New York: Free Press, 1981.

teaching composition to uniformed police officers and underrepresented pre-law hopefuls, Audre Lorde wrote poems about “the difference between poetry and rhetoric.”⁴³ While teaching courses on institutionalized racism in racist institutions, Audre Lorde gave the speeches that are quoted with no contextualization on occasions as various as Anne McKlintock’s discussion of South African nationalism and NYU student striker’s explanations of the difficulty of creating an anti-racist graduate student union. In 1979 when Audre Lorde famously insisted that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ she was standing at a podium in the City University of New York graduate center giving a speech that she had been conscripted to give at the last minute by colleagues teaching in the public university system that would be her employer for the rest of her days.⁴⁴ And by “the master’s house” she explicitly meant the university. She was lambasting her white feminist colleagues for prioritizing tenure and the academic benefits of the university over the transformation that feminism was supposed to mean. The erasure of the university from all discussion of Audre Lorde’s career and the decontextualized mobility of Audre Lorde’s theories of difference across academic disciplines begs a question. Where is the classroom? How does the work of teaching haunt and disrupt the disciplining of the disciplines? Remember that in “The University and the Undercommons” Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey describe teaching as the labor that the university seeks to free itself from (and that scholars seem to flee). There is a question to be taught in the disavowal of teaching not only in the practice of literary scholars, but also in our exclusion of teaching from our readings of literary production.

⁴³ Audre Lorde. “Power” in *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978, 108.

⁴⁴ Audre Lorde. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 110.

My assertion is that there is a danger to the labor of teaching that can be understood through the foreclosure of Black maternity. The university criminalizes and disavows the labor that produces it, seeking to claim knowledge as its own origin. Teaching is a relationship co-produced across generations. It reveals the complicity between knowledge production labor relations. The classroom as a queer space and time of Black feminist literary production reveals the threat of a different relationship.

Soon we will not need you...

Black Studies, becoming Africana Studies or African Diaspora Studies more recently, is faced with the persistent presence of campus violence. In month that this dissertation chapter was first drafted, November 2007, nooses were found at California State University, Portland State University and Purdue University and a swastika was found on the door of a Columbia University professor, only one month after a noose was left on another faculty member's door, prompting frustrated students of color to engage in a 12 day hunger strike.⁴⁵ During this same month students have demanded responses from the university administrators at Yale University, the State University of New York at Geneseo, Hamline University, and Smith College for party costumes featuring white students in Blackface.⁴⁶ And this is only what was in the news. During one month.

⁴⁵ On CSU: <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/nov/16/local/me-noose16>. On Portland State: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14522720>. On Purdue: http://www.purdueexponent.org/?module=article&story_id=8325. On Columbia: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/10/10/columbia.noose/index.html> and <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/13/a-week-into-the-columbia-hunger-strike/> all accessed 2/8/10.

⁴⁶On Yale: <http://www.yaledailynews.com/opinion/guest-columns/2007/11/01/white-yalies-in-blackface-reveal-racism-on-campus/>. On SUNY Geneseo: <http://sg.video.yahoo.com/watch/1462284/4997287>. On Hamline: <http://www.startribune.com/local/stpaul/11550356.html>. On Smith: <http://www.cbs3springfield.com/news/local/11628036.html>. All accessed 2/8/10.

Off campus, 4 Black lesbians are sentenced to jail time for defending themselves from a racist homophobic attacker in Greenwich Village, 6 young Black men are sentenced to jail time for a schoolyard fight prompted by a public display of nooses, an 11 year old boy dies of a tooth infection while Medicaid and an insurance company both refuse to cover the simple procedure that could have saved him.⁴⁷ And it was only three years ago that the governor of Louisiana authorized the National Guard to shoot the mostly Black abandoned population of Katrina stricken areas on sight.⁴⁸ Remembering that Audre Lorde went from teaching teachers to teaching police officers teaches us some disciplinary questions, in more than one sense of the word. The role of accountable intellectuals in a moment when both the University and the legal system are blatantly racist, when self-defense is increasingly criminalized for Black and brown people is increasingly difficult to imagine. Threats, nooses, swastikas and hate mail have increasingly been directed towards teachers who seek to create critical space for discussions about forms of oppression, which I interpret as a demand, from students, and others outside direct campuses, for the university as a site of social reproduction or discipline, not critique, and certainly not the emergence of a radically different society.

I assert that at least one of the questions that Audre Lorde left is the difficult question of intergenerational accountability inside a state narrative of death. Inside a state that states our deaths in advance and justifies them through the means of our birth, Audre Lorde taught people to write. If we read “Power” and “Blackstudies” as poetic first

⁴⁷ On New Jersey 4: http://www.racewire.org/archives/2007/06/black_lesbians_in_nyc_get_11_y_1.html.
On Jena 6: <http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/news/national/usstatesterritoriesandpossessions/louisiana/jena/index.html>.
On tooth infection: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/07/states-even-after-boys-de_n_312877.html.
All accessed 2/8/10.

⁴⁸ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200509/s1451906.htm> Accessed 2/8/10.

person accounts from a teacher who taught consecutively in the volatile atmosphere of a demand for Black studies, the liberal project of preparing white teachers to teach in New York City public schools and the vexed project of teaching remedial writing and structural racism to police officers, we can learn a great deal about the disciplinary alliances between the police state and the contemporary university. Alexis DeVeaux tells us that Audre Lorde wrote note after note about how to transform the syllabuses she had created to teach public school teachers for her new audience of police officers.⁴⁹ In a moment when many majority Black schools have metal detectors and visible police presences, when state prison budgets predict and ensure the failure of public schools, when teachers are forced to act like prison guards, this detail about Lorde's teaching career is important. Audre Lorde sought to teach the mechanics of a sentence to young working class police officers who would not be sentenced to anything if they killed Black elementary school children in 1973. In Lorde's own writing about her teaching she explicitly says that the exercise she chooses to teach the same group are "different the day after the police slaughter of a Black child."⁵⁰ So the question that remembering Audre Lorde's role as teacher teaches me is this: What kind of account does Audre Lorde give of herself in "Power," in "Blackstudies," in a life left to those who would not need her, but who would need so deeply the questions her everyday generated? In a recent conversation, asha bandele, a student of Lorde's when she was teaching poetry at her alma mater Hunter College, told me that if I only wrote one thing about her

⁴⁹ Alexis De Veaux. *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007, 117.

⁵⁰ Audre Lorde. "Poet as Teacher as Human," in *I Am Your Sister: Unpublished Essays by Audre Lorde*. Ed Beverly Guy-Sheftall. . . . p182

experience working with and learning from Audre Lorde it should be “Integrity. She never lied. She always chose *us* over a lie.”⁵¹

How could Audre Lorde be accountable to the police in her classroom and to the memory of Clifford Glover at once? How could Audre Lorde be accountable through Blackstudies to a “Black community” that would not embrace her whole? Even as I write this and you read this, who can we be accountable to, and how? The answer to Lorde’s poetic dilemma is her own theory of poetry. In Lorde’s many public lectures about the poetry and teaching, two of which have recently been published in the new collection of her essays *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, Lorde explains her understanding of the pedagogy of poetry. In “Poet as Teacher-Human as Poet-Teacher as Human” she explains that “Whether or not I ever teach another class, every poem I write is an attempt at a piece of truth,” describing each of her poems as “a learning device.”⁵²

*The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.
Audre Lorde “Power” (1976)*

In her poems “Power” and “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children” Lorde responds directly to the 1973 police murder of ten-year old Clifford Glover. On May 3rd 1973 on CBS Walter Cronkite explained that the officer claimed that the 10-year old child

⁵¹ Asha Bandele, telephone interview with the author November, 28th, 2007.

⁵² Audre Lorde. “Poet as Teacher-Human as Poet-Teacher as Human” in *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings by Audre Lorde*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Johnetta Bestch Cole and Rudolph P. Byrd, New York: Oxford Press, 2009.

pointed a gun at him and then ran away.⁵³ According to Cronkite, no gun was ever found, but Officer Thomas Shea was acquitted of all charges. A jury of 11 white men and one Black woman decided that this 10-year old boy was sufficiently dangerous to justify the actions of the 37 year police officer who shot him in the back insisting, “I didn’t see the size nor nothing else, only the color” in court according to Lorde.⁵⁴

Lorde invokes the various news portrayals of this and other police murders in “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children” lamenting, “rumors of the necessity for your death/are spread by persistent screaming flickers/ in the morning light.”⁵⁵ Here Lorde invokes both the sirens of police cars and the mass media “rumors” that criminalize Black youth. In this poem, dedicated to Clifford, Lorde contextualizes his murder within “Centuries of wasted children/ warred and whored and slaughtered,” this tradition of violence, she claims “annoint(s) me guardian/ for life.” Lorde links this state sanctioned murder to the deaths of young people in wars, the social attacks on the bodies of women and simple slaughter, which is what Clifford’s fate seems to have been.

The policeman who shot this little boy, Clifford Glover, age 10 is also caught on tape saying “Die you little motherfucker,” during the shooting, according to Lorde’s documentation of the event in her poem “Power.” Lorde’s invocation of the term here seems to suggest that the way in which Black motherhood is narrated in the dominant American imaginary is related to the agreement between the police officer and the court that the murder of this child was legal. According to Walter Cronkite, Clifford’s actual mother is the first one to say the words that Lorde affirms here “It was murder.” Lorde

⁵³CBS Evening News for Thursday, May 03, 1973
<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/program.pl?ID=228771>

⁵⁴ Audre Lorde. “Power” in *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978, 108.

⁵⁵ Audre Lorde. “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children,” in *The Black Unicorn*.

contextualizes the language choice of the police officer by reframing the relationship. “The difference” she insists “between poetry and rhetoric/ is being ready to kill/ yourself/ instead of your children.”⁵⁶ It is significant that in 1978 when she republished “Power” in *The Black Unicorn* she restructured it slightly. The phrase “ready to kill” stands alone in the later version.⁵⁷ This phrase has more than one invocation. It is clear that Thomas Shea and other police officers are indeed “ready to kill.” Their routine violence is one of the clearest indicators that racism is not merely rhetoric, but has deadly consequences. Lorde suggests that an effective response to this brutality must be poetic and must use intergenerational pathology (*you little motherfucker*) as an excuse. The effective poetic response must *risk the present. (kill/ yourself instead of your children)* This is important because unlike the dominant hetero/homonormative politics of the future through the figure of “the child” that Lee Edelman decries in his polemic No Future, Lorde is advancing a queer politics that refuses the reproduction of the present, while at the same time affirming the value of life, so pervasively denied to Black youth.

We continue to live in a time where to imagine the survival of Black children is a utopian dream. As Sharon Holland argues through *Spillers*, Black women’s bodies have become the symbolic space between life and death.⁵⁸ And Thomas Shea is heard on tape telling Clifford Glover to return to the dead space of Black maternity, “die you little motherfucker.” Police brutality enforces the narrative that a “culture of poverty” discourse sells. The police embody and enact the policy. Black children are doomed

⁵⁶ Reprint of first version from *Between Ourselves*. In *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 215.

⁵⁷ Audre Lorde. “Power” in *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978, 108.

⁵⁸ Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 6.

because of their proximity to death, death being the other name for the Black mother. In *Passed On: African-American Mourning Stories*, Karla Holloway demonstrates the ways in which the likelihood of “untimely” death for Black people in the United States shapes a cultural relationship to death.⁵⁹ I am extending this argument to examine the queer, untimely ways that Black feminist literary production relates to both death and life in response to the death waged on Black children in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The untimely, early deaths of Audre Lorde and June Jordan and the early deaths of so many Black children make an intergenerational relationship particularly difficult to imagine. The desire for an intergenerational relationship is haunted by the violence in the word “motherfucker” the threat that seeks to transform the poetic reach, the living attempt to create a future in which love could survive, into pathology at every step. The state affirms the statement. *Die you little motherficker*. This difficult miracle of intergenerational reach is made necessary by the continuing deadly effects of the narrative of inherited worthlessness that threatens racialized young people today. Recounting the numerous recent murders of queer young people of color Jose Munoz contradicts Edelman’s dystopic presentism with an unapologetic utopianism. Munoz builds on Ernst Bloch’s temporalities of hope to “call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a “not-yet” where queer youths of color actually get to grow up.”⁶⁰ In collaboration with the Blochian “not-yet-here” is the resource of the “no longer conscious,” those sections of the past that have not become historical. In the next section of this chapter I explore the uncelebrated labor of Audre

⁵⁹ Karla Holloway. *Passed On: African-American Mourning Stories*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

⁶⁰ Jose Esteban Munoz, “Cruising the Toilet: Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity,” *GLQ* 13:2-3, 2007 Duke Press.

Lorde and June Jordan as English teachers. I draw on this “no longer conscious” past in order to intervene in a literary historical mode that can only see poetic products, and to argue against the erasure of lived poetic practice in our criticism and in our classrooms. But more importantly I examine the labor of teaching to demonstrate the extent to which June Jordan and Audre Lorde deployed intergenerational reaching to create untimely presents in which they could collaborate with young people towards non-reproductive future possibilities.

Blackstudies

Starting in 1970, Audre Lorde taught at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a branch of the City University of New York for ten years. Audre Lorde was the first Black faculty member to teach at John Jay and it is likely that she was hired because of the implementation of the open admissions policy that she supported students in pushing for during the takeovers.⁶¹ “Poetry is not a luxury,” and it is also not a livelihood, not even for the legendary, especially not for the tokenized. But the labor that supported Audre Lorde’s radical life is something in our no longer conscious. And I have offered you a reading of Audre Lorde’s poems against police brutality (above) without reminding you that while she wrote and published those poems, while Thomas Shea got away with killing Clifford Glover, a little boy, Audre Lorde was teaching at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Imagine teaching composition, the art of the coherent sentence under the name of such a contradiction “Criminal Justice.” Audre Lorde was teaching remedial writing to an interracial group of police officers that wore their full uniforms, including their guns to her class each day. And people wonder why Audre Lorde was able to speak

⁶¹ DeVeaux, 117.

with such eloquence and nuance about “the master’s tools” at the Second Sex conference at CUNY graduate center. Audre Lorde was teaching what Alexis De Veaux calls “an explosive mix” of armed police officers and newly admitted working class students at John Jay day in and day out.⁶²

Imagine what it was like to teach armed police officers to write into each other’s understanding across race. And that was the basic thing. Lorde also taught a class she had designed during her earlier work training mostly white teachers to work in a mostly Black public school system at Lehman College called “Race and the Urban Situation” in the even more charged atmosphere of John Jay. According to De Veaux’s close examination of Lorde’s personal papers, she revised and revised and revised lectures on institutionalized oppression, race, gender and class, Black middle class complicity in racist oppression, foolish ideas of Black pride and the effects of stereotyping during these years at John Jay. I have had the privilege of working with teachers who have every right to fear the taught violence of the students they face, and who bravely persist in unteaching that violence.⁶³ Audre Lorde also co-taught the first women’s studies course at John Jay “Women in History and Literature in Black and White” with Blanche Cook. Cook remembers that within the first week the firefighters and police officers in the class brought their mothers and sisters into the room and that by the second week they were “invaded” by the women from the New York City gay bars. They moved the class to a bigger room.⁶⁴ This style of teaching, like the teaching that Jordan would do at Berkeley later, blurred the lines between academic space and street space, all the more

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ You know who you are.

⁶⁴ Blanche Cook at “Sister Comrade” a celebration of the lives and work of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker at First Congregational Church in Oakland California on November 3rd 2007.

appropriate because of the roles their students would play on the streets of New York. This type of teaching threatens to turn academia's rigorously guarded insides of academia, out. And indeed it forced Lorde and Cook to come out as lesbians to their students. The bravery of some teachers threatens the reproductive imperative of training schools. I have witnessed this type of work and seen how it can become a life's work, and I am taking this moment to insist that such work should not be invisible. But the work of teachers is largely thankless, as is the unpaid or appropriated labor of mothering, and herein lies the revolutionary potential of mothering and teaching as intergenerational practices that awaken utopian futures.

Melinda Goodman, Audre Lorde's successor at Hunter College wrote, "respect for her students is overwhelming. She knows what it's taken for us to be here because she knows what it's taken for her to be here with us."⁶⁵ Audre Lorde expresses the difficult temporality of pedagogical presence in her poem "Blackstudies," published in her last book with Black Arts Movement Broadside Press, *New York Head Shop and Museum*. Even though Lorde won a Broadside Poets award for her work in *New York Head Shop and Museum*, and the book included "Love Poem" her first published poem explicitly expressing love for a woman this publication represented the end of a difficult relationship the Black arts publishing apparatus. According to Alexis De Veaux's research, Dudley Randall, who despite his own positive reviews of her work was reluctant to even publish Lorde until Gwendolyn Brooks convinced him to, claimed not to understand the gender of the addressee in "Love Poem" and had refused to allow it to be

⁶⁵ Blanche Cook cites Goodman outloud at the Sister Comrade event and in the biography she co-wrote on the website http://web.mac.com/lisbetslife/Sister_Comrade/Audre.html, but does not tell us the original appearance of the quotation. I am still looking. (The Sister Comrade website has expired.)

included in *From a Land Where Other People Live*, Lorde's first Broadside book. After *From a Land Where Other People Live*, a small cardstock booklet, was nominated for the American Book Award⁶⁶ while *New York Head Shop and Museum* was already in production, Lorde ended what she called the betrayal of "her own need for the Black community's embrace."⁶⁷

*I worry on nationalist holidays
make a fetish of lateness
with limp unbelieved excuses
shunning the use of pronouns
as an indirect assault
what skin I have left..."*
-Blackstudies

Clare Coss, a close friend of Audre Lorde remembers her difficult and fearful commitment never to be censored again. In 1973, before *New York Head Shop and Museum* was published she read the poem, which Coss calls "brave with pronouns," to a packed audience in a women owned bookstore in Manhattan.⁶⁸ After *NYHSM* she published the rest of her work through white-owned and operated presses.

Though Lorde felt stifled by the heterosexist nationalist politics of Broadside Press, her poem "Blackstudies" was generated both by her work as a teacher and her support of Black and Puerto Rican student takeovers at City College in 1969. The classroom is a place of literary production. Lorde's classroom experience produced this poem and dialogically produced the impossible discipline, "BlackStudies." Though, as

⁶⁶ Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich were also nominated for the National Book Award in 1974. Rich ultimately won, but she read an acceptance speech that all three women had written together, a demonstration of their refusal to reify poetry as individual labor.

⁶⁷ De Veaux, 129-131

⁶⁸ Clare Coss at "Sister Comrade" an event in honor of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker at First Congregational Church in Oakland, CA on Nov. 3rd 20007.

she mentions in her speech “I am Your Sister” she was very critical of the way that Black women were convinced to have sex in occupied building as a form of “revolutionary” service to male students, she was one of the teachers who expressed solidarity by bringing food and blankets to students and teaching her classes as part of the “Harlem University” that the students created during the takeover.⁶⁹ Coming immediately after her first teaching job as a writer in residence at the historically Black Tougaloo College in Mississippi, Lorde’s composition teaching experience at City College was her first engaged encounter with the grammatical structures. De Veaux explains that “She came to see these rudiments as arbitrary, liberating as well as restrictive. Tenses were, she learned, simply a way of ordering time.”⁷⁰

*In a room on the 17th floor my spirit choosing
I am afraid of speaking
the truth
in a room on the 17th floor
my body is dreaming
it sits
bottom pinned to a table
eating perpetual watermelon inside my own head...⁷¹*

“Blackstudies,” a poem in which the narrator waits fearfully on the 17th floor for a classroom full of students is a demonstration of the complicated temporality of teaching and a meditation on the significance of Black studies at the moments of its generation. The speaker of the poem struggles not to reproduce the stereotypes of

⁶⁹ Audre Lorde “I Am Your Sister:” Kitchen Table Women of Color Press Freedom Organizing Series Pamphlet, 1985.

⁷⁰ De Veaux 103-106

⁷¹ Audre Lorde. “Blackstudies” in *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1976) reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 153.

“perpetual watermelon” and “chitterlings I never ate” which cycle in her head, but the poem is critically engaged with reproduction itself and the specter of nationalism.

*The palms of my hands have Black marks running across them..
(Blackstudies Section I)*

*deep roads sprouted over the palms
of my hidden fists
dark and growing.
(Blackstudies Section II)*

*I move awkward and ladylike
through four centuries of unused bathtubs
that never smile
not even an apologetic grin...*

*what skin I have left
unbetrayed by scouring...
glistens and twinkles blinding all beholders
“But I just washed them Mommy!”*

*Only the Black marks on my hands itch and flutter
shredding my words and wherever they fall
the earth springs up denials
that I pay for
only the dark roads over my palms
wait for my voice
to follow.
(Blackstudies Section IV)*

The history that the teacher struggles to produce differently is not only the legacy of stereotypes and the language of white supremacy, but also former models of Black education. Moving from the historically Black Tougaloo College to the tower of a City College that sought to remain ivory, Lorde describes the “children” of Black studies as both the students waiting in the hallway and the dark marks on her hands. Those of use who teach Black studies do not have clean hands, and railing against a memory of her mother’s attempt to scrub the Black off of the dark places on her body, Lorde imagines the dark marks on her hands, ink stains perhaps, as the “roads” to Black futurity.

Against the language of Booker T. Washington who characterized education at the Tuskegee Institute with constant reference to cleanliness, Lorde describes Black studies as a practice of faith that requires us to get our hands dirty.⁷²

Lorde is also concerned with the limitations of reproducing a Black tradition on masculinist terms. Referencing a male poet named “A.B.,” she challenges poetry as a reproductive intergenerational act with the refraction of teaching as a measure. “but he too has written his children upon women” she explains “I bear mine alone in the mouth of the enemy.” Here Lorde is both talking about her role in the writing of the future with her students and on what it means to “bear” the relationality of the teacher who refuses to reproduce the past, but cannot control the future. In the same stanza Lorde has already used the phrase “bearer of hard news” which gives this second “bear” a valence broader than biological reproduction. The radical intervention of Black studies is something that must be borne, which is different from being born, but no less embodied. The sexual politics of the student movement further reflect this embodied “bearing,” and Lorde first addresses her fear of confrontation while “young girls assault my door/with curse rags/stiff with their mothers old secrets/covering up their new promise.” Her ability to face these girls struggling with cycles of unspoken violence is linked to her own predicament “condemned to nursing old gods for a new heart.”

*while young girls assault my door
with curse rags
stiff with their mothers old secrets
covering up their new promise...*

*children will come to understand
to speak out living words like this poem
that knits truth into fable*

⁷² Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1900.

*to leave my story behind
though I fall through cold wind condemned
to nursing old gods for a new heart (Blackstudies Section I)*

The relationship between “old” and “new” in this poem charts the difficulty of time. Lorde is explaining that although we cannot afford to reproduce the past, represented through curses, stereotypical images and the violence of her own mother, the future offered by ‘Blackstudies’ is not something altogether new. In each of the five sections of this cyclical poem phrases and words return. The “perpetual watermelon” of the first section becomes “forbidden melons” in the second section. The memory that “demons rode me/until I rose up a child of morning” in section one becomes a statement that “their demon father roe me just before daylight,” and the “chill wind (that) sweeps the high places” in the first line of the poem becomes “A chill wind beating down from the high places” in the first line of the last section.

*Now all the words in my language come garbled
except anguish. (Blackstudies Section IV)*

*My students wait outside my door
searching condemning listening
for what I am sworn to tell them
for what they least want to hear
clogging the only exit from the 17th floor
begging in their garbled language...” (Blackstudies Section V)*

Possibly most important, in the fourth section the speaker explains that “all the words in my legend come garbled” and in the fifth section the students have already appropriated it, “begging in *their* garbled language.” The elements of this poem are repeated with difference, in this poem that reuses so many words that it could almost be called a villanelle, insisting on a difference in the way language reproduces itself.

Just before light devils woke me

*trampling my flesh into fruit...
and when my mother punished me
by sending me to bed without my prayers
I had no names for darkness...*

*and although demons rode me
until I rose up a child of morning
deep roads sprouted over the palms
of my hidden fists
dark and growing. (Blackstudies Section II)*

*he too has written his children upon women
I hope with love.
I bear mine alone in the mouth of the enemy
upon a desk on the 17th floor.. (Blackstudies Section III)*

*Their demon father rode me just before daylight
I learned his tongue as he reached
for my hands at dawn
before he could touch the palms of my hands
to devour my children
I learned his language
I ate him
and left his bones mute in the noon sun. (Blackstudies Section IV)*

It is here that Lorde uses an explicit appropriation of the role of mother. The speaker describes herself as both witch and mother explaining that the demon of white supremacy in the form of standard English “rode me just before daylight/ i learned his tongue as he reached ...before he could touch the palms of my hands to devour my children/I learned his language/ I ate him.” The articulation of Black futurity in a language that threatens to “devour my children” is the difficulty of the Black studies teacher, teaching a logic that could destroy her students. This task is possible to fulfill only through a form of radical intersubjectivity that operates at the limit of consciousness for the teacher. It is Lorde’s own internalized racism, a fear of darkness learned from her mother’s punishment and violent scrubbing that possesses her vexed relationship to teaching composition. The students finally speak at the end of the poem

“oh speak to us now mother for soon/we will not need you/only your memory /teaching us questions” but even this is only a prediction in the mind of the about to be re-embodied teacher. The temporality of this poem is both brief, occurring within the few minutes before the students arrive in the classroom, and expansive, spreading through the entire history of Black debasement through colonizing languages and extending past the lifetime of the poet. And the poem ends with the poet “stepping into my self” before she opens the door to greet her waiting students. The time of this poem is both embodied and disembodied time animated by fear and hope. This space of this poem is the problematic of Black futurity.

So what happens if we apply the temporality that Lorde creates in her recursive and winding poem to our reading of Lorde’s practice of production? If we remember the no-longer conscious fact that while police officer Thomas Shea, a John Jay student and a team of jurors justified the killing of young Clifford Glover, Lorde was teaching police officers at John Jay College about race, how do we measure what Lorde produced?⁷³ Remember the multiplication of the phrase “ready to kill” in “Power” and place it in the “Blackstudies” classroom where Lorde is afraid of her students “I am afraid/ that the mouths I feed will turn against me.” This poem is not about the innocence of children, it about the menace of investing faith past fear in students who may not only “kernel me out like a walnut,” but who may indeed go out and kill an unarmed child after class. The stereotypes that circle in the teacher’s mind become that much more dangerous because it is these stereotypes, living in the very body of the radical teacher that will authorize the students to defend themselves from the Black monster that does not exist. In the end,

⁷³ Lorde mentions that Thomas Shea was a John Jay student, though not in any of her classes, in a 1986 interview reproduced in *The Edges of Each Others Battles*, a film on Lorde by Jennifer Abod in 2002.

which is not the end, Lorde agrees to her own death imagining that her students “will not need her.”

A generation after Lorde published these poems, asha bandele, one of Lorde’s mentees, published a novel about the intergenerational effects of police violence. Lorde taught bandele at Hunter College, Both Miriam and her daughter Aya are protagonists in this novel about how state violence against Black people attempts to halt the transformative energy of love. Aya, a young woman who is incarcerated when she defends herself against an attempted rape, is shot by police officers one day shortly after her release as she goes running in her neighborhood in Brooklyn, wearing a hoodie and listening to a walkman. Bandele’s narration of the moment of the murder is an untimely retrieval of the capitalized STOP that punctuates June Jordan’s “In Memoriam.” This STOP has its own page, and like the actions in Jordan’s poem has no attributed speaker. Maybe Aya says this hoping the police will not shoot her, maybe the police say this assuming Aya’s walkman is a gun, maybe the narrator says this demanding the witness of the reader, maybe the reader says this hoping the narrative will some how stop before the bullets hit.

But the narrative continues. When her mother Miriam arrives in the hospital, shocked that her only child is dead so young, one of the police officers at the hospital is surprised at her grief. “You’d think they’d be used to it by now,” he says. And maybe there is some truth in this statement that bandele puts in the mouth of this police officer. Aya never knew that her father had also been the victim of a police murder before she was ever born. It was police violence that transformed Miriam into a young Black single mother, not pathology. Through Miriam’s recounting of her own experience as a young girl, falling in love with a traumatized young Black Vietnam veteran who is shot when he

attempts to talk back to police officers in the late seventies, we discover that nothing Miriam could have done to “protect” her daughter from the fate of her father could have counteracted the state’s criminalization of both of her loved ones. The narrative continues.

Ultimately bandele uses a poetic radicalization of Black maternity to disrupt the inevitability of the narrative that naturalizes the criminalization of Black people through the body of the Black mother. Miriam, incarcerated after she attempts to enact revenge on the police officers who are acquitted for Aya’s murder, remembers a Sonia Sanchez poem that Aya read to her the morning before she was killed, on her way to a class like the one where asha bandele met Audre Lorde at the public University. This poem allows Miriam to resume communication with her dead, Aya and Bird (Aya’s father). This poem allows Miriam to dedicate a transformed form of living to her daughter, collaborating with the other women in the prison to create a mode of self-love through which to make daughterhood livable.

If Lorde imagines her students saying “speak to us now mother for soon/we will not need you/ only your memory/ teaching us questions.” What is the question that bandele learned? The difficult miracle of bandele’s novel is the utopian vision of a transformed relationality between women in prison that offers futurity even when it is the daughter who is already a memory. When Lorde tells Clifford Glover in “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children” that she is “bent/ forever/ wiping up blood/that should be/you” what is she learning? What does the memory of Clifford Glover teach the teacher who teaches policemen to become authors, who teaches policemen to write, who authorizes the language of police-in-training? What did Clifford Glover teach Audre Lorde? What question did Audre Lorde leave?

But Mommy, I washed them already

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Judith Butler theorizes responsibility as the attempts through which “individuals” navigate vulnerability and hurt through the failure of narrative, the impossibility of speaking from an individuated “I.”⁷⁴ The difficulty of speaking for oneself in this text emerges in the places where “individuality” breaks down. Whereas in *Precarious Life* Butler had argued that death and the incompleteness that we experience through mourning prove that we were interdependent and not individuated self-sustaining beings to begin with, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler emphasizes is a past in which we were all dependent on someone else for our very survival. The work of mothering, if not the figure of the mother, is an invisible presence in this text as a fundamental pre-memory site of intersubjectivity. At some point, during the long period during which human babies are unable to provide for their own needs, we were all dependent on at least one other person, and most likely already a number of others for our very survival. This emphasized precondition of the text points to, but does not elaborate the hidden labor of those who appear to be authors of their own speech. This is often a gendered and racialized labor, the devaluation of the labor of others through objectifying discourses of gender and race enables the self-making of some. When Audre Lorde speaks from the place of the Black mother and teacher in “Blackstudies” she is inhabiting one of the spaces where labor is devalued or “free” and authority is denied. The dehumanizing stereotypes that run through Lorde’s narrators mind are not merely metaphorical. Even at the end of her life, the acclaimed, widely published,

⁷⁴ Judith Butler. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham Press, 2005.

prolifically tokenized Audre Lorde was not a valued worker at Hunter College. Jewelle Gomez, poet novelist and former employee in the dean's office at Hunter, remembers she got her position in the English department in 1980 with a cruel caveat from the reluctant chair of the department: "As long as Audre's not teaching lesbianism." Lorde and colleague Adrienne Rich held the first major event for Astrea, the National Lesbian Action Foundation, in the Hunter College Auditorium, according to Gomez, if not teaching, then certainly revealing "lesbianism" among the students who packed the seats.⁷⁵ asha bandele, former student leader of the Audre Lorde poetry society and mentee of Lorde remembers that the Hunter College Department of English summarily rejected her request to maintain a limited post while battling cancer.⁷⁶ For the token Black woman, whose labor was being incorporated into a post-civil rights narrative of multiculturally expansive capitalism, the economic prospect of speaking for oneself was threatened by both usefulness and worthlessness. As Lorde herself reminds us in her poem "A Song for Many Movements," "our uses have become/more important than our silence....our labor/has become more important/than our silence." In the age of tokenization, Audre Lorde, the first Black faculty member in the English Department at John Jay College, eventually the least necessary faculty member at Hunter College, knew the economy into which she spoke. Giving an account of oneself, Butler argues is always already impossible, because the self is a provisional concept. That which is it seeks to describe leaks into other bodies. But I want to insist, that this is not random. This leakage, this drag on subjectivity operates through the narratives inscribed on certain

⁷⁵ Jewelle Gomez, at "Sister Comrade" an event in honor of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker on November 3rd at the Oakland, California at the First Congregational Church on November 3rd, 2007.

⁷⁶ asha bandele, in a personal interview on November 25th, 2007.

bodies and everything that thusly embodied would-be subjects might produce. For Audre Lorde, the production of accountability was sharpened by the ways in which her racialized, gendered body was read into what Spillers calls the narrative of the flesh, a narrative that would seek to reproduce itself through her speech or her silence. In that sense Lorde's account is not the account of a self that we remember through the figure of Audre Lorde, but just as much the account of the structures of dominance through which she could barely speak, and which we continue to survive.

The recursive strategy of "Blackstudies" then, seeks to narrate an embodied positionality that disavows a social system based on the selling of particular bodies as sites for the reproduction of human worthlessness. There are Black children, like dirt on the palms of Audre Lorde's hands. Like traces of ink. Accountability is a matter of dirty hands written in the ink of the intervening tale, the different sort of subject that Spillers asks for. M. Jacqui Alexander, central figure in a more recent struggle to replace tokenism with democratic academic space at a New York City University, remembers to thank Audre Lorde for the questions she taught, performing intergenerational intersubjectivity in the introduction of her collection of essays, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

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Intergenerationally, what does it mean to hold together Alexander's understanding of spiritual accompaniment and Butler's exploration of social accountability in Lorde's account of herself in "Blackstudies."? For example, the recurring image of watermelon haunting the narrator as she struggles to produce "Black

⁷⁷ M. Jacqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. See chapter four "Anatomy of a Mobilization" for details of Jacqui Alexander's role in the student, staff and faculty uprising at the New School in the 1990's.

studies” reminds us that Lorde is accompanied by a cruel, mass marketed history of dehumanization, but that she is also not alone. Through the shameful racial screen of watermelon and chitterlings, Lorde’s mother emerges seeking to enforce the cleanliness that will never earn Black children human recognition and the young girls outside the door bring “curse rags/stiff with their mothers old secrets” to assault the narrator. The fear here is that the representation of race, the goal of Black studies, is inevitably complicit in the reproduction of racism. Lorde inhabits and invokes the already destabilized figure of the Black mother to interrogate the costs of social reproduction for students who are directly oppressed by the social norms the university shelters and nurtures. The narrator’s mother is here indirectly in the narrator’s defense of her own dirty hands (“But I just washed them Mommy!”), the mothers of the students are here indirectly, vectors of the secrets that stain the curse rags, the labor of Black mothers under nationalism are here indirectly through the male poet AB’s ability to have “written his children upon women,” and the narrator herself become a mother, not in the present but in the past “just before daylight” when the demon of the English language mounts her and also in the mouths of her students who wait outside the door. So while mothers surround and people the text of this poem, Black motherhood is not present. It is past and future, framing the moment of the poem, but not reproducing itself in the time of the poetic present. And this is the crux of Lorde’s transformation of the term “mother” here. Yes. Histories of violence follow us. Walk with us. Connect us to dead people who lived death with life. But the existence of environments, institutions and narratives that reproduce oppression can never make oppression natural. We are not born to be debased. We do not inherit abjection from our mothers, though they are used to justify our dehumanization. None of this is inevitable. Repetition has not killed

difference. So in this repetitive poem, the reproduction of history circles around a moment inflected but not determined by the reproduction of dehumanization through intersecting narratives of gender, race and violence. The mother of this fully populated poem creates a space “I open the door” where the supposedly inevitable has not happened yet, where the mother does not reproduce, but rather challenges. Just as “mother” Lorde will not be necessary...only leaving her questions, the mothers she invokes in the text indirectly have left their questions framing the necessary present that Lorde and her students will generate. The young women come to class “with their mothers old secrets/covering up their new promise.....outside my door they are waiting/with questions...” Lorde’s mother’s invisible question is indicated only by Lorde’s response “But I just washed them, Mommy!” Mothers provide not the answer to the fate of children, but require the questions of production and accountability.

So when Lorde’s narrator in “Power” describes her nightmares of a dead child, murdered by a police officer, we must read her use of metaphoric motherhood as method through which to give a non-reproductive account, choosing a poetic mandate “to kill ourselves” instead of the rhetoric that sacrifices “our children.” Any of Lorde’s students at John Jay could have killed Clifford Glover and gotten away with it. The mandate for Lorde’s poetics is not rhetorical. So though it is the one Black female juror who agrees to Thomas Shea’s acquittal for the murder of Clifford Glover who “lined her own womb with cement/to make a graveyard for our children.” It is the poem’s speaker that must guard against the reproduction of the status quo, which is the opposite of Black motherhood. It is the poem’s speaker who has nightmares in which she thirsts for the blood of the murdered boy. It is the speaker who refers to “the destruction within me,” acknowledging that “unless I learn to use/the difference between poetry and rhetoric my

power too will run corrupt.” The scene for Lorde’s deployment of the difference between poetry and rhetoric is the classroom. Instead of simply reproducing composition, in her classes Lorde taught her students about the composition or the make-up of institutional racism, revising the function of the institutions of the policing university. While co-teaching the first ever women’s studies course at John Jay College, Lorde opened the class to the women in the lives of the police officers in the class, after the second class period New York lesbians came to the class as well. The classroom literally could not contain the *relations* that Lorde made possible through her work as an out Black lesbian professor at John Jay. So they moved to a larger space. Rhetoric in the classroom reproduces the violence of the status quo; a poetic intergenerational classroom dynamic opens an alternate mode of production.

The fear that pervades this poem, that her power will fortify police action, “corrupt as poisonous mold” resulting in intergenerational rape: “I will take my teenaged plug and connect it to the nearest socket/raping an 85 year old white woman/who is somebody’s mother,” results not only from the political urgency of her impact on New York’s “Finest,” but on the vulnerability of a Black woman teaching armed police officers day in and day out for 10 years. Poetic engagement is not only Lorde’s ability to address her students effectively, it is the danger of *being addressed* by students armed not only with institutional privilege, but also with loaded weapons. Some of us are brave. Butler’s description of the received address is almost literal in this case:

“To be addressed carries with it a trauma, resonates with the traumatic, and yet this trauma can be experienced only belatedly through a *second* occurrence. Another word comes our way, a blow, an address or naming that suddenly

inexplicably slaughters, even as one lives on, strangely, as this slaughtered being, speaking away.”⁷⁸

Lorde’s students carry the “curse rags” of their own mother’s secrets, invoking the teacher’s memory of her own mother’s abusively internalized racism, the practice Lorde describes in a later essay as her mother’s attempt to roughly scrub the darkness of Lorde’s skin, leaving her red and raw. Even the imagined address of her students calls forth a traumatic racial history. And today students threaten professors with nooses and swastikas, dig through google looking for hate-mail fodder. And Audre Lorde came out as a Black lesbian in an interracial relationship to armed police officers in 1970. *Some of us are brave.*

The question Lorde teaches us asks how we can create accountability in what we hope is the worst of circumstances without retreating into enmity or dissolving into liberal apology. Butler defines responsibility thusly “I am my relation to you”⁷⁹ and through Levinas describes a relationship to the cruelest other, the inflictor of genocidal violence in Nazi Germany. What happens when the students and the would-be executioners are the same people? Lorde’s particular situation teaching “Black studies” and “women’s studies” to feed a notoriously cruel police department, reveals a more constant pedagogical threat. The student is in a position to destroy the teacher.⁸⁰ Not only because I could certainly be compelled to teach a student who has made known

⁷⁸ Butler. *Giving an Account*, 84.

⁷⁹ Butler, 81.

horrific threats on the lives of Black women⁸¹, but because the intergenerational address faces a future that is not in the teacher's control. Differing from the patricidal model through which thinkers seek to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, towards the accumulation of singular brilliance, the intergenerational relationship I am seeking to describe here is a double-edged relationship to intimacy and survival.

My claim is that the impossible relationship to accountability illustrated by Audre Lorde's representation to her own teaching is the place where the stakes, possibilities and difficulties of relationship across difference, or the contours of a different relationship become visible. The haunting never present figure of Black maternity marks the spaces where language needs to be produced, or where the narrative of pathologized Black maternity will lurk. June Jordan approaches this dilemma by actually performing the bad teaching of Black maternity using Black English, the first marker of a high-risk child, the language in with Black deviance is taught learned and transmitted to reveal the linked disciplinary functions of standard English and police violence.

In Conclusion: (En)Gendering Death

Both Audre Lorde and June Jordan wrote from within what I will call a forced poetics of gender and death. As much as their work reveals the urgency and potential of intergenerational address, the contours of their accountability also reveal an intense pressure on the speakable and unspoken possibilities of Black freedom. Accountability, in this chapter and throughout the project, means the direction and possibility of giving

⁸¹ Ryan McFadden was readmitted to the student body of Duke University after police confiscated and newspapers published a grotesque email he wrote describing a post-rape murder scene to his fellow lacrosse team members. Vice President of Student Affairs, Larry Moneta, defended McFadden's threat as "a joke."

an account. To whom can we give an account of ourselves? And where are our desires silent? This chapter has explored the extent to which Audre Lorde and June Jordan related to the space and time of university teaching as technologies through which to produce responses to the disciplining imperatives of the university industrial complex and the prison industrial complex. What I am seeking to make visible here is a dialogical relationship between Black male martyrdom and repressed Black maternity as dynamic sites in the counter-production of a poetics of Black freedom. Haunting even the threatening potential of an intergenerational relationship between the bad teachers of Black maternity and masculinized, criminalized Black youth, is an even more dangerous sociality where “mothering” is able to refer to the turning of feminized Black subjects towards each other. Martyrdom sells; mothering continues to haunt. Death sells. Survival disrupts. In each case Lorde and Jordan mobilize against the police targeting and murder of young Black men, but as they seek to narrate these experiences, the poetic energy of repressed Black maternity emerges again and again, haunting their texts *like a motherfucker*.

4. “Difficult Miracle”: Audre Lorde, June Jordan and the Forced Poetics of Publishing in the Black Arts Market

One could say that the Black Arts Movement was born out of martyrdom. In the wake of the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Medgar Evers, John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy which represented the death of the civil rights era, the project of Black freedom became a poetic one, articulated through creative expression and militant political projects that rejected the role of the state as an arbiter of freedom. In the move from a discourse of rights to revolution the terms of Black freedom transformed. One *could* say it that way. And that is often the way the story is told. In his history of Dudley Randall and Broadside Press, Julius E. Thompson marks the memorialization of Malcolm X as the definitive act of the “golden years” of Broadside Press.¹ Houston Baker explains the shift from an intergrationist voice to an accountability to a Black mass audience as a result of “the arrests, bombings and assassinations that comprised the white South’s reaction to nonviolent direct action protests.”² Listing the murder of Medgar Evers as the first of a series of “betrayals of Black citizenship rights” that created the climate for the Black Arts Movement, Cheryl Clarke also cites Baker and reproduces the framing that I have reproduced more

¹ Julius E. Thompson. *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960-1995*. Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 1999, 75-76.

² Houston A. Baker. “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of African American Literature,” in *Within the Circle*, ed Angelyn Mitchell, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994. 286.

simplistically above.³ However, the first sentence of this chapter, which suggests that the death of male leaders gave birth to the Black arts and Black power movements, makes some important elisions. First, this version of the story uses death to eclipse labor, for example, the work of Gwendolyn Brooks to mentor and support Black artists interested in articulating freedom (or her work to *mother* a Black arts movement). Citing the death as the origin point for the Black Arts Movement obscures the (already dark) concept of Black maternity altogether, characterizing creation as a struggle between men for patriarchal power. The narrative of the Black arts movement becomes a narrative of a lost fatherhood, represented through the figures of Black male martyrs. The masculinism of the Black arts movement is an attempt to recuperate this lost paternity, and the surviving narrative of the significance and relevance of the Black Arts Movement is tied to this masculinism. As Cheryl Clarke argues “The Black Arts Movement called upon the race to become men in ways that subsumed race.”⁴ The elision that Clarke’s phrasing makes clear is the totalizing masculinity of the concept, such that women have no stated role in the ideological production or constitution of “the race.” As Hazel Carby and Michelle Wright have argued this investment in a male lineage where men can produce a strong race of empowered men without the messiness of feminine agency precedes and exceeds the Black Arts Movement.⁵ As Phillip Brian Harper reminds us however, this desire for a simple unadulterated masculinity was also influenced, and made violent by anxiety about the complicated class and interracial relationships that allowed the

³ Cheryl Clarke. *In the Mecca: Black Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 10.

⁴ Cheryl Clarke. *In the Mecca: Black Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 17.

⁵ Hazel Carby. *Race Men*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Michelle Wright. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

masculinist figures of the Black Arts Movement to proclaim their race and gender purity with such impact.⁶

The Black feminist poetics modeled by Jordan and Lorde in the midst of their participation in Black Arts Movement challenges cultural nationalism in a way that could be described as diasporic, in that it reveals the contingency and fiction of the imagined nation by exceeding the coherence it ascribes. This chapter questions the queer survival of a Black feminist poetic by enacting a queer intergenerational reading practice that refracts the work of June Jordan and Audre Lorde in the 1960's and 70's, examining the contours and limits of their participation in the Black Arts publishing stream and the exciting queer maternal excesses that survive. As we move on in Chapter 5 to explore the publishing practices of Jordan and Lorde during this same time period, in the subcultural literary market of the Black arts movement it will become even more clear that Lorde and Jordan were speaking through what we explore in Chapter 3 as a forced poetics that required them to foreground young Black males as the subjects of freedom and salvation in their classrooms and their texts, but in the background, emerging, shaping and transforming the speakability or accountability of Black freedom is the figure of the Black mother.

June Jordan and Audre Lorde emerged as published poets during the late 1960's and their poetic projects, which were critical of the patriarchal family as the site of Black freedom and evocative of Black maternity as an alternate site, were mediated by a market that could sell Black death, but could not embrace the role of queer maternity in the possibility of Black life. For instance, as Julius E. Thompson explains Dudley Randall's

⁶ Phillip Brian Harper. "Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity," in *Critical Inquiry* 19 (2): 39-53.

1963 poems on the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church and the assassination of JFK were the “initial spark” for Dudley Randall’s creation Broadside Press, despite the fact that Randall’s *Ballad of Birmingham* ignores the historical context of what he imprecisely calls “a church in Birmingham, Alabama.”⁷ Randall’s poem proposes an ironic tragedy where a Black mother who has forbidden her child from participating in Freedom Marches and instead dressed her in what the narrator believes to be too much oppressive white and sent her to church where she is the victim of the bombing, however it is well documented that the children at the 16th Street Baptist Church were consistently involved in direct action protests, which is most likely one of the reasons that church (which Randall never names) in particular was targeted. In his impulse to chide a Black church affiliated mother, Randall erases the reality of the intentional work of mothers supportive of the Civil Rights movement to involve their children in the ethical practice of protest. Slandering the authority of the mother sells. The authority of the mother is dangerous. But Jordan and Lorde both built careers as poets during this time period. The cruel coherence of Black death carries with it the repressed inarticulate trace of how animate Black life becomes material for the reproduction of oppression: the (t)race of the Black mother. This chapter seeks to examine ways in which the energy of queer Black mothering, or Black m/othering as the production of difference, survives the forced poetic limitations of its discursive time.

The reading practice at work in this chapter emphasizes the social and spiritual valences of the verb “to read.” As I mention in chapter 1 Toni Morrison’s question “Can you read?” which haunts her recent novel *A Mercy* also haunts the project of reading

⁷ Julius E. Thompson. *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960-1995*. Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 1999, 26-27.

Black women's writing, and in this case Black feminist poetry more generally. The question of reading, which Morrison depicts as a question of whether Black mothers and daughters in the United States will interpret each other's words and actions in a way that does not reproduce slavery, is the question of this chapter. What is the queer intergenerational reading practice that will interrupt the social reproduction of Black women's subordination to a patriarchal and racist marketplace of ideas? I suggest that the appropriate reading practice for such a queer and dangerous project requires faith. Therefore I am also "reading" in the sense of divination. Within the Yoruba traditions and its derivations worldwide practitioners use the Obi, a plant grown in West Africa in order to "read" for divine messages. The Obi, can have any number of seeds and sections. The diviner soaks the seeds and opens them along internal divisions within the plant. The biologically reproductive elements of the plant differ from plant to plant in terms of number. Sometimes there is a balance of the "male" and "female" components of the plant; sometimes there is one "male" component and three "female" components. The variations are many. An intricate process that involves the way the plant opens and settles once in the hands of the diviner is called the "reading" process. M. Jacqui Alexander emphasized in a recent meeting of the "Migrations of the Sacred" media collective project that spiritual practitioners can "read anything" rice, tea leaves etc. She expands this potential to the possibility of reading any element of nature, wind, rain, trees etc. This chapter applies this insight, that faith makes it possible to "read anything" for divine messages to under-theorized poetic texts by Jordan and Lorde with attention to the emergence of feminist redefinitions of mothering within a masculinist discursive market. Like the reading of the plant elements of the Obi this reading practice must be immersive, historically grounded and attentive to internal divisions and breaks within

the poems and the poetic form. And we must read with the understanding that the messages we receive, no matter how scary or dangerous contain divine information for us in the present.

June Jordan and the Difficult Miracle of Poetry in Time

What explains the fact that June Jordan the poet, the teacher existed? What explains the fact that despite her early death, she remains present in the public consciousness, however unacknowledged. Who could have predicted that the United States of America would elect a bi-racial African-American president based on the unattributed anthem “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for,” from June Jordan’s “Poem for South African Women.”⁸ What exactly have we been waiting for? How do we understand the poetic presence of prophesized selves arriving right on time? This section of the chapter looks at the temporality of Jordan’s definition of poetry, and the enactment of the “difficult miracle” of her own poetic production in terms of the lasting power of her poem “In Memoriam, for Martin Luther King Jr.” and the queer intervention of her essay “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America: Or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley,” arguing that Jordan’s theory of poetry and poetic labor offer poetry as a queer practice of redefining production, presence, absence and possibility as a question of survival.

⁸ June Jordan. “Poem for South African Women” in *Passion* (1980) now available in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 278-279. See also its unattributed use in Barack Obama’s famous and effective “Yes We Can” speech: http://www.barackobama.com/2008/02/05/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_46.php (accessed 2/9/10)

Poetry is (A Hungering For)

Before we get to what June Jordan's poetry teaches us about poetry, let us start with Jordan's theories of the significance of poetry. By placing Jordan's poetry in the context of her theories about poetry I resist the tendency to read the poetry of the Black Arts movement as if it is simple testimony. The poetry under review here is theoretical work that uses radical and inventive form to produce a possible language to describe a potential relation. However, at the same time that I find Jordan's multiple definitions of poetry to be key to my reading of her work, I do not assert that Jordan is the all knowing reader of her own poets, or assume that these theoretical explorations of what poetry can mean directly describe Jordan's poetry.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Jordan, preceding Sylvia Wynter's assertion in 1969 that poetry was a way to rename the world in a language that made connection possible where disconnection was normative. It is the potential in the poetic, the possibility of a relation that is not quite yet speakable, a relation that requires new names, and new positioning for all names that informs my reading practice here. Therefore while Jordan's relationship to her own poems, and the Black Arts publishing market's relationship to her poems are important, the key relationship here is the emergent relation, our reach towards a relationship with Jordan's body. Of work.

Jordan explicitly identified as a poet first; whether she was teaching or attempting novels, she was a poet first. Aside from her young adult novel *His Own Where*, Jordan never finished a novel, although she and Toni Morrison discussed a possible historical novel on Bessie Smith and she had announced intentions of writing a novel about the problem of land ownership and food in Mississippi in her bio at the end

of her biographical children's book on Fannie Lou Hamer.⁹ In an angry letter to her erstwhile agent Charlotte Sheedy, Jordan emphasizes: "I am a poet who writes poetry and also, who writes essays, novels, plays, songs etcetera...At the root of my work is the immutable fact of my identity: I am a poet. I write poetry."¹⁰ If for Jordan, "poet" is an identity and as we remember from her statement in *Essence Magazine* "poems are housework" we understand that for Jordan poetry is a way of life, certainly not a product and not merely a particular process.¹¹ We do not have to agree that identity is an "immutable fact" to understand that with this statement Jordan is insisting that poetry is an ethic upon which to build an entire life.

Indeed, Jordan's most enduring definition of poetry emerged in her practice of introducing poetry as an interface for radical pedagogy through her Poetry for the People courses at UC Berkeley. In *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* a group of her student teachers compile a record of their work to use poetry as an intervening force in social and academic life as a model. In the introduction to the volume Jordan explains that "Poetry is a political action undertaken for the sake of information, the faith, the exorcism, and the lyrical invention that telling the truth makes possible."¹² Poetry is a way of "telling the truth" it is not simply self-evident, though in Jordan's view it is accessible to everyone. Poetry requires invention, exorcism, faith. It is a transformative spiritual practice, which is what makes it so political. So

⁹ Toni Morrison. "Letter to June Jordan" October 27, 1975. June Jordan Manuscript Collection, Box 84, Folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University and June Jordan. *Fannie Lou Hamer*. New York: Crowell, 1972.

¹⁰ June Jordan, "Letter to Charlotte Sheedy" June 3rd 1984. June Jordan Manuscript Collection, Box 89 Folder 11, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

¹¹ Alexis DeVeaux. "Creating Soul Food" in *Essence* April, 1981, 82-150.

¹² June Jordan. "Introduction," in Lauren Muller and the Blueprint Collective eds. *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 3.

guided by the ethical imperative to tell the truth, poetry is also an ontology. Jordan is interested in teaching her students and anyone else who is watching what it is *to be* a poet. The ground rules for the Poetry for the People class explain “the art of telling the truth (poetry) is a necessary and a healthy way to create powerful and positive connections among people who otherwise remain (unknown and unaware) strangers.” Once again poetry is the production of a rival relationality that replaces disconnection with connection. Ultimately this definition of poetry depends mostly on the definition of “The People” that the groundrules spend most of their time describing.

1. “The People” shall not be defined as a group excluding or derogating anyone on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, sexual preference, class or age.
2. “The People” shall consciously undertake to respect and to encourage each other to feel safe enough to attempt the building of a community of trust in which all may try to be truthful and deeply serious in the messages they craft for the world to contemplate.¹³

On her actual syllabus for the course Jordan frames these rules with the explanation “there are certain rules that must be respected inside this experimental and hopeful society.”¹⁴ These classrooms then, become places through which to transform a dominant social relation (of disconnection) through poetry. The question of poetry in this context is the question of democracy. How do “the people” relate to each other without depending on the privileges granted by exclusion and exploitation? Poetry, for Jordan is a practice oriented towards the production of democratic relation within a repressive context.

Alongside these explicit pedagogical concerns for poetry Jordan’s set of concerns about who “the people” are also inhabits her theories of poetry on another level. For

¹³ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴ June Jordan. Syllabus for Poetry for the People 2000. Box 80, Folder 2. June Jordan Manuscript Collection. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

example her essay “For the Sake of People’s Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us” starts with a concern about paternity and lineage. “In America,” she begins, “the father is white.”¹⁵ This is a broad statement, and as the paragraph continues we realize that Jordan is not only talking about the white father as the father of the poetic tradition, against which Lorde defines the erotic.¹⁶ Jordan is also talking about the white father as the father of the “experiment of the republic” inhabiting the space claimed by the US through manifest destiny.¹⁷ She also is talking about an embodied relationship because in addition to her concern about how this white father dominates not only the American landscape but also the role of this white father on “the life of her son.”¹⁸ Her son, collaborative life created by a relationship between Jordan and her son’s literal “white father” adds urgency to her concern, but also complicates her role in this white patriarchal project of poetry.¹⁹

Jordan’s essay originally written for the introduction of her collection 1980 *Passion* and later anthologized is part of a long-term engagement with Whitman’s legacy.²⁰ Jordan framed her 1988 New York Times Sunday Magazine article about the impact of gentrification on her neighborhood (Park Slope Brooklyn) with a quotation from Whitman’s “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” and titled the article “Walt Whitman Ideal.”²¹ Jordan was also the eighth poet to be honored with a residency at Whitman’s

¹⁵ June Jordan. “For the Sake of People’s Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us,” in *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 5.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider* page number...

¹⁷ June Jordan. “For the Sake of People’s Poetry,” 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ June Jordan. “For the Sake of People’s Poetry,” 5.

²⁰ June Jordan. *Passion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1980 and Perlman, Folsom and Campion eds. *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1981.

²¹ June Jordan. “Walt Whitman Ideal.” New York Times, Nov. 20, 1988, SMA51.

birthplace.²² Maybe Jordan's affinity for Whitman derives from the fact that he understands his own work to seminal, not in a patriarchal sense, but rather, as Micheal Moon elaborates in *Disseminating Whitman*, with the energy of an irrepressible lover set to transform the meaning of the body through the production of an erotic readerly response.²³

Jordan identifies as a New World Poet and identifies that with a particular lineage a queer lineage that includes the work of a Walt Whitman a queer "white father" whose queerness derives not from his attention to homosexual themes but rather from his refusal to conform to conventions and his exclusion from standard poetry curricula. Jordan goes on to elaborate that like Neruda, Whitman's poetry uses simple language and is explicitly political making it queer within a poetic tradition that values abstraction and pathologizes and patronizes political poetry as didactic and uncomplicated. Jordan's most sustained interest in Whitman's queer poetic action centers around his examination of the moral problem of human reproduction within the institution of slavery. Citing an excerpt from "I Sing the Body Electric" in which Whitman attends a slave auction and meditates on the fact that no amount of money can compensate for the value of a human life because each enslaved person can create infinite offspring:

Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it...
This is not only one man, this is the father of those who shall be fathers in
their turns
In him the start of populous states and rich republics, Of him countless
immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments.²⁴

²² Barbara Delatiner. "Poets Recall Bond to Walt Whitman," New York Times, May 28, 1989, LI10.

²³ Micheal Moon. *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

²⁴ June Jordan. "For the Sake of People's Poetry," 7-8.

What a queer thing, Jordan points out, for Whitman to argue for the human equality in the midst of slavery when the market enslaves both the human being but also the poetic form. Whitman's argument is basic, if we understand people to be vessels for an infinitely possible manifestation of spiritual energy, and not just as finite bodies useful for alienated (or in this case, completely appropriated) labor under capitalism, slavery cannot be justified. This interpretation of the meaning of bodies, and the possible relationships between bodies is queer indeed. This dissertation depends on the viability of this argument and calls the production of survival through the assertion of this rival interpretation of life against capitalism, mothering. However, despite the fact that the very next section of Whitman's poem discusses the predicament of the woman for sale at an auction and describes "the teeming mother of mothers"(line 188) Jordan only refers to his reference to perpetual fatherhood. And this is not the only reference to a male-only process of reproduction in this essay. Referring to another "New World" poet, Pablo Neruda, Jordan cites the line from *The Heights of Machu Picchu* where he invites the reader to "Arise and birth with me, my brother."²⁵ Birth, in this essay in the biological sense and in the sense of the origin of "People's Poetry" is a homosocial practice among men, Jordan can only claim to be part of the lineage. Or can she? The submerged concern of the relationship between Black maternity and the queer transformative prospect of People's Poetry is in the first paragraph alongside the concern about the "white father." The white father "inaugurated the experiment of this republic" when he "sailed his way into slave ownership."²⁶ What then is the relationship between the experiment of the republic and the "experimental and hopeful society" Jordan will

²⁵ Ibid, 9.

²⁶ Ibid, 5.

inaugurate a decade later in her Poetry for the People classroom? Jordan's relationship to this project is refracted by her concern for the "white father's" domination of her son and the fact that the general white father "availed himself of my mother—that African woman whose function was miserable—defined by his desirings, or his rage."²⁷ It is this relationship to the general Black mother that defines Jordan's relationship to this white-fathered poetry. Most of the time, she explains, her interest in this white father dynamic is "the interest a pedestrian feels for the fast traveling truck that is about to smash into him. Or her. Again."²⁸ Though Jordan immediately goes on to distinguish her interest in the white father in this essay from the character of her interest "most of the time" it is telling and important that her relationship to this lineage is one of rape and murder at the worst and exploitation, domination and exclusion at the very least. This essay, which leads her collection *On Call* also contextualizes the archeological work to investigate the position of the exploited Black maternal figure through the figure of Phillis Wheatley the hidden site for the imagination of an alternative lineage that she never quite claims. It is this work, the emergent haunting of Black mothering that we will focus on at length.

Wheatley: Black Mother of American Poetry?

In her essay "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like A Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley"²⁹ June Jordan theorizes the depth of the danger awakened when Black women, those whose bodies are inscribed with the justification for slavery and its afterlife, intervene into the creative process of freedom. As Saidiya

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ From *On Call* all references refer to this edition.

Hartman explains in her essay “The Time of Slavery,” the traumatic impact of slavery is not over.³⁰ Not only does the organizing logic that people can be own impact the psyches of the displaced and brutalized generations, but the structure of value (or devalue) used to justify slavery continues in structures such as prisons, economic oppression and other forms of institutionalized racism and exploitation. I argue that this afterlife is inscribed on the bodies of Black women in particular, who are misnamed as the mode of reproduction through which race(ism) is reproduced. For this reason authority, the means of ideological reproduction claimed by a Black feminist poet, for example, deals with the constraints of a discourse that has already overwritten her. In this chapter I argue that the predicament of Black feminist publishing during her own lifetime is central to Jordan’s definition of the “Difficult Miracle” of Black poetry. Although Phillis Wheatley is recognized as the very first Black poet to be published in what would become the United States, and only the second woman poet published in the American British Colonies, the volume of poetry that she wrote after she gained her freedom from the Wheatley family is nowhere to be found. After Wheatley’s death her husband published an ad looking for the manuscript, which she had lent out, probably in an unsuccessful attempt to get it published, but there is no evidence that it was ever found. Jordan argues that “no one would have published” the poems that Phillis Wheatley wrote after the death of her mistress and after her twenty-first birthday.³¹ The work of an

³⁰ See Saidiya Hartman. “The Time of Slavery” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4, Fall 2002 757-777 and *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Transatlantic Slave Route* New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2007, p 6.

³¹ June Jordan. “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” in *Some of Us Did Not Die*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, 184. (Original published in *On Call*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

independent, adult, post-enslavement Phillis Wheatley owner of her own words, would have been unpublishable. Jordan's hypothesis is not limited to the 18th century. She suggests that the impossibility of Black female authority then and since has been reproduced over time, asking "Can you imagine that in 1775? Can you imagine that, today?"³² Jordan goes on to explain "the *difficult* miracle of Black poetry in America," as a predicament shared by Black poets of all genders whose poetry is marked as "political," "topical" and ultimately "insignificant," "because, like Phillis Wheatley, we have persisted for freedom."³³ In her constant reference to the dates surrounding the "American Revolution," Jordan implicitly makes the point that the imagination of "freedom" in the United States is based on the literal and literary unfreedom of Black people and Black poets.

A close examination of Wheatley's copybooks, which have not been addressed in published literary or historical work on Wheatley that I can find, affirms Jordan's impulse. I examined Wheatley's copybooks, which miraculously *survive* in the special collections library at Emory University, because an intergenerative reading practice requires this question of production. What was published? What could never have been published? And importantly, what discourse within the publishing of a particular time period framed those possibilities, and what can be read between those starts, stops and absences. Wheatley's unpublished copybooks, full of poetry and axioms published by others, serve as a record of what she found relevant *to record*, the context into which she would project her own unlikely and embattled voice "as an educated African slave

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*, 185.

woman in a racist, sexist, Enlightenment world,” as Dwight McBride would say .”³⁴

Wheatley’s concern with the relationship between slavery and the democratic project in the United States emerges not only in her poems in honor of George Washington and the American Revolution³⁵, but also in her examination of the published poetry of her lifetime which often employed slavery as a metaphor for conflict in the democratic process. Building on the work of Jordan and others of Wheatley as poet, here I examine Wheatley as a critical reader of the poetry of her time anticipating and collaborating with Jordan (and me.) Amongst the many poems circulated during the revolutionary period that described the American colonial relationship to Britain as slavery, Wheatley collected excerpts from at least two.³⁶ One excerpt begins “How many nations have long since/Been slaves to a usurping prince,/Let Britian’s history relate...” making it clear that the question of slavery as a relationship between political units was a concern for Wheatley. The next poem she copied down does not presume that monarchy itself is an enslaving relation, but rather distinguishes between tyranny and a monarchy that deserves the respect of its subjects. “Their tyrant kings let slaves revere/ Where pale obedience bends in fear/Not so America’s homage-They/The monarch whom they love, obey...” One becomes a slave, this poem suggests, by accepting tyranny. Slavery, in this case, is problematic not only within the context of an emergent democracy, but also in any post-Magna Carta monarchy. This set of poems seems to argue that slavery is an

³⁴ Dwight McBride. *Impossible Witness: Truth, Abolitionism and Slave Testimony*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

³⁵ For an extended discussion of the theme of freedom and Wheatley’s interest in the American Revolution see John C. Shields. “Phillis Wheatley’s Struggle for Freedom in her Poetry and Prose” in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 237-245.

³⁶ All references to Phillis Wheatley’s copy books refer to Box 1 folders 1 and 2 in the Phillis Wheatley Manuscript Collection at Emory University.

unacceptable relation that people take *within* a system. In other words he who *chooses* to accept tyranny as a political relation or *chooses* to consent to colonial subordination with the British Empire is morally lacking enough to be called a slave.

Wheatley copied down another poem that seems to resonate with this contradictory depiction of slavery as a moral choice on the part of the slave. The poem “Against Bribery at Elections” that starts with the line “Curs’d be the wretch that’s bought and sold.” Though the poem is discussing the situation of corrupt politicians who are “bought and sold” due to their susceptibility to bribery, the resonance that would make this poem interesting enough to a literate enslaved woman that she would copy it down is obvious. The poem goes on to invoke slavery as a metaphor explaining:

“When liberty is put to sale/For wine, money or ale/The sellers must be abject slaves”

The argument of the poem, that democracy does not work when people can be “bought and sold” extends to provide a critique of the condition of slavery within a republic. However, the fact that the politician who is criminalized for choosing to participate in a system of bribery is compared to a slave elides the fact that no slave chooses the condition of enslavement. The poem “The Voice of Freedom” continues this trajectory declaring “American attend to Freedom’s cry!/ Who scorns her voice deserves in chains to die.” (Emphasis in Wheatley’s transcription.) Though Wheatley may have seen a deeper resonance in this poem, i.e. the fact that those who refused to hear the cry of freedom from slavery voiced by enslaved people karmically deserved their own form of slavery, the poem continues the pattern of characterizing slavery as a punishment for improper political choices.

These poems, while characterizing conditions they disapprove of through the use of slavery as a metaphor also provide a false definition of slavery, that must have seemed particularly ironic to Wheatley and a generation of enslaved people in Boston who witnessed and participated in the American Revolutionary freedom project first hand and suffered the consequences of the strange coherence between the overthrow of slavery as a concept and the reproduction of slavery as an economic practice in the new republic. Those who would defend their rights to own slaves, convinced themselves and each other that they deserved freedom by pejoratively comparing themselves and each other to slaves. The intimate function of slavery as a concept in the transformation of a white, male landed class of political and intellectuals players from monarchical subjecthood to stakeholders in a supposedly democratic project also reveals the lie of the integrity of the differential subjectivity that a slave system depends on. Where does the slave end and the potential master begin? This question is especially fraught because of the sexual interactions that men in this same ruling class imposed on enslaved men and women and the fact that these "son's of liberty" were also routinely fathering slaves. Wheatley copied down a related poem "On the Power of Gold" which seeks to illustrate the destructive impact of money itself by comparing it to slavery: "...this yellow Slave/Will knit and break Religions..." The use of the figure of the yellow slave refers to gold, the explicit subject of the poem, but also raises the issue of the reproduction of slavery, the system of institutionalized rape that was profitable under slavery. This example, alluded to through this choice to specify color, provides a damning example of how the interests of capital, the reproduction of slaves through rape, contradict strict sexual religious and moral codes. I would argue that Wheatley's collection of this excerpt in the set of poems that she would enter into a discourse within her own work also brings

up the question of biological reproduction of enslavement as both a contradiction and a collaborator within a democratic project. Though Jordan may not have had access to Wheatley's copybooks, or insight into the discursive context in which Wheatley placed herself, Jordan centers these concerns in her discussions, highlighting rape, abjection, and a contradictory political and literary American project as factors that make Black poetry a difficult miracle in the context of the United States of America.

Jordan's use of Phillis Wheatley could be read as an androcentric one, one could read her applications of Wheatley's predicament to all of Black poetry as a move that drops the gender out of the 'difficulty' of the 'miracle' of Black poetry. But when Jordan asks "if she, instead composed a poetry to speak to her pain, to say her grief, to find her parents, or to stir her people in insurrection, what would we now know about God's darling girl, that Phillis? Who would publish that poetry, then?" she is also asking a self-reflexive question about the paradox of publishing poetry that challenges slavery and the publishing market, the industries through which Black life was/is processed and distributed. On what terms will Jordan's poetry be known in the future? What compromises, risks, and strategies did she take in order to pass on messages to the present? Which secrets did she pass on and which ones did she *pass* on? Jordan engages in an intergenerational reading of Wheatley's known work looking for a radical critique and precedent that is only evident in Wheatley's work through Jordan's practice as the destined reader of the poems that Wheatley published at great cost. Jordan's intergenerational idea of the difficult relationship Wheatley had to the publishing industry of her time period probably tells us more about Jordan's first hand experience, but the value that Wheatley places on the act of publishing is suggested by the notes on printing that she preserved in her copybooks. Copying down the poem "The Art of

Printing or Writing a Poem” in its entirety, Wheatley reveals her interest in the “mystic art” of printing through which “With the hard laws of distance we disperse...And travel o’er the wide extended All.” Most importantly, this characterization of publishing reminds the reader that one of the key functions of printed poetry is “To mortal life a deathless witness give.” This intergenerational thrust within the potential of printing is exactly what made Jordan’s belated invocation of Wheatley possible and indeed what makes the reading I am doing now available. Stepping back into the context of the “difficult miracle” of June Jordan’s *own* poetic publication I argue that the survival of Jordan’s poetry, like Phillis Wheatley’s, is a racialized *and* gendered predicament. And the difficult miracle is that we are the destined readers now.

Difficult

Jordan’s articulation of herself as a “published” poet was her manuscript *Some Changes* which was first published in 1967. But her broader recognition came in 1969 with her long poem “Who Look At Me?” published alongside paintings, dedicated to her son and marketed to children, libraries and public schools. With this work Jordan became an official participant in the Black arts movement which she also expressed distance from due to her feminist political stance, her poetic style and her refusal of the boundaries of Black nationalism³⁷ Within the context of Black nationalism, Jordan’s role as a Black woman poet writing poems “for children” was a less difficult miracle than her emergence as Black woman poet writing poems as an “independent” adult, like Phillis Wheatley’s role as an enslaved Black child genius poet was a less difficult miracle than

³⁷ See Alexis DeVeaux. “Creating Soul Food” in *Essence* April, 1981, 82-150.

her attempt to publish poetry as a free adult mother who had left her husband. The republication of *Some Changes* in 1971 and its belated marketability was its own difficult miracle. Jordan wrote *Some Changes* before the years that she spent co-directing a poetry workshop for children, co-editing the *Voices of the Children* anthology, visiting public libraries and public schools all over the city of New York to read “Who Look at Me?” aloud. Many of the letters sent by excited teachers and librarians incorrectly hailed Jordan as “Jane Meyer” (Meyer was her married name briefly...Jane was never her name at all). Clearly the first release of *Some Changes* had not made a name for June Jordan. Making a name for herself would prove its own difficult miracle. *Some Changes* reappeared in a critically acclaimed second edition the same year as her young adult fiction novel *His Own Where* and within one year of two more children’s books that she would publish in the early seventies.³⁸ However unlike *Dry Victories* and *Fannie Lou Hamer*, which were both reviewed in the *New York Times* and Jordan’s later book of poems *Passion*, which was reviewed by *The Black Scholar* among other publications, seemed to be from a parallel universe within Jordan’s own body of work. In her taglines for essays published in *Black World* and *Wilson Library Bulletin* as well as in her prominently placed reviews of children’s literature in the *New York Times*, she was mentioned as the author of her several children’s books, but not as a poet, even after *Some Changes* was being applauded in *Publishers Weekly* and the *Yale Review* at the

³⁸ *His Own Where* is an interesting work, not only because it is a novel written entirely in Black English (more on Jordan’s belief in the educational value of Black English for young people in the section entitled “Black English is A Whole Lot More than Mothafuckin”), but also because it is latently nationalist in the masculinist sense. The “where” of the young man in the novel seems to be the young woman in the novel. Their attempt to start a new life in an urban graveyard forms a strange heterotopia.

very same time.³⁹ Jordan, reviewing and receiving reviews *only* in the Children's literature coverage of the *New York Times Book Review* was known at that point in the mainstream, not as a poet, but as a writer and (often rather harsh) critic of children's literature. As Beverly Lyon Clark elaborates in *Kiddie Lit* the relationship between women, children's literature and feminism is complicated. Clark argues against feminists that seek to distance women from an imposed natural relationship with children, as complicit in the further dehumanization of children (i.e. women are sophisticated humans and children are undeveloped parts of nature) and the devaluation of children an audience for literature.⁴⁰

However, Jordan did not inhabit her strategic position as a mother writing and reviewing children's books complacently. *His Own Where*, her young adult novel "created a stir" in the words of the New York Times Book Review.⁴¹ *His Own Where* made Jordan open to the charges of deviant Black bad teaching that the culture of poverty narrative was nurturing at the time. For example, as early as 1962 the *Baltimore New-Post* lamented "Families bred in slums possess other *built-in* problems, and often a radically different set of values," (emphasis added).⁴² Buddy, the protagonist of *His Own Where* is expelled from school because he leads a student protest to demand sex-education for teenagers, and the victory of the novel is the ability of two Black teenagers find his "own place for loving, made for making love." So here we have a Black children's author positively portraying youth sex, in Black English. A radically different set of

³⁹ Publishers Weekly, May 18th 1970, 36. Yale Review, Spring 1970, 561-563.

⁴⁰ Beverly Lyon Clark. *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

⁴¹ "Books About to Be" in New York Times, September 3, 1972 BR4

⁴² "Cliff Dwellings for the Subsidized Poor," *Sun*, February 26, 1952. Cited in Williams, 126.

values. Jordan, whose poetry would later be effaced from a high-school anthology by a school board in Gretna, Virginia, had created a book that rejected standard English and encouraged teenagers to “make love.”⁴³ The argument of the book itself refuses the logic of the danger narrative that would use the “bad teaching” of the book as proof of the danger of Black maternity as a mode of production. The book argues that teen pregnancy is not about the pathology of young Black people, but rather about the denial of adequate sex education by state institutions, like schools. The book, though successful, possibly *due* to the controversy it caused, retains its danger into the present moment. A 2006 curriculum designed for young people who “Hate to Read!” suggests that while providing interesting subject matter *His Own Where* should be used to teach student’s “how not to write.”⁴⁴ June Jordan’s children’s literature survives in the cracks of the “bad teaching” it threatens.

Some Changes, Jordan’s first book of poems, was re-published in 1971 at E.P. Dutton as part of the Black Poets Series edited by Julius Lester (a Black and Jewish writer who wrote his first book “To Be a Slave” in 1969 for a child audience), appeared in the unlikely company of Stanley Crouch (*Ain’t No Ambulances for No Niggahs Tonight*) and Larry Neal (*Hoodoo Hollerin’ Bebop Ghosts and Other Visions*). *Some Changes* is an ambivalent text, in the sense that it moves back and forth, almost poem to poem, between melancholy and hope. *Some Changes* refers to the individual “changes” that the narrator of the poems is experiencing as well as the “changes” that the Black community experiences during the “death” of the civil rights movement. Unlike like the general

⁴³ June Jordan. *His Own Where*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971, 1.

⁴⁴ Carol Ann Petuch. “I Hate to Read! An Assortment of Young Adult Literature.” Yale-New Haven Teacher’s Institute. <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1980/1/80.01.06.x.html> (accessed December 19, 2009)

tendency within the Black Arts Movement to follow-up the death of the (masculinist and) integrationist Civil Rights movement with a turn to largely separatist (and masculinist) Black cultural nationalism, Jordan portrays the institution of marriage as deadly, and centralizes the Black mother not as the goddess figure who should birth a Black nation and silently inspire a Black patriarch, but as a figure standing alone struggling to make freedom out of the cruel persistence of Black death

In this context, the publication and re-publication of *Some Changes* within the Black Arts Market is a difficult miracle inhabiting the double threat of the bad teaching of Black maternity. While the figure of the Black mother is valorized within the masculinism of the Black arts movement, the figure of the Black mother is only useful as a *good* teacher if she is committed to reproducing a nationalist Black patriarchy through her domestic labor. Jordan, questioning family, critiquing marriage and publicly known to be a member of a failed interracial marriage threatens to be a bad teacher within the terms of Black nationalism. The difference between good and bad teaching in the frame of the Black arts market is a matter of the direction of accountability. Teaching Black pride to children in the post-civil rights moment can be seen as good teaching from the perspective of a Black nationalist project, and can be incorporated into the liberal economy of diversity within the New York Public children's library and school system. The difference between good and bad teaching as I am framing them here are informed by Homi Bhabha's distinction between the pedagogical and the performative, where the Bhabha's pedagogy which describes that which is "continuist, accumulative" and proper to the reproduction of the national form is understood as good or desirable teaching and what Bhabha would call the performative which is "repetitive and recursive...(and) intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation's *self generation* by casting a shadow between

the people as ‘image’ and its signification as a differentiating sign of Self, distinct from the Other of the Outside.”⁴⁵ This danger, the performative poetic rival teaching of the Black mother, applies to both the envisioned nation of the Black cultural nationalist movement and the existing U.S. nation state by making the production of difference visible, seductive, bringing a naturalized narrative about the production of sameness into view. So unlike the reproduction of Blackness and pride in an audience of children, reflections on violence, poverty and love from the perspective of a single Black mother reveals the dialogic contingency of the production of difference and inequality across races *and* genders.

The threat of Black maternity is that the stereotypical desires placed on the figure of the Black(queen) mother in Black cultural nationalist discourse and the comforting Black mammy in liberal white discourse, shelter, protect and continue the danger of repressed Black maternity. The re-publication of *Some Changes* represents a moment where Jordan can use the leverage she has gained as a Black woman poet creating “positive” images *for* Black children to publicize her critical analysis of the position of Black motherhood in relationship to Black freedom. The “difficult miracle” of June Jordan’s legibility within the space of a masculinist Black arts movement is a miracle achieved through a poetic practice that hinges on the rhetorical deployment of Black motherhood. The means through which Jordan achieved the difficult miracle of *Some Changes* in the early 1970’s informs her definition of “poetry” a decade later. In order to illuminate the poetic practice at a pivotal moment in Jordan’s career, I will read the most

⁴⁵ Homi K Bhabha.. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge 1994, 147.

enduring poem from the collection “In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr.” as a precursor to “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley.”

The Market for Martyrdom

Jordan’s choice to write a poem about the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. is a major factor in her acceptable inclusion in a Black Arts Project that she never fully embraced. Almost every collection of poems that is considered part of the Black Arts canon, from the late 60’s to the early 70’s, included poems about the assassination of either Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X or Medgar Evers, if not all three.⁴⁶ Predictably, revolutionary death poems figure prominently in *Soulscript* the anthology of Black poets that Jordan edited for Doubleday in 1970. The first section of *Soulscript*, featuring poets between the ages of twelve and eighteen, features a poem by Michael Goode, lifelong student and mentee of Jordan, about the death of Martin Luther King. The collection ends with Claude McKay’s classic “If We Must Die.” Jordan’s “In Memoriam” floats somewhere in the middle. An interloper even in her own anthology, Jordan creates a genealogy of Black poets in the introduction to *Soulscript* that does not (can not) include any mention of Phillis Wheatley, and this despite the fact that in the same year, an article in *Time* about Black poets mentions Wheatley to contextualize

⁴⁶ See especially Broadside Press...including Dudley Randall and Margaret Burroughs eds. *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and Death of Malcolm X*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969. Etheridge Knight. “Portrait of Malcolm X” and “Malcolm X A Year After” in *Poems from Prison*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968, 26, 27. Raymond R. Paterson. *At That Moment: A Legend of Malcolm X*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969. Nikki Giovanni. *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968. Also see p 35 below.

Jordan and her peers.⁴⁷ Instead of mentioning Wheatley as a precedent, Jordan refers to tradition of Black leadership that goes from “Frederick Douglass down through Eldridge Cleaver” and a Black literary tradition whose only female member is Margaret Walker.⁴⁸ Furthermore, while Jordan includes most of the poets who appear more than once (Amiri Baraka, then Leroi Jones, Larry Neal, Jean Toomer etc,) in multiple thematic sections of the anthology, she restricts all three of Audre Lorde’s poems to the “saying the person” section on personal reflections, away from the other “political” Black poetry, making the statement that while the other poets, mostly male, can speak for the Black community, Audre Lorde can only speak for herself. Jordan’s brief introduction to the “saying the person” section of her anthology makes no attempt to bridge the personal to the political, but emphasizes the individual contingency of such poetry, merely explaining that “If I write a poem/organizing what I know/so that my individuality,/my special I-Am, has been/spoken as exactly as I can/speak, then that poem/is saying the person.”⁴⁹ The difficult miracle of creating Black Arts Movement anthology and corresponding definitions of poetry required Jordan to create boundaries that her own work (and the work of many of her contemporaries) exceeds. *Some Changes* re-published a year later, is filled with poems that would almost all be characterized as “saying the person” in a way that problematizes individuality. To a certain extent *Some Changes* is a meditation on the broad (if not national/ist) political implications of the personal politics of Black motherhood, or its impossibility.

⁴⁷ “The Undaunted Pursuit of Fury” *Time* April 6, 1970 p98-99.

⁴⁸ June Jordan in “Introduction” in *soulscript: Afro-American Poetry* New York: Zenith Books, 1970, xvii-xviii. Margeret Walker was the author of the 1966 novel *Jubilee* and the famed poem “For My People.” Walker died of breast cancer in 1998.

⁴⁹ *Soulscript*, 83.

Miracle

Some Changes is a difficult miracle in its twoness. *Some Changes* uses the recognizable practice of eulogizing martyrs and deploying Black motherhood as a symbol of stalled freedom, but in a manner that does not reproduce Black family and which ultimately reframes community accountability as a personal dilemma of production. In *Some Changes*, Jordan achieves the difficult miracle of characterizing the tragic death of Martin Luther King Jr., as something other than the trope of lost fatherhood that Black arts martyrdom poems depict again and again. The first thing that allows her to achieve this difficult miracle is the context of the collection. Before we get to “In Memoriam” Jordan leads the reader through poems addressing tragic premature death, pathologized familial structures and abortion, the major themes that she will use to characterize King’s death.

Directly countering Black male leader’s acceptance of the matriarchy thesis of the Moynihan report (and W.E.B. DuBois’s *Philadelphia Negro* decades before) that blames unmarried Black women for the suffering of Black communities, June Jordan creates a publication that is critical of normative and stable relationships between men and women. Rejecting the recurring message that Black women’s independence, complexity and power threaten to castrate Black men, like Reverend Henry Hardy’s simple assertion ““The black male has always been castrated by white America.” Mr. Hardy said. “Black women have always been used to keep black men in their place.”⁵⁰ Jordan creates a collection that decentralizes the problem of Black masculinity. In the first and second

⁵⁰ New York Times, March 27, 1986.. Cited in *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986, 6. See more in section on the matriarchy thesis in the chapter on Black maternity.

sections of the collection, Jordan makes it very clear that racialized patriarchy achieved through marriage is not her idea of a liberatory path for Black communities. Early in the collection, “The Wedding” intervenes into the tendency of the race man (be he DuBois, Frazier, Baraka, or Cosby) who would blame a lack of respectability and commitment through a married male presence for the problems of Black women and children. “The Wedding” characterizes marriage as an institutional trick and a communal failure. Undoing the romance of marriage, Jordan describes the groom “not smiling” and the bride “twice forgetting her own name.”⁵¹ The dispassionate description of the couple reflects the “indifferent” impact of their union on “life in general,” while the marriage itself is framed as the way that “they made themselves a man/and woman.” Marriage is primarily the production and enforcement of gender, and the line break is important.

By marrying today
they made themselves a man
and woman⁵²

“Man and woman” cannot reside on the same line. The first effect of this young marriage is to produce manhood.⁵³ Emphasized through the alliterative “m” the production of “selves” is directly related to “man.” “And woman” stands alone. The woman stands even more alone than usual in this depiction of marriage because the other effect of the ceremony is to provide them with an answer for the normalizing “curious(ity)” of their community while simultaneously dividing themselves from the community.⁵⁴ Jordan’s narrator describes them as

⁵¹ June Jordan, “The Wedding,” in *Some Changes*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971, 6.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Only a few years later, Toni Morrison will make a similar point when the narrator of *Sula* explains the marriage of Nel and Jude, saying “the two of them together would make one Jude.” (page)

⁵⁴ Jordan, “The Wedding,” 6.

brave enough
but only two.⁵⁵

The argument of this poem is that marriage for marriage's sake does not strengthen a Black community, it instead creates a weak and empty unit that is disconnected from the wider community. It has become clear in late capitalism that marriage has become a political tool of privatization, used to excuse the anti-welfare state from any accountability for the lives of community.⁵⁶ The government and corporate subsidization of marriage through health benefits and tax relief is an attempt to shift responsibility away from the state through a reification of the family unit. Marriage, as it is deployed by the state, seeks to be the anecdote to the single Black welfare mother and the queer alternative that she represents. .

About thirty pages later, Jordan meditates on what that alternative might be, describing marriage as something that restrains love and holds it captive. To be livable, marriage would need to be “as unruly as alive.” “Let me Live with Marriage,” written as something like a modified sonnet, (not for Phillis Wheatley, but maybe for the distant paradoxical love of Petrarch) this poem engages Shakespearean language and sonnet structure approximating four stanzas, though Jordan intervenes with line breaks, breaking with the structure of the love sonnet as she seeks to break with the structural limits of the institution of marriage. Jordan offers:

Let me live with marriage
as unruly as alive
or else alone and longing
not to long alone.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ See southernersonnewground.org (accessed 2/9/10).

⁵⁷ June Jordan. “Let Me Live With Marriage,” *Some Changes*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971, 35..

Reversing the iambic rhythm in the first line, and moving into anapest in the second before succumbing to the iamb in the third line, Jordan juxtaposes the heart's rhythm with the structure of marriage. Emulating a Shakespearean tendency to turn words around through repetition, this is a revision of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, which starts with the line "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," meditating on the relationship between love, proof and movement.⁵⁸ Shakespeare's argument is that love is an "ever-fixed mark" that is completely unmovable. "Love is not love/which alters when it alteration finds," Shakespeare insists.

Using a modified sonnet and a similar strategy of repetition in which love can be "not love," Jordan argues instead that love must be unruly, and therefore should not be contained by the strictures of marriage. Jordan focuses on the words "alone" "love" and "cruel." Above "alone", like marriage is a state that the speaker hopes is not permanent. "Cruel" is a test for reciprocity

...Will you attack
as cruel
as you claim me cruel?...

and "love" is a flexible term. It is the name of the beloved and it is the name for an energy that can be used to bind, that can be corrupted, that can be stilled within the context of marriage.

This poem, directed to a would-be/had been spouse, possibly her son Christopher's father, laments,

And now
absurd
I sing of stillborn lyrics almost sung

⁵⁸ William Shakespeare. "Sonnet 116," in *The Sonnets*. New York: Dutton/Signet, 1963, 158.

before ending with a the couplet in iambic pentameter
If this be baffling then the error's proved
to love so long and leave my love unmoved.

The unbroken couplet is ironic here. Marriage and the sonnet are inadequate to express love, indeed the second meaning of the closing line doubts whether or not the addressee will even be “moved” by the poem itself. There-emergence of the word “long” which remains a verb even while appearing here as a temporal marker for love, and the consonant “leave” alongside “love,” belies the possibility that love could be “unmoved.”⁵⁹ The true rhyme in Jordan directly opposes the slant rhyme in closing couplet in Shakespeare’s earlier attempt to make his definition of the “marriage of true minds” absolute in the closing couplet of Sonnet 116:

If this be error and upon me proved
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.⁶⁰

Jordan’s sonnet seeks to prove the error upon Shakespeare’s unmovable pronouncement on the security of the marriage of true minds. This poem in which she sings “of stillborn lyrics almost sung,” is tragic because a rigid structure has stamped out the possibility of life.⁶¹ Because of the repeated “s” sound the would-be song becomes a lamentful whisper. Marriage becomes an abortion of self-expression that the poet at best, would tragically “live with.”⁶² This characterization of marriage as “stillborn lyrics” directly opposes the idea (reinvoked recently through state amendments to define

⁵⁹ Jordan. “Let Me Live With Marriage,” 35.

⁶⁰ Shakespeare. “Sonnet 116,” 158.

⁶¹ Jordan. “Let Me Live With Marriage,” 35.

⁶² Ibid.

marriage on explicitly heterosexual terms) that marriage is the only appropriate generative site for birth.⁶³

These poems, which are explicitly critical of marriage as a form are important to contextualize other poems in the collection that centralize the tragic position of the single mother and also intervene at the level of poetic form. The single mother and child are not tragic because they have failed to attain patriarchal structure. Instead, the mother and the child are a poetic problem, constrained by the lack of a creative structure. In “The New Pieta” and “In Memoriam” Jordan privileges the position of the mother, mourning a murdered relationship to birth and positioning the Black mother as a subject that exceeds the structure she inhabits. The third poem in the collection “The New Pieta: For the Mothers and Children of Detroit” written shortly after the Detroit riot in the summer of 1967, uses an invocation of the renaissance depictions of a dead Jesus Christ in the arms of his mother Mary to construct a classic but heretical definition of family, divinely fatherless and tragic. In the pieta, the family is not tragic because it is fatherless, it is divine because it is fatherless. The fact that Jesus has no man as a father is what makes his death divine and communally redemptive. The tragedy is the fact that the established order cannot recognize the divinity it witnesses, and attempts to extinguish. The tragedy of “the Mothers and Children of Detroit” is not the absence of father figures, it is the devaluation of life through the pathologization of Black mothering. The established order can not see the divinity in Black people, does not count the safety of Black children as worthy of government action on the basic level of building codes or landlord regulations. Jordan’s pieta takes place in what she calls a “wrong one

⁶³ Ibid.

room,” invoking what Michel Foucault calls the medicalization of the family structure, pathologizing the results of the structural conditions that poverty assigns to Black mothers and their children.⁶⁴ Invoking the Pieta, a much-used feature of classical western artistic production and using iambic meter, a classic feature of order in English poetry, Jordan makes a structural critique:

They wait like darkness not becoming stars
long and early in a wrong one room
he moves no more.⁶⁵

In this first stanza and in the last stanza of this three-stanza poem, Jordan follows two lines of iambic meter with a third, concluding line, still iambic, in emulation of the heartbeat, but tragic and abbreviated “he moves no more.”⁶⁶ The darkness of the inhabitants of the poem and of the “wrong one room” is not destined to become light or to achieve an enlightenment version of universalized family norms. The queerness of the mother and son pair is that they actually survive and live (iambic heartbeat) in a structure that can only pathologize them. Except when they don’t. “a wrong one room.” “he moves no more.” Light in the form of fire is a destructive force, not the path to normalcy. In this perfectly balanced poem, three stanzas, three lines each, Jordan uses structure to make a critique of the relationship between structural violence and human life in the context of racism. This comes across even more strongly in the final stanza:

She and her knees knock slowly closed (a burning door)
not to continue as they bled before
*he moves no more*⁶⁷

⁶⁴ June Jordan. “The New Pieta,” *Some Changes*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc, New York 1971, 5. And Michel Foucault. *The Birth of the Clinic*. New York: Random House, 1994 (translation copyright by Tavistock Press, 1973).

⁶⁵ June Jordan. “The New Pieta,” *Some Changes*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc, New York 1971, 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, emphasis in the original.

This stanza has an even more disciplined structure. The final words in each line in the last stanza rhyme with the last words in the last line of each preceding stanza. *more. war. door. before. more.* Knees knock that bled before in alliteration. This structural choice demonstrates a resonance, the stopped heartbeat, the throb of the tragedy in this poem resonates with the entire structure of the poem and the sacrificial housing structure that Jordan blames for the death of the young man in the poem.

The poem makes a connection between the oppressive housing conditions in Detroit which Thomas J. Sugrue explains had been deteriorating since the 1940's. After World War II the Federal Housing Authority refused loans to Black Detroiters while "underwriting the construction of homes by whites of a similar economic status a few blocks away," demonstrating direct government complicity with the common practice of racist redlining by private banks in many American cities.⁶⁸ Meanwhile the Home Owners Loan Corporation in Detroit gave higher rating to white neighborhoods who adopted "restrictive covenants" that explicitly forbade building owners from renting to racial and ethnic minorities.⁶⁹ It comes as no surprise then that a general housing shortage in Detroit impacted Black residents particularly harshly. One notorious landlord, William Bruton, charged extremely high rents because Black renters had no other options, and encouraged his renters to take in boarders, and in one case rented a 3 bedroom apartment to 12 people, violating the fire code. And indeed four people were

⁶⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue. The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 44.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

ultimately killed in a fire in that residence.⁷⁰ However, it is not the blatant use of racial discrimination to confine the housing options of Black people that gets the blame in the social narrative. The specter of deviant sexuality brought on by the crowding of multiple families into small living spaces only reinforced the racism of white homeowners associations who insisted on keeping Black people out of their neighborhoods. A neighborhood publication called the *Brightmoor Journal* warned that creating apartments in their community to address the housing crisis would ‘open the way for ill fame houses,’ constructing a slippery slope between homes open to Black children and professionalized brothels.⁷¹ The devaluation of Black youth operates through the pathologization of the Black mother. By 1967 when “one of the most brutal riots in American history” erupts, in which 30 people were killed by police officers and 7,231 people were arrested Black housing had been effectively contained, according to Sugrue “few whites lived anywhere near the epicenter of the riots.”⁷² What Sugrue called the “time bomb” of housing discrimination had clearly blown up.

Again:

She and her knees lock slowly closed (a burning door)
not to continue as they bled before
*he moves no more*⁷³

If Jordan’s structural choices in this poem illustrate and critique the structural violence of racist housing, the content of the final stanza frames this structural violence as an attack on the creative capacity of Black mothers. The mother’s knees close. Her

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 54.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 52.

⁷² Sugrue, 44.

⁷³ Jordan “The New Pieta,” emphasis in the original.

physical reproductive organs, now closed within those locked knees, become “a burning door,” connected by ontology (the “b”) like the exit to Eden, and her fertility is finished, “not to continue as they bled before.”

Re-membering King (or Re-gendering Martyrdom)

After King’s death and during the period in which Medgar Evers and Malcolm X were murdered, Black poets published a number of memorial poems. Poetic responses to these particular murders continued a long tradition of eulogization in African American poetry, and as Karla Holloway points out, the presence of untimely death in Black communities is much older than civil rights.⁷⁴ It seems appropriate here to offer a brief catalogue of the responses to martyrdom in Black Arts poetry that appear along with Jordan’s “In Memoriam” using Arnold Adoff’s influential anthology *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century* published in 1973, the same year that Jordan’s text re-emerges. Adoff organized this anthology based on what he judged to be the most important works by the most important Black poets of the 20th century. Adoff, who dedicates the anthology in part “For the memory of heroes and victims/under the ground too soon” understands the canon of Black poetry to be a form of response to the untimely deaths of Black people, famous and unknown.⁷⁵ It is not surprising then, that he finds poems that eulogize to be some of the most important works by the authors he features throughout the century. Poems in the anthology eulogize Richard Wright and W.E.B. DuBois who died in the 1960’s, and the untimely deaths of people such as Emmett Till, the Black contingent in the Union Army during the Civil War, the victims of the bombing

⁷⁴ Karla Holloway. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

⁷⁵ Arnold Adoff ed. *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*. New York: Harper and Rox, 1973.

of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and the victims of church burnings and racist terror more generally.

During the time period immediately preceding the publication of the anthology a number of poems were published explicitly in response to the deaths of Martin, Medgar and Malcolm. Margaret Walker published “For Malcolm X.”⁷⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks wrote three poems one entitled “Medgar Evers” dedicated to his son Charles Evers, one entitled “Malcolm X” dedicated to Broadside Press publisher Dudley Randall and one entitled “Martin Luther King Jr.”⁷⁷ which seems to need no specific dedication. These three poems appear consecutively in the anthology. Adoff also includes a poem entitled “For Malcolm X” by Nanina Alba, Gerald Barrax’s “For Malcolm: After Mecca” and “Portrait of Malcolm X by Etheridge Knight and Amiri Baraka’s “Poem for Black Hearts” which urges readers to avenge the murder of Malcolm X.⁷⁸ Likewise, the collection includes Sam Cornish’s “Death of Dr. King,” Don L. Lee (Haki Madhibuti)’s “Assassination” along with June Jordan’s “In Memoriam” and Audre Lorde’s “Rites of Passage” all of which directly respond to the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.⁷⁹

The moment of these murders and the eulogies that accompanied them made the poems that Lorde and Jordan wrote legible and the critical mass of topical martyrdom poems allowed for a certain diversity. Reading “In Memoriam” along with some of its fellows allows the argument of the poem to come into relief. Compare “In Memoriam” to “Death of Dr. King” a poem by Sam Cornish on the same subject published near the same time and anthologized together with both parts of Jordan’s work in 1973 in Arnold

⁷⁶ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 158, 159.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 169, 224, 232, 244, 255.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 296, 423, 305, 249.

Adoff's comprehensive anthology. Like Jordan's poem, Cornish's has two parts. Like Jordan's poem Cornish's is about a populace overwhelmed with grief in the face of violence. And though Cornish's poem ends quite evocatively with an image that pushes time out of joint, "Black men/jump out of trees," next to Jordan's it is remarkably contained.⁸⁰ Unlike Jordan's poem, which accumulates verbs, piling predicate on top of predicate until you wonder if these actions are indeed the *subjects* of the loss she describes, every statement in Cornish's poem has a clear subject and predicate. Compare Jordan's opening stanza:

*honey people murder mercy U.S.A.
the milkland turn to monsters teach
to kill to violate pull down destroy
the weaky freedom fruit
from being born*

with Cornish's "we sit outside/ the bars the dime stores/ everything is closed today."⁸¹ Every line marches after the other with grave clarity. And the message is powerful. The mourning of Dr. King's assassination is also the mourning of countless lynched "Black men," also the living deaths of "Black men" who would be in bars but are now on street corners.⁸² And the gendering in the poem is much more familiar. Unlike Jordan's open "outward hand" the ready-to-riot subjects of this poem have impenetrable "hands filled with bricks."⁸³ Though stricken, these men are holding weapons. And they are peers. Whereas Jordan's address to "honey" suggests that the speaker of the poem might be explaining the inexplicable to a child, Cornish speaks from the standpoint of "we" who

⁸⁰ Ibid, 296.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Jordan, "In Memoriam" in *Some Changes*, 15/Cornish, "Death of Martin Luther King Jr." 296.

are old enough to hang around the bars.⁸⁴ And King is reassuringly male, though dead he does not become “the weakly freedom growing fruit,” he remains “a brother.”⁸⁵ Cornish tells us “a brother is dead,” reminding us that the narrator and the people on the scene are also men.⁸⁶

The purpose of this section is not to do a reading of all of the many poems written in memory of Martin Luther King Jr., but I do see the eulogization of Martin Luther King Jr. as a contentious and generative moment for Black arts movements articulation of itself, King’s death opens a space where the Black freedom had to be newly written. King’s own rhetorical and political influence on the speakability of Black freedom has an afterlife in the wave of poetic work that tried to describe the aftermath of his death. If King’s oratorical work made a rights-bearing Black audience visible, characterizing the impact of the death of (figured in much of this poetry as “a King”) King was crucial to the Black Arts Movement’s task of speaking to Black audiences. In Larry Neal’s essay on “And Shine Swam On” he emphasizes the need for a connection between Black male political leaders and a Black audience.⁸⁷ Ultimately the majority of these poems lent themselves to the multiplication of gendered leadership, authorizing Black cultural nationalists to claim patriarchal leadership of the Black cultural nationalist movement, but this process was not inevitable. Though the development of a masculinist language of Black freedom is not my main focus here, looking at the breadth and proliferation of

⁸⁴ Jordan, “In Memoriam” in *Some Changes*, 15/Cornish, “Death of Martin Luther King Jr.” 296. Also note that Jordan wrote her poem in conversation with her own son, who wrote his own poem as did the other young participants of the “Voices of the Children” youth poetry program, whom Jordan was with when they all heard about the death of King. See June Jordan. “Childrena and the Hungering For.” Speech delivered March 29th, 1969, Lehigh University Tri-State Poetry Festival, 2. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 55 Folder 14. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

⁸⁵ Jordan, “In Memoriam” in *Some Changes*, 15/Cornish, “Death of Martin Luther King Jr.” 296.

⁸⁶ Cornish, 296.

⁸⁷ see also Larry Neal in “The Black Arts Movement” on the question of audience.

the poems eulogizing Martin Luther King Jr. would illuminate many of the debates and concerns that accompanied the post-civil rights framing of Black power in the United States. The importance of the question of how to imagine Black freedom in a post-civil rights moment made poems written towards the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. particularly marketable and provided a space for poets such as June Jordan and Audre Lorde to be more legible and far reaching than they might have otherwise been.

Jordan links “The New Pieta” to “In Memoriam” through her use of iambic pentameter. Jordan, who studied poetic forms from all over the world, and often broke free of all of them, is saying something with her choice of iambic pentameter in these specific places. “The New Pieta” starts with the line “They wait like darkness not becoming stars.” Departing radically from the freeform anti-grammatical stuttering traumatic style of the first section the second section, which describes the “deplorable abortion” of King’s assassination in “In Memoriam” begins “They sleep who know a regulated place.”⁸⁸ Each of these lines is structures a suspended space, an absence. These two lines play separated balance to each other, describing the position of a differentiated “they.” The “they” of “The New Pieta” describes the brutal lucidity the mothers of the dead, the “they” of “In Memoriam” describes an impossible security, exactly that which the mothers of Detroit are denied, invoking one of King’s final speeches “Remaining Awake Through the Great Revolution” where he likens those who ignore the needed responses to poverty, war and racism to Rip Van Winkle who sleeps

⁸⁸ Jordan, “In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr,” 15.

through a revolutionary shift.⁸⁹ In this speech King explicitly describes his empathy for the plight of welfare mothers who suffer abusive housing conditions. The relationship between the “they” who do not sleep, and who are not stars and the “they” who are not here in this chaotic place characterized by the traumatic recurrence of what King’s assassination represents to the rioting public, is not free, or arbitrary. Like iambic pentameter the rhythm of Black trauma, sleeplessness, loss is measured. And regular. It marches to the beat of what is lost. It tramples on the dreams of the awake. And it was the second section of Jordan’s poem for MLK that was dangerous to the Black arts market.

These two lines in iambic pentameter establish the perspective of what survives the sacrifice of Black men. Thus, when Jordan describes the effect of King’s assassination as the way a deadly “honey,” “milkland” culture of “U.S.A.” was able to “destroy/the weakly freedom growing fruit/ from being born.”⁹⁰ Martin Luther King’s assassination is not the death of the great father leader, it is a “deplorable abortion” linked to the deaths of children in “The New Pieta” and the failed promises of patriarchalism in the figure of marriage.⁹¹ It is a loss that has already been survived by the subject of the abortion. King’s assassination is a prevention of birth, or a “rape” against an intergenerational process of “freedom growing fruit.”⁹² Jordan’s departure from a paternalistic model of leadership is a difficult miracle. However her intervention is still legible on the terms of Black nationalism which has understood the Black

⁸⁹ Martin Luther King Jr. “Remaining Awake Through the Great Revolution” sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington DC on March 31st 1968 in ed. James Washington. *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986, 268-278.

⁹⁰ Jordan, “In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr.,” 15.

⁹¹ Ibid, 16.

⁹² Ibid, 15.

woman's body to be a site through which a nation can be produced and a battle ground upon which white rape (of land/resources/or stable Black procreation) must be avenged. The difficult miracle of Jordan's intervention is that this "freedom growing fruit" is *not* a nation. In fact "freedom" is directly threatened by the Zionist idea of milk and honey that introduces the poem. Nationalism is the pedagogy of murder exemplified by the United States:

honey people murder mercy U.S.A.
the milkland turn to monsters teach
to kill to violate pull down destroy
the weakly freedom growing fruit
from being born

America⁹³

The use of "honey" and the "milkland" to reference the biblical description of Zion, the promised land, is gravely ironic. King, of course, spoke of the promised land in his final public speech, presciently warning the audience "I may not get there with you." In Jordan's poem the U.S.A. only fulfills the murderous promise. The fact that the poem starts with "honey" and the fairytale style of "milkland" could also suggest a reading of the poem where the speaker is a mother telling a horrifying bedtime story, especially since the second section of the poem begins "they sleep." In that case the "mercy" in the first line, could function as a colloquial exclamation. Akin to Nina Simone's "Mississippi God-Damn," Jordan's speaker sighs "mercy (,) U.S.A." Jordan uses alliteration and assonance to depict the cruel coherence of the murderous context. "people murder mercy" in the "milkland," and turn to "monsters." The "milkland" "kills." The subject of this freedom is not a nuclear family. It is not virile or potent. It stutters with the

⁹³ Ibid.

alliterative “f” “freedom growing fruit from” failing to achieve the harder alliterative boon of “being born.” King has something to do with birth in this poem, but he is not in the role of the patriarch.

As historian Charles Payne had argued, King as a figure has been monumentalized to a point that can obscure the diverse civil rights leaders and forms of movement leadership that preceded and surrounded him.⁹⁴ In her 1987 essay on King “The Mountain and the Man Who Was Not God” delivered at Stanford University on the anniversary of King’s birth and published in her collection *Technical Difficulties*, Jordan argues that King’s significance has been misunderstood by those who insist he was a great patriarch or who claim his relevance is threatened by the FBI collected information on his infidelity that reveal he was not a completely faithful husband. King, Jordan insists, was never God, nor was he perfect. In fact, Jordan is as critical of King’s leadership style as she is of the way he has been incorrectly historicized as a patriarch of the Black community. She is quick to point out “Dr. King did not invent Montgomery, Alabama, or the Women’s Political Caucus of Montgomery, or Mrs. Rosa Parks.”⁹⁵ Jordan goes on to critique King’s lack of respect for the women who were also leaders in what she calls the Civil Rights Revolution, explaining that while even Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois spoke and wrote publicly on women’s equality:

...one can find scant indication that Dr. King recognized the indispensable work of Black women within the Civil Rights Movement. On the contrary, there is no record of his gratitude for Ella Baker’s intellectual leadership. There is no record of his seeking to shake the hand of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Charles Payne. *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom”: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Also see Charles Payne and Steven Lawson. *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

⁹⁵ June Jordan. “The Mountain and the Man Who Was Not God: An Essay on the Life and Ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr..” in *Some of Us Did Not Die*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, 145.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 152.

While celebrating King as a miracle, a mountain, and prophet without whom the Civil Rights Movement would have been unimaginable and largely unnarrated, Jordan does not valorize King as a “the one” who made the civil rights movement possible and she disagrees with King’s own approach to leadership and the historical role of savior into which he has been placed. The model of leadership that she offers is much more democratic, following Ella Baker’s approach, as documented and framed by historian Barbara Ransby.⁹⁷ “We are not gods,” Jordan says, “And we are many. I would hope that we shall once again begin to build beloved community *not* looking for a leader but determined to respect and activate the leadership capacities within each one of us.”⁹⁸

Therefore the vision of freedom that Jordan mourns in “In Memoriam” is not patriarchal power, but it is still gendered. It is “weakly... growing fruit.” The miracle, mountain, man is recontextualized in Jordan’s memory which is mammary. The “milkland” is fruitless. When Jordan describes the murder upon “the outward hand” she may be describing a posture that King took during his speeches, but she may also be describing the figure of the pathologized welfare mother, punished for putting her hand out to seek a handout. The gendered language of the poem is particularly evident in the longest stanza of the poem.

tomorrow yesterday rip rape
exacerbate despoil disfigure
crazy running threat the
deadly thrall
appall belief dispel
the wildlife burn the breast

⁹⁷ Barbara Ransby. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003.

⁹⁸ Jordan, “The Mountain and the Man Who Was Not God, 149.

the onward tongue
the outward hand
deform the normal rainy...⁹⁹

The “weakly freedom fruit” is caught in a reproduced context of rape. The alliterative “rip rape” coupled with “despoil disfigure” draws attention to the vertical alliteration of “onward” and “outward,” all asserting pressure on the prevented birth, which is pathologized and beset by the same gendered constructs of violence and pathologization that criminalize Black mothers. Followed up by the internal rhyme of “deform the normal” the pair of “despoil disfigure” echoes the pathologization of the bodies of poor and Black women as unsuitable places for the production of children with citizenship rights. In fact the animalization of Black mothers, as discussed in the chapter on mothering emerges in the “wildlife” even as the term also calls out the brutality of the system that produces King’s assassination. Importantly the breast is the first body part mentioned in the poem, before “the onward tongue/the outward hand,” those other problematic features of Black women. I am not suggesting that instead of protesting the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and the dream of American equality that he represented, Jordan was explicitly calling out the state for assassinating the characters of Black women and mothers in particular. Nor am I suggesting that (such as in Lorde’s “Rites of Passage”) the speaker of the poem is (like the poet) a Black mother. Instead, I am offering that the gendered language of the poem characterized the violence of racism in a manner that exceeds the singular person and masculine gender of King. The story this poem tells reminds us, in the resonance of its language, that racism is engendered and re-engendered through gendered physical and ideological violence. It is the

⁹⁹ Jordan, “In Memoriam,” 15.

gendered instability of the poem that opens the poem to a queerly, intergenerational, difficult miracle of encounter with Jordan's work on Wheatley.

Jordan's essay on King supports this reading of the poem, asserting that the energy that was attacked through the assassination of King was not simply a dangerous masculine posture of self-possession, it was the possibility of shared leadership. "When that devil's bullet lodged itself inside the body of Dr. Martin Luther King, he had already begin an astonishing mobilization of poor, Black while, Latino Americans who had nothing to lose...Is it any wonder he was killed?"¹⁰⁰ The danger of Martin Luther King Jr's example is lost in his re-packaging into a self-possessed patriarch. The danger in the tendency he represented at the end of his life was a tendency against possession and towards socialism, or radical sharing. At the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. was not individualistic enough, not respectable enough, and certainly not capitalist enough to survive. Martin Luther King Jr. as the bad teacher of an alternative sociality that was anti-imperialist, coalitional and willing to sabatoge the function of the state through direct action was too dangerous. Whereas most of the male poets in the Black Arts movement recuperated Dr. King as a respectable leader, referencing the middle of his career and emphasizing themselves as the youthful militant generation born from the death of his paternal non-violent approach, June Jordan recuperates King as a radical teacher, slain, feminized, raped and insists that the vision he made possible was not simply destroyed, but aborted. In a narrative that says Dr. King's death can unproblematically give birth to a patriarchal cultural nationalist movement, death does not remain death and birth does not have any relationship to the problem of the

¹⁰⁰ Jordan, "The Mountain and the Man Who Was Not God," 147.

maternal trace. And in “In Memoriam” death is not birth. It is actually death. As Michelle Wright and Hazel Carby point out, a masculinist concept of Blackness perpetuates itself within intellectual traditions through the concept that Black men can create Black men without the interference of women.¹⁰¹ Like Biblically patriarchal begetting, man produces man, which also means man produces himself in a singular line of godliness. Michelle Wright argues that in the case of the Black male intellectual tradition the fantasy is that Black men produce themselves and each other in opposition to white masculinity. The complication of maternity disrupts this fantasy. Michelle Wright cites the mother poems of Audre Lorde and Carolyn Rodgers to argue that their emphasis on the Black maternity proves the lie of the fantasy of one line, revealing life itself, and the concept of Blackness in particular as something that is dialogically produced, not as the opposite of whiteness, but as a conversation.¹⁰² In this version of the story, is it not the dead father with the power of naming that gives birth to the future. Instead and intergenerational conversation nurtured by the teacher/mother produces the possibility of difference across time.

Memorializing King, Jordan intervenes into both the elision of the Black mother in the intellectual production and the narrative of the Black mother as the bad teacher. It is US nationalism that “teach to kill to violate,” an answer to the pathology that blames violence on the bad teaching of the Black mother who produces young Black male criminals through her deviance and neglect. Jordan believes that there is such a thing as bad teaching, and in her reviews of children’s books she accuses a number of authors of

¹⁰¹ Hazel Carby. *Race Men*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Michelle Wright. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

¹⁰² See Wright, *Becoming Black*.

naturalizing violence in a way that teaches children to be apathetic and silent. For example, in September 1971 Jordan blasted John Donovan's Wild in the World in a New York Times book review that attacks Donovan's complicity in a society where "our whole vocabulary reflects our routine brutality," warning that "violence begets the very same."¹⁰³ Using the term "beget" a Biblical term which refers to the patriarchal passing down of generations from man to man, Jordan challenges the pathology narrative that suggests *some* children are born with violent predilection or taught it by their mother's. If violence is passed down through generations it is passed down through the continuing story of masculinist violence. For Jordan violence is pedagogical, but it is taught through narrative, particularly the problematic narrative of nationalism. It is also important to note that though both parts of "In Memoriam" appeared simultaneously in 1967 in the first edition of *Same Changes*, Jordan only chose to reproduce the first section of the poem in *soulscript*. The second section, which follows up her early reference to the prevention of freedom "from being born" with an explicit reference to King's assassination as a "deplorable abortion" does not appear in *soulscript*, the Black arts anthology. We can only assume that since Jordan was the editor and the author, this was her choice. What made this one among many poems about King's death dangerous?

What Cornish's poem, Jordan's "In Memoriam" and Lorde's "Dreams Bite" (to be discussed later) have in common is that they are broken poems, organized into two parts with a break in the middle. That break within each poem makes the function of these King eulogization poems visible as bridges charged with crossing the break in time

¹⁰³ New York Times Book Review, "Wild in the World" BR8, Sep 12, 1971. Also see Jordan's similar critique of the violence in Julius Lester's re-presentation of the Uncle Remus stories in 1987, (New York Times "A Truly Bad Rabbit" p505, May 17, 1987.

signified by King's death. These poems organize themselves around an absence, they admit a disconnection. But the break is present. In the break between the parts of each of these poems is a contradiction, a founding impossibility a demand. Ending before the break is an amputation, but that is exactly what Jordan does when she anthologizes "In Memoriam" in her anthology *Soulscript*. Only the first part appears, offering a lie of wholeness.

Time Binds

A difficult miracle. Jordan, even in her *own* anthology could not accommodate the excess of her memory of King. What made Jordan's reference to King's murder as an abortion, her echo upon the unnamed predicament of single motherhood, her meditation on "wild reversal hearse rehearsal," and "no next predictable" unfit for *Soulscript*?¹⁰⁴ What made the second part of this poem of radicalized mourning into excess? Maybe this poem was too poetic to serve the function of eulogy. Maybe it was too early. Maybe it went on too long. In *Soulscript*, and some other anthologized appearances¹⁰⁵ the poem ends with the capitalized word "STOP," representing the poet's insistent protest, but also symbolizing the helplessness of the poet and the audience. King is killed

by men by more
than you or I can

STOP.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Jordan, "In Memoriam," 16.

¹⁰⁵ Indeed even in its most recent posthumous appearance on Me' Shell Ndegeocello's album "Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape."..

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

But the complete poem actually ends with a reclamation of the killing word
“more, ” as used above. The poem ends

ritual of fright insanity and more
deplorable abortion
more and
more

“In Memoriam” is about the death of a freedom that was never meant to survive. Jordan’s use of the term “deplorable abortion” contradicts and exceeds the terms of anti-abortionism within the masculinism of Black nationalism. Firstly, by distinguishing that this abortion is “deplorable” June Jordan, never redundant, reminds the reader that abortion is not automatically “deplorable.” I read Jordan’s use of the term “deplorable abortion” here within a Black feminist focus on the issue of coerced sterilization in Black communities specifically targetting the “outstretched hand(s)” of working class women of color, especially due to the previously mentioned links in to the New Peita for the mothers and children of Detroit.

The repeated reference to “more” in this ending insists on extending past the end into an alternative, and remains connected to the repetition of “more” in the stilling move from “he moves no more” to “*he moves no more*” in “The New Pieta.”¹⁰⁷

The combination of all of these “**more**”s with the words “deplorable” and “abortion” in “In Memoriam” invokes submerged alternative repeating “or,” “or,” “or,” “or” and “or.” The “or” performs the break in the poem. Part two is an alternative. Later in *Some Changes*, Jordan includes a poem simply entitled “Or” and starting with the word “OR,” just as capitalized as the “STOP” that cannot end “In Memoriam.” “Or” takes

¹⁰⁷ Jordan, “The New Pieta,” 5.

place in MLK Jr's hometown of Atlanta and overflows with words like "insatiable," "crazy," "fly," "up/and up" and "too proud." "Or" is the flipside of the unpredictable "next" that Jordan opens up in part two of "In Memoriam." The foreshadowing word "or" is a love that escapes the narrative of post-civil rights Black arts articulation. "Or" is that which exceeds the Black arts framing of itself within a tradition that depends on forefathers. This "or" is the turn of honest freedom and unpredictable embodiment that Jordan will later address in "A New Politics of Sexuality," it is the hinge of difference that makes articulation possible in the body. I declare that the miracle of *Some Changes* is this excessive "or," and that this was a miracle too difficult to anthologize, to include, to frame. "Or" cannot represent, it is something more ephemeral, like a gesture of critique pointing towards something that could exist, but does not. Yet.

"alternative temporality"

My intergenerative intervention depends on this "or" as a site for the poetic, the difficult miracle that averts reproduction and makes space for an alternative. The difficult miracle of Black poetry is something evident in her practice and the places where she makes more possible than she can say, yet. These are the places where the intergenerational is necessary. I call myself answering (while inventing) this need. And so I insist on looking at the relationship between this first "or" at a difficultly generative moment for June Jordan, poet, and its reappearance in the title "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America **or** Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley," as a means through which to trouble the relationship between poetic practice and the product of poetry in June Jordan's work. In other words, literary critics are out of control. I am using a particularly constructed back-story about Jordan's poetic debut to and the small

word “or” to assert that the poem in Jordan’s 1984 “Something Like A Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” is not the collection of words that appears after a colon announcing “Something Like A Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley,” made up of 12 lines with ababcdcdefef rhymes and a closing couplet. That lovely passage written in iambic pentameter is not the miraculous poem. I am asserting that the poem of Jordan’s intergenerational piece on Black poetry comes much earlier in her description of something Hortense Spiller would need to say in *diacritics* three years later and I would need to read over again.¹⁰⁸ I would redirect us away from the achieved miracle of Jordan’s tribute and back to the more difficult opening paragraph where the intervening narrative needs slashes and colons to hold together. I would redirect us to read this opening paragraph on what it means to be a slave, an intergenerative attempt at memory, with “In Memoriam” in mind. Maybe “In Memoriam” was an elegy that Phillis Wheatley wrote in advance, hidden in a tribute to a member of the white Boston elite. Maybe the break in “In Memoriam,” the unacceptability of the second part relieves the unproducibility of Wheatley’s second work, after her break with slavery. Maybe “In Memoriam” was in mourning for Phillis Wheatley’s second collection of poems, written as an independent Black woman, the book of poems that Jordan dares us to imagine in 1775 or “today.”

“to kill to violate pull down destroy
the weakly freedom growing fruit
from being born

America”

¹⁰⁸ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar. Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

Maybe that “weakly freedom growing fruit” is Wheatley second book of poem, which was prevented from being born, but it is also the ambiguous word in the middle: “America,” the creation of the political unit which Wheatley’s work and the texts she read contested in 1775. Weakly freedom growing fruit. Maybe it was the contested status of Phillis Wheatley’s work and the work of Black women’s literary production in the early 1970’s. Maybe it would have been impossible for Jordan to remember Phillis Wheatley in the introduction to *soulscript*. Maybe it would have been impossible to remember Phillis Wheatley in the midst of a Black arts movement that decried her (her-Wheatley’s? her-Jordan’s) poetry as inauthentic, docile and too white. In 1962 Rosey Poole laments that Wheatley because of lack of “strength” is not “a really important figure” but rather “a literary curio.” In 1967, the year before King’s assassination, Robert Hayden includes Wheatley’s work in his anthology Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets, but surmises that her poetry “had almost nothing to say about the plight of her people.”¹⁰⁹ In 1968 the anthology *Dark Symphony*, marketed as a chronicle of the history of “Negro writing” does not even include Wheatley’s work.¹¹⁰ And in 1970, in her own anthology *soulscript* Jordan, not surprisingly, cites everyone but Wheatley in her list of literary ancestors.

It is not until 1973, four years after the publication of *Some Changes* and three years after the publication of *Soulscript* that Jordan and her contemporaries in the field of Black women’s writing gathered publically in the name of Phillis Wheatley. On the

¹⁰⁹ Robert Hayden ed. Kaliedoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets (New York, 1967), px xx. See also R. Lynn Matson “Phillis Wheatley—Soul Sister?” *Phylon*, 33:3 (1972) 222-230 for a discussion of the way a Black Arts Literary movement situated Wheatley at the time.

¹¹⁰ James Emmanuel and Theodore Gross eds. *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*. New York: Free Press, 1968.

200th anniversary of the publication of Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects" Margaret Walker convened a gathering of Black women poets which included both June Jordan and Audre Lorde, along with Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez and other Black women writers. June Jordan opened the opening session of the conference with a reading, and Audre Lorde closed that same session with a reading of her work. In 1973, a year before the 1st Conference of Afro-American Writers at Howard and 5 years before that conference agreed to have a session dedicated specifically to the work of Black Women Writers (moderated and organized by Jordan), Phillis Wheatley's name, through Margaret Walker's vision and labor, provided a space specifically for and about Black women's poetry. The coverage of the poetry festival in the Feb 1974 "Annual History Issue" of *Black World* continued to disavow the understanding of Wheatley's work as "Black" poetry, remarking "after her rebirth in Mississippi Phillis is Blacker..."¹¹¹

That Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved woman kidnapped from West Africa has to post-humously be recontextualized in Black belt Mississippi in order to become "Blacker" speaks to the disidentification of Black arts poets with Wheatley's project, even as the invocation of her existence begins to create a space for Black women poets. I would also say that the contestation of Wheatley's Blackness has a prefigurative relationship to the tension between the work of Black women writers and the male-claimed project of Black literary production which would be demonstrated more blatantly and violently in the mid-1980's response to work by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange that addressed violence within Black communities.

¹¹¹ "Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival" in *Black World* Feb, 1974, p. 92.

This is the context within which Jordan cannot easily claim or remember Phillis Wheatley. In 1974 *Bid the Vassal Soar: Interpretive Essays on the Life and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton* one of the first monographs to address Wheatley's work and life at length, M.A. Richmond explains that because of her privileged status in the Wheatley household, Wheatley was not really a member of the community of the enslaved, not considering the fact that the affective labor of enslaved people, and enslaved women was a part of their enslavement even when they were not primarily engaged in manual or domestic labor, or that different roles in relationship to the whims of slaveholders were not part of the complicated contours of interactions between enslaved people in general who would have been required to relate to each other across boundaries created and enforced by slaveholders.¹¹² Aside from Richmond's simplistic analysis of slave authenticity that Wheatley fails, he sympathizes with the situation of Wheatley who without literary precedent, with no female or enslaved American poet predecessor struggled to become a poet (and Richmond, not overly generous informs us that in his opinion neither Wheatley nor Horton "was a great poet").¹¹³ So for she who would ultimately, and with difficulty claim Wheatley herself as a precedent for the intervention of poetry by Black women into the reproductive narrative of American racism, the creation of a context for Wheatley as miracle was a complicated act. Alice Walker would suggest that it was Wheatley's mother, who's spiritual sun based rituals show up in Wheatley's poetry that provides the precedent that

¹¹² M.A. Richmond. *Bid the Vassal Soar: Interpretive Essays on the Life and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton*. Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974. Again, 1974, the year of publication by Howard University Press is the same year of the first Howard Conference of Afro-American Writers which had no designated discussion of the literary contributions of Afro-American women in particular, except in the panel on children's literature in which June Jordan and Lucille Clifton participated.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, xiii

Richmond can neither find or acknowledge. Jordan ultimately describes the task of a poetic reading of Wheatley's work, and more broadly, as a difficult miracle. The task of looking for what is not supposed to be there in places that we are not supposed to look. Wheatley is not supposed to look to Africa, but despite everything she does. Jordan is not supposed to look to Wheatley, and I am certainly not supposed to impose Wheatley on Jordan's cherished commemoration of the life, and protest of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. But the queer thing is that queer precedent, the deviant engine of outlawed mothering is here, happening.

Maybe in "in Memoriam," a poem about a light-skinned preacher whose southern heritage and centrality to the understanding of the civil rights struggle made him "Blacker" than a woman kidnapped in Africa and enslaved in Boston, June Jordan was mourning Phillis Wheatley implicitly in a way that could not have been explicit in 1968. Or Something.

Like (a sibling of) the closing of part one of "In Memoriam" ("terrorizing/ by death by men/ by more") this passage describes Wheatley's first unidentifiable home as "tortured by rupture, by death, by theft, by travel" retroactively recontextualizing King's assassination as part of the crime of the transatlantic slave trade. Like the opening of "In Memoriam" ("to kill to violate,") June Jordan's description of slavery is infinitive, but unlike "In Memoriam" it stays ontological. Whereas "In Memoriam" shifts to unattributed verbs "rip rape/exacerbate despoil disfigure," this opening passage of "Something Like a Sonnet" is about *being*.

“Come to a country to be docile and dumb, to be big and breeding, easily, to be turkey/horse/cow, to be cook/carpenter/plow, to be 5’6” 140 lbs...”¹¹⁴ If you read this run-on sentence aloud, the alliteration falls in evenly measured breaths, the true and slant rhyme come in rhythm (*cow/plow/lbs*). I am saying that *this* is the poem. “in good condition and answering to the name of Tom or Mary: to be bed bait, to be legally spread legs for rape by the master/the master’s son/the master’s overseer/the master’s visiting nephew: to be nothing human nothing family nothing from nowhere nothing that screams nothing that dreams...”¹¹⁵ Listen to the repetition of “master, master, master” and “nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing” and consider that maybe this is the poem.¹¹⁶ “...nothing that dreams nothing that keeps anything/anyone deep in your heart.”¹¹⁷

Consider that this is the place where June Jordan exemplifies the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America. The “sonnet” for Wheatley at the end of Jordan’s essay represses the gendered ontology that the first paragraph establishes as mode of reading captivity. The sonnet describes Wheatley as a “Girl...who fell to a dollar lust...A child without safety of mother or marriage...From African singing of justice and grace, Your early verse sweetens the fame of our Race.” The gendered implications of Wheatley’s enslavement are nodded to in absence. Compare the sonnet’s “a child without safety of mother or marriage” with the paragraph’s “to be legally spread legs for rape,” for example. And note the nationalist simplicity of the closing couplets, “From Africa

¹¹⁴ June Jordan. “The Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley.” in *Some of Us Did Not Die*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, 174.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ **nothing that dreams** At this point Jordan has yet to write “The Mountain and the Man Who Was Not God” (1987), her essay in response to Duke Political Science PhD David Garrow’s Pulitzer Prize for his expose on Martin Luther King Jr. She had yet to write against the deification of one leader and towards the collectivization of leadership.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 185-186.

singing of justice and grace/ Your early verse sweetens the fame of our Race.” In this couplet the miracle of race pride seems easy, but the difficult miracle of the gendered trauma of the race that Jordan has already established disrupts the line that the sonnet draws from Africa to “our Race.” The slave ontology that Jordan describes in the opening passage “to be nothing human nothing family nothing from *nowhere* nothing that screams....”¹¹⁸ The repression screaming in the first passage has been effectively repressed by the last couplet of the closing sonnet. My argument is that the place of the poetics of Black freedom is not to be found in the nationalist couplet, but is rather to be found in the repressed scream of Black maternal flesh, opening the passage backwards and forward at the beginning of Jordan’s essay.

This is the place that can teach me what I mean by “poetic.” Poetry is the miracle of speaking from the place of legal rape. In her 1976 essay “Ethno or Socio Poetics” Sylvia Wynter defines poetry as a process of naming the world that is also “calling it into being.” For Wynter, poetry is an act of production, “for to name the world is to *conceptualize* the world, and to conceptualize the world is an active relation.”¹¹⁹ The difficult miracle of Black poetry is the difficulty that June Jordan inhabits in her attempt to describe slavery, the circumstances under which Phillis Wheatley became a poet. Difficult. Miracle. June Jordan explains that “a poet is someone at home,” but somehow the kidnapped Phillis Wheatley made herself into a poet.¹²⁰ Sylvia Wynter cites George Quasha’s explanation that ethnopoetics are the way that people say who they are, but she challenges Quasha, Frederic Jameson, Edouard Glissant and the other attendees at the

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 174.

¹¹⁹ Sylvia Wynter “Ethno or Sociopoetics” *Alcheinga* Vol. 2 No. 2, 1976.

¹²⁰ Jordan, “Something Like a Sonnet,” 174.

first International Symposium on Ethnopoetics using that same small word “or” to think about sociopoetics, poetry as the practice of an active relation across a capitalism that has made everyone homeless. Difficult. Miracle. By 1984, June Jordan is a widely published poet. And she defines her relationship to poetry: Difficult. Miracle. She creates a relationship to slavery: “anyone deep in your heart.” She creates a relationship to Phillis Wheatley or Martin Luther King Jr. or to Alexis Pauline Gumbs (who will one day sit in a library at June Jordan’s own Barnard College finding “Something Like A Sonnet” as she researches for her very first work of literary criticism, on the revolutionary solar-powered legacy of Phillis Wheatley). Sylvia Wynter is right, poetry is a particular conceptualization. In this dissertation, as in Jordan’s essay, the poetic has a dialogic relationship with narrative. The poetic is excess, an untimely gesture, too late or too early but necessary. The poetic is the turn enabled by the small word “or.”¹²¹ But this excess is complicated. And the poetic intervention, the radical literary productive act of creating a new world is always in conversation with the narrative that prophesizes the logic of slavery into its afterlives. The “or” that allows for an intergenerational conversation that pushes past death is linked to the persistent narrative that naturalizes racialization, making Black people interchangeable objects to be bought “or” sold.

Along the lines of Elizabeth Freeman in “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” I am engaged in an intergenerational erotic practice.¹²² A pleasure of resonance aided by my own longing and tempered by the fact that the people I need to know are not alive to tell me I am wrong about them. And though Freeman develops “Erotohistoriography” as

¹²¹ Note that in her passage on what it means “to be a slave” in “Something Like a Sonnet,” Jordan does not use the word “or” to stand in for violent interchange of slavery (“turkey/horse/cow” “cook/carpenter/plow” “anything/anyone”), she uses the violence of the slash instead.

¹²² Elizabeth Freeman. “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text*.2005; 23: 57-68.

an intervention into queer theories recent insistence on creating relationality through the temporality of trauma, the poetic pleasure in this dissertation is never outside of the enslaving narrative through that has kept Black women rapeable, has kept the children of Black mothers expendable. This is the time of diaspora. The intergenerational reach of this project is inside that narrative like a threat or an alternate reading waiting to happen. This chapter in particular is an attempt to articulate a touch across death, a push through time that disrupts the temporal politics of “development” and “security” that the cover stories criminalizing Black maternity would defend. I am naming my relation with borrowed, second-hand words. Difficult. Miracle.

Poetry as a Need: Audre Lorde and the Broken Drum

*tattle tale tit
your tongue will be slit
-from the nursery rhyme that starts Audre Lorde's "Need"*

Poetry is (not a luxury)

If Jordan's most remembered poem is the first half of her tribute “In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr.,” which remains marketable through its association with the death of an iconic Black leader, Audre Lorde's cache also has a queer intervention to make in the marketplace of dreams. This chapter seeks both to cause and to interrogate the survival of the work that Jordan and Lorde participated in by presenting the poetics of survival in their work as an analytic relationship. The Black Arts Movement, of which both Lorde and Jordan were troublesome constituents, was highly articulate in the poetics of Black death, Black male death in particular, and untimely Black death at the

hands of white racists in general. But some of the poetic work of Jordan and Lorde inhabited an inarticulate space. The Black Arts Movement could not articulate a response to the murder of 12 Black women in Black neighborhoods in Boston in 1979 and the repeated domestic violence related deaths of Black women in Black families. And the Black Arts Movement was even less able to articulate the intricacies of the *survival* of Black people, the continuation of Black subjectivity, without objectifying the body of the Black mother. How does language survive its own failure? This section of the chapter will examine Lorde's work on King, which put her on the map within a patriarchal Black arts poetry market, in the context of one of her forgotten pieces "Need: A Chorale for Black Women's Voices," arguing that a poetics that centers the disavowed Black maternal figure, pressed against the signification of Black maternity as death, leaves traces of a desired, queer, (im)possible relationship to the future.

Like Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" her manifesta on the poetic process "Poetry is not a Luxury" is often mentioned but usually under-theorized. Generally the only quotations offered from either of these essays are the titles in classroom and political usage. But if poetry is not a luxury, what is it? In this groundbreaking essay, Lorde agrees with Jordan and Wynter that poetry "helps to fashion" a "language (that) does not yet exist."¹²³ Ironically, Lorde first published this essay, in *Chrysalis* a feminist quarterly where Lorde served as poetry editor from 1977-1979. Lorde had high hopes for the role of poetry in the publication which she shared in a 1976 letter to two of the founding editors. She said that the poetry in the publication "must sing warm scream the highest of our journeys the bloodiest of our failures the

¹²³ Audre Lorde. "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 38.

most bizarre and precious of our dreams the most difficult of our future uncharted arrivals and the agonizing elations of reconstructing the route and journeys so we may come again.”¹²⁴ This vision for feminist poetry as a navigational necessity for the achievement of feminist praxis was evidently not fully embraced by the rest of the collective. Lorde was consistently dissatisfied with the placement and de-prioritization of the poetry she selected for the journal. In a later letter she complained that the use of poetry was “less functional than breaks between articles” which she characterized as a “western European mindfuck.”¹²⁵

It is ironic then, that in the very pages of this journal which Lorde would ultimately refuse to be associated with because of its disrespect for poetic form and its treatment of poetry as superficial filler, she would make the lasting statement “Poetry is not a luxury.” Or maybe it is exactly this context which made such a statement crucial, marking poetry as the opposite of a “western european mindfuck,” emphasizing poetry as a dark and erotic birthing process. In this section I argue that if poetry is not a luxury, it is a *need*. In the discursive gap between a western European mindfuck and a Black cultural nationalist publishing market that also stifled the work of Black feminists, poetry is a difficult miracle, producing a language of potential.

Lorde describes poetry as a birthing process, an embodied mode of production: “It is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are-until the poem-nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”¹²⁶ Lorde’s emphasis here is the importance of form. Poetry, like criminalized Black mothering, makes an alternate

¹²⁴ cited in Alexis De Veaux. *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004, 178. More on this in Chapter 4 on Publishing.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 212.

¹²⁶ Audre Lorde. “Poetry is Not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider*. New York: The Crossing Press, 1984, 36.

form of life visible, speakable, possible. Or as Lorde elaborates, poetry is “the way we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.”¹²⁷ In fact birth is the defining verb of the concept. “This distillation of experience from which poetry spring *births* thought as dream *births* concept, as feeling *births* idea, as knowledge *births* (precedes) understanding.”¹²⁸ Lorde is prioritizing the role of the mother here, distinguishing poetry from what she calls the “sterile word play” that the Eurocentric model proposes.¹²⁹ Instead she offers the birth control complex’s worst nightmare: poetry as “spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas.”¹³⁰

And ultimately this is not only about a metaphor of birth. This is about literal children. Lorde refuses the dichotomy between creativity and survival, “...action in the now is necessary always. Our children cannot dream unless they live.”¹³¹ Poetry is not a luxury. It is a need. Remember: “the difference between poetry/and rhetoric/ is being willing to kill/ ourselves/instead of our children.”¹³² Once again intergenerational queer survival is at stake. What will the children dream? Which children will live?

Obsolete: A Queer Memorial

Audre Lorde’s “Rites of Passage,” dedicated to MLK Jr. is a poem similarly situated to Jordan’s “In Memoriam” and it appeared in anthologies in the United Kingdom and the United States that claimed to represent Black/Afro-American poetry in

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 37, parentheses in the original, emphasis added.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 37.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 37.

¹³¹ Ibid, 38.

¹³² Audre Lorde, “Power” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 215-216. Originally in *Between Ourselves* (1976).

the late sixties and early seventies.¹³³ Lorde's poem, unlike Jordan's, does depict King as a father figure. Whereas Jordan symbolizes King as a vulnerable assemblage of body parts "the onward tongue/the outward hand" or a child that is never born, Lorde addresses her poem to "the children." In fact in this brief 21-line poem Lorde uses the words children and child five times and centralizes the death of fathers. The second stanza reads

 Their fathers are dying
 back to the freedom of wise children playing
 at knowing
 their fathers are dying
 whose deaths will not free them
 of growing from knowledge
 of knowing
 when the game becomes foolish
 a dangerous pleading
 for time out of power¹³⁴

Lorde's poem, which repeats the words "knowing," "dreaming," "hoping" and "growing" alongside the words "pleading:" and "dying" resonates with Jordan's image of "weakly freedom growing fruit" in its use of verbs in gerund form, but changes the temporality. The emphasis is on the rhyming words "knowing and growing." But what is at stake is freedom. The words and "freedom" ("freedom" echoing "free them") are contingent in the poem, the deaths of the fathers will not free them. If Jordan's poem describes an interrupted process, Lorde's instrumentalizes the repeated phrase "their fathers are dying" to create continuity and participation in a process of creation that finds its end in an approaching future. The death of the fathers marks the shift from a

¹³³See for example Arnold Adoff ed. *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973, 249. Ted Wilentz and Tom Weatherly eds. *Natural Process: An Anthology of New Black Poetry*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1970, 69-70.

¹³⁴ Audre Lorde. "Rites of Passage," in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 29. Originally in *Cables to Rage* (1970).

difficult but hopeful past (the freedom of children) to a more difficult and cynical future. The second line of the poem refers to the hopes of the civil rights movement and the nonviolent approach that characterized King's strategy

Once we suffered dreaming¹³⁵

In the final line of the poem the tension between growth and death emerges. "Dreaming" becomes "dream" a periodization that is passing away with King. Lorde's poem expresses the urgency of intergenerationality,

Quick
children kiss us
we are growing through dream.¹³⁶

Lorde is reaching for a critical intergenerationality here, within the context of a disrupted nuclear family, where the death of the father a rite of passage, part of the *development* of a generation. Ostensibly the "us" that the children must kiss refers to the unnamed mothers who function as collective narrators in this poem. Interestingly in the earliest version of this poem in Lorde's journal the poem ends rather differently:

kiss me goodbye love
we are growing from dreams.¹³⁷

Lorde's revision from a more intra-generational erotic to an intergenerational desire is important. The difference between "growing from dreams" which would privilege the dream (and King, the famous dream bearer) as an origin point and "growing through dream" which resonates with the role of dreams as part of a continuum

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Unprocessed unpublished Journal from Audre Lorde Manuscript Archives. Displayed at Spelman College Event celebrating the acquisition of the Audre Lorde Papers, September 2008, Spelman College Cosby Hall.

of creative birthing in through poetic dynamism offers a different temporal and spatial status for the dream.

Lorde's poem ends where Jordan's "New Pieta" begins, with mothers and children battling a deadly environment and in the context of this project Jordan and Lorde's poems collaborate in creating an intergenerational context where radicalized motherhood is possible, where a gendered articulation of freedom is speakable, where a death passage rearticulates the possibility of the birth passage.¹³⁸ But this collaboration is not what convinced Black and white male editors and publishers to anthologize these particular poems from these particular poets. The loss of the father, named in Lorde's poem allows its inclusion in a collective Black power narrative more interested in lost paternal right than childbirth.

A need. "Rites of Passage" is the first poem in Lorde's 1970 collection *Cables to Rage*. A less celebrated poem that does not appear in the anthologies of the time or in anthologized representations of Lorde since bookends the collection, barely surviving, like the second section of Jordan's "In Memoriam." "Dreams Bite..." invoking love, peace, dreams and monuments, could just as well be read as a reflection of King, the fallen dreamer. "Dreams Bite..." provides a dystopic challenge to King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech.¹³⁹ Whereas King refers to seeing the Stone Mountain in Georgia surrounded by happy Black and white descendants holding hands, Lorde describes "the people of winter/putting off their masks/to stain the earth red with blood" and "the

¹³⁸ Special thanks to Ronald Cummings for help thinking through the resonance of "passage" in this poem.

¹³⁹ Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream," in James M. Washington ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: Harper, 1986, 217-220.

people of sun/are carving their own children/into monuments of war.”¹⁴⁰ In this moment after the hope of civil rights, Lorde prophesies the violence of white liberals who used Civil Rights as a political mask and Black people trapped in the doomed reproduction of an inadequate struggle. Instead of reproducing the “legends” and legacies of the Civil Rights movement, “Dreams Bite...” asks for a non-reproductive alternative that rejects inheritance and resists the trasubstantiation of death into heritage. In part two of the poem Lorde’s “dreamer” prophesys:

When I am absolute
at once with the Black earth
fire
I make my now
and power is spoken
peace
at rest
and hungry means never
or alone
I shall love again

When I am obsolete.¹⁴¹

Lorde’s mirroring of “absolute” and “obsolete” of “fire” and “peace” and of “now” and “power” creates a context of transformation. This poem is not interested in “passing down” the legacy of any King, but rather in the recognition of death as death: a simple request for a just present as opposed to a perpetual currency. The erecting of stone monuments is replaced with a return to earth. The soil is privileged over the grave marker. The “dreams” of this poem are for a present, and love is possible when the dreams of the now dead are no longer necessary. “Dreams Bite...” intervenes in the structure of legacy and embraces death as a form of unity that does not claim ownership

¹⁴⁰ Audre Lorde. “Dreams Bite...” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 55.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

of a future, but rather allows for a productive relation “love again” after it’s time. The love between the dead and the living is untimely, not innovative, but “obsolete,” not inherited, but queer. This poem, reminding us of the untimely temporality of dreams, was not anthologized, was not passed on.

In fact, much of Lorde’s poetry was not passed on, even though her most celebrated work was as an author and teacher of poetry, and she was even named poet laureate of the State of New York shortly before her death, Lorde’s essays, and her biomythographical narrative *Zami* get far more critical attention than do her poems. This may be because her narrative works are easier to compare to other works, or because prose is more marketable and is often assumed to be more self-evident than poetry. Outside of Lorde’s fellow poet contemporaries and colleagues (including Akasha Hull, Cheryl Clarke and Jan Clausen) who continue to emphasize the important of her poetry, the few critics who treat Lorde’s poetry at length agree that the formal qualities of Lorde’s poetry disrupts the containment of her work in a narrative of identity, otherness and multiculturalism, the context in which her prose is often read.¹⁴² Reminding us that unlike many of her Black Arts counterparts Lorde’s poetry is deeply and openly influenced by white modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sagri Dhairyam points out the terms on which Lorde’s poetry has survived have to do with the

¹⁴² For the wisdom of the poet/scholar contemporaries see Akasha Gloria Hull. “Living on the Line: Audre Lorde and *Our Dead Behind Us*” in Cheryl Wall ed. *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989, 159-172. Cheryl Clarke. “A House of Difference: Audre Lorde’s Legacy to Lesbian and Gay Writers,” in Debbie Douglas, Courtney McFarlane, Makeda Silvera and Douglas Steward eds. *Ma-ka Diasporic Juks: Contemporary Writing by Queers of African Descent*. Toronto: SisterVision Press, 1997, 192-205. Cheryl Clarke. “Knowing the Danger and Going There Anyway,” in *Sojourner*. September 1990, 14-15. Jan Clausen. “Word Warrior,” in *The Nation*. Feb. 1, 1993, 130-132.

way its discursive positioning allow many to value it without reading it.¹⁴³ Lexi Rudnitsky points out that it is the ambiguity that Lorde builds into her poem through her uses of syntax that allows Lorde's poetry to "create a new language, which would, in turn make possible a new social order."¹⁴⁴ Megan Obourn's work on Lorde is critical of the way Lorde has been mobilized in the service of liberal multiculturalism in a way that sanitizes the contradictions she sought to address. I agree with Obourn that a reading of Lorde that ignores her experiments in form can be co-opted into a narrative of liberal multiculturalism, without confronting the transformational demands of her work. Obourn argues that Lorde's work challenges, what Obourn characterizes as the identitarian tendencies of the Black Arts Movement, because of her multiply signifying language and multiple axes of oppression to confront.¹⁴⁵ Obourn uses trauma theory to understand the structural disruption at work in Lorde's work. I agree with all three critics that Lorde's poetry disrupts reproduction of identity on nationalist terms and disrupts her co-optation into a model of infinite diversity without confrontation. And while I do not use trauma theory directly to read Lorde's poetry, I do think that her poetry is designed to reveal a narrative that creates subjectivity on such violent terms that they must be split, like the term mother is already split from itself in a discourse where human life is expendable. So what does it mean for Lorde to invoke obsolescence in her poetry, when for most English departments, as Dhairyam mentions, her poetry is already obsolete, rarely studied leaving the figure of Lorde as a representative of

¹⁴³ Sagri Dhairyam. "Artifacts for Survival": Remapping the Contours of Poetry with Audre Lorde." In *Feminist Studies* Vol. 18 NO. 2 (Summer 1992), 229-256.

¹⁴⁴ Lexi Rudnitsky. "The 'Power' and 'Sequelae' of Audre Lorde's Syntactical Strategies," in *Callaloo* Vol. 26, No. 2 (2003) 473-485.

¹⁴⁵ Megan Obourn. "Audre Lorde: Trauma Theory and Liberal Multiculturalism," in *MELUS*: Vol. 30, No. 3 (Fall 2005), 219-245.

embodied difference intact for the project of inclusive diversity (as opposed to transformative diversity) within the academy? What reading practice allows us to access the “new language” that her poetry makes it possible for Lorde to “love again” past her use value?¹⁴⁶

Situation: The Dream of Language

I am writing a dissertation about Black feminist literary production in English, a language, like every language I’ve learned, that is wholly inadequate to the task. But as English forecloses Black feminist authority, it reveals the lie of its eternity, the key to its own unmaking. Language is not a heritage to the future. Not. A loophole in which the brilliant can live forever. Not. An effective demand to never be forgotten. Language is a weak omen, reminding us to make something else. The need, is poetry. The situation in which Audre Lorde wrote *Need* to read aloud, in chorus, at a benefit in Boston after Barbara Smith mailed her clipping after clipping of Black women’s bodies found, dead in the Black neighborhoods in Boston is a need for language that is also the failure of it. Writing a letter to Audre Lorde was one example of the practice that Barbara Smith and her twin sister Beverly Smith describe in their article “I Do Not Deserve to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand Me’: Letters From Black Feminists 1974-1978,” published in *Conditions 4* in 1978, immediately before this wave of murders and this letter to Lorde.¹⁴⁷ In this article the Smith sisters explain letter writing as a practice that responds to the impossibility of Black feminist authority in its present and in its

¹⁴⁶ Lorde. “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde. “Rites of Passage.”

¹⁴⁷ Barbara and Beverly Smith. “I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978,” in *Conditions 4*, 1979, 62-77.

future.¹⁴⁸ The Smiths explain that when these letter were written “we had not one publication of our own” and go on to describe their act of publishing the letters as an against a future that reproduces their silence: “As Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will *ever* be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now.”¹⁴⁹

*No guarantee that **we** or our movement will survive long enough...* Black women in Boston had good reason to believe that they would not survive and even better reason to believe that they would not become historical. Months after this article was published, while Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel were editing *Conditions 5: The Black Women’s Issue*, Black women were found dead day after day, and besides coverage in some Black community newspapers the media was not interested. *tattle tale tit*. Even as the Black feminist in Boston and their allies used publishing as means to refuse their own invisibility, they inhabited the cruel inadequacy of language to purchase their survival. Black women kept turning up dead. And the protests and the pamphlets and the banners did not stop it from happening. They did not convince anyone that they would be punished for killing Black women, and indeed the police refused to investigated, claiming that the women were out at night, and therefore must have been sex workers and therefore that killing these Black women was not a crime. And of course we know that the brutality police officers enact against Black women who they

¹⁴⁸ More on this in chapter 3.

¹⁴⁹ Barbara and Beverly Smith. “I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978,” in *Conditions 4*, 1979, 63.

perceive to be sex workers is not always so passive. So the women kept turning up dead. The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organization based in Boston in which Lorde had participated since 1974, published a pamphlet after the 6th woman was killed entitled “6 Women Why Did They Die?,” a pamphlet that disagreed with the suggestions of Black male leaders that women should be kept indoors, or suggestions that the murders with either Black on Black crime OR violence against women, was inadequate.¹⁵⁰ As more women died the collective reprinted thousands of the pamphlets, but they could not afford to change the numbering throughout the pamphlet each time. The pamphlet circulated with rough revisions, crossed out numbers a cruel tally of deaths, 6 no 7 no 8 no 9 no 10 no 11 no 12 women. Why did they die? In Barbara Smith’s files at the Lesbian Herstory archives she has a note on the revised pamphlet. “We cannot afford to change the numbers.”¹⁵¹ The death in our presence exceeds our capacity to describe it. This is what W.E.B. DuBois was hesitating about at the beginning of the 20th century when he wrote in “Sociology Hesitant” that there was something about human behavior that could be counted (6 women dead, now seven, now eight, now), but that there was also “a something Incalculable.”¹⁵² How do we say it?

On the morning of April 28th 1979 protesters including the members of the Combahee River Collective and a coalition of Black Boston residents and allies gathered to stop the violence. I imagine that it took letters and press releases and markers and pens to create the scene of April 28th. I imagine that many women stayed up all night making the signs that I’ve seen in the pictures. On the night of April 27th those signs said

¹⁵⁰ Also reprinted as Combahee River Collective. “6 Black Women Why Did They Die?” in *Aegis Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women*. May/June 1979, 29-31.

¹⁵¹ Barbara Smith. Barbara Smith Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Box 2, Folder 6.

¹⁵² W.E.B. DuBois. “Sociology Hesitant” reprinted in *boundary 2*: 27:3, 2000, 40.

“8 Women. Stop the Killing.” But on the morning of April 28th, the very morning of the demonstration the body of the 9th dead Black woman was found. That morning I imagine hands shook as they took markers and crossed out 8 and wrote 9 above the words “Stop the Killing.” I imagine that someone’s hand shook, wondering if there wasn’t something a hand could do with a pen that would actually make the killing stop. The language of protest fails to stop the untimely deaths of Black people. And this is why poetry is a need. The place where the language fails to describe, to intervene, to carry some piece of any of us into a sure future is the generative site for a poetics where survival means, pushes, relates differently, where words become unfamiliar to each other and reach for a logic in which to not continue the violence their witness requires.

I imagine someone wrote a poem about that morning. I imagine someone tried to go back to April 27th and stop time. I imagine no one consented to the cruel operation of time on the morning of April 28th. And I imagine this because I have had such a morning. Almost 30 years later a coalition including UBUNTU, a women of color survivor-led coalition committed to creating a world free from sexual violence pushed months that they had spent reading Audre Lorde’s *Need* aloud, reading Ntozake Shange’s “With No Immediate Cause,” the poem that the Combahee River Collective published in the center of their “Why Did They Die?” pamphlet, quipping “it is better to speak” (from “Litany for Survival”) towards something that we called “A Day of Truth-telling.” We stayed up the night of April 27th making signs. And we didn’t know it was a vigil. We didn’t know of the earlier failure. We hadn’t done all of this research yet. We stayed up the night of April 27th 2007 and woke up carrying poems that were not meant to be kept under our pillows, remembering that even as we walked through the scene of a publicized rape in our community every 15 seconds it was happening again.

We walked a strange temporality of survival, surviving sexual assault and clutching words that had survived this earlier failure. Not safe. Not safely historical. Present to a poetics that moves beyond description to creation. With not an inheritance, but an imperative, that we should never have to say these words “Stop the Killing,” “End Rape Now,” we should never have to say this again.

So Audre Lorde wrote about “Need,” treatise to lack, evidence of a language so cruel we should throw it out, or at least generate something else. The work of this project is to say there must be a relationship to language that does not reproduce the violence we survive in the present. But to say there must be, is not to say there is. A poetics of survival produces a need so profound that it stops the beat, a need so sharp that we refuse even our subjecthood because we can describe it. Barbara and Beverly Smith said .”..no guarantee that we or our movement will survive” and in the same year Audre Lorde published the other poem, a litany that the members of UBUNTU read daily like the catechism it almost is as they walked through and past a campus committed to reproducing rape culture in broad daylight.¹⁵³ A language for the survival of Black women in Black communities was yet to be invented. It was a need.

Family Quarrel: Patriarchy as Reflex

If *Need* had been published through a mainstream publishing venue in the mid-1980’s as its own work, it would have been remembered, and vilified, alongside other better-known work by Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange that also explicitly addressed violence against women within Black communities. A conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, one of the Black

¹⁵³ Barbara and Beverly Smith. “I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978,” in *Conditions 4*, 1979, 63.

male literary figures who was not at all central to the attack on Black women writers, illuminates the family quarrel context in which Lorde's piece lives. As late as five years after that wave of murders in Boston in 1984 an *Essence* magazine conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin demonstrates the difficulty of articulating a response to violence against Black women within the Black community.¹⁵⁴ This conversation entitled "Revolutionary Hope" demonstrates some important limits in the 1980's conversations about gender in Black communities. Throughout the conversation Baldwin invokes the incisive repertoire he developed as a reluctant spokesman for Black people in white America, articulating the "nightmare" of the differential position of Black people in relationship to white people.¹⁵⁵ Lorde marks and seeks to ameliorate the absence of accountability to/for Black women in the androcentrism of Baldwin's talk about "Black Americans." "Even worse than the nightmare is the blank," she says, "And Black women are the blank."¹⁵⁶ In order to talk about violence against Black women in the Black community, Lorde tries to shift the conversation "While we are reacting to what's out there, we're also dealing between ourselves—and between ourselves there are power differences that come down..."¹⁵⁷ "Between Ourselves," is not a throw-away phrase for Lorde who used exactly that phrase as a the title of a poem and a collection of poetry.¹⁵⁸ "Between Ourselves" characterizes Lorde's approach here and elsewhere as she seeks to illuminate the power differences that exist within what might otherwise claim to be

¹⁵⁴"Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde," *Essence Magazine* Vol. 13 No. 8, December 1984, 72-74, 129, 130, 133. This conversation was coordinated by the same Cheryl Greene who orchestrated the aberrant Black feminist literary presence in *Essence* during the 1980's more on this in Chapter 4 on publishing.

¹⁵⁵ "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde," *Essence Magazine* Vol. 13 No. 8, December 1984, 72.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁵⁸ Audre Lorde. *Between Ourselves*. Point Reyes: Eidolon, 1976.

unitary categories like “women,” “Blacks” and “lesbians.” When Baldwin insists that men cannot be expected to know how women look at the world, but that women can sense how men view the world, Lorde counters that this supposed difference in perceptual ability mirrors the way that Black people are forced to internalize white worldviews, while whites remain ignorant to the views of Black people. She reveals a difference between “a man” and “a woman” that Baldwin naturalizes (“men have come into the world either instinctively knowing, or believing or being taught”) as a structure of oppression and takes this opportunity to speak against violence against Black women in Black communities.¹⁵⁹ “We’re finished being bridges. Don’t you see? It’s not Black women who are shedding Black men’s blood on the street—yet. We’re not cleaving your head open with axes. We’re not shooting you down...”¹⁶⁰ Baldwin responds by reprioritizing the male perspective, insisting “a man has a certain story to tell too, just because he is a man” and then he makes a move, expected in the context of *Essence* but strange in a conversation between two Black literary figures who are out as non-heterosexual people.¹⁶¹ Baldwin conscripts himself and Lorde into a makeshift patriarchal Black family that in reality cannot include either of the conversants. “A family quarrel is one thing; a public quarrel is another. And you and I, you know—in the kitchen, with the kids, with each other, or in bed---we have a lot to deal with...There is no way around it. I’m a man. I am not a woman.”¹⁶² This moment, strangely complicit with the fantasy of a Black patriarchal family that is the underlying desire of *Essence*

¹⁵⁹ “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde,” *Essence Magazine* Vol. 13 No. 8, December 1984, 74.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² *ibid.*

magazine throughout the decades, demonstrates the impossible space of Black patriarchal rule that gendered violence seeks to produce. Baldwin's statement attempts to silence Lorde's explicit reference to violence against Black women by putting a "public quarrel" back inside a heterosexual partnership. Baldwin's own exclusion from this family by homophobic Black leaders including Eldridge Cleaver sharpens the urgency of Baldwin's statement "I am a man. I am not a woman. No one will turn me into a woman."¹⁶³ Lorde's blatant uncovering of the killability of Black women leads Baldwin to cut himself off from any possibility of femininity. What would happen, indeed what violence was justified when people did "turn (Baldwin) into a woman"? This statement of gender stability directly contradicts the later statement that Baldwin will make in the same conversation: "There's certainly no standard of masculinity in this country which anybody can respect. Part of the horror of being a Black American is being trapped into being an imitation of an imitation."¹⁶⁴

Talking about violence against Black women, especially when enacted by Black men is dangerous, not only because it disrupts the illusion that a Black man can "protect his woman" (in Baldwin's words), but also because it reveals the relationship between feminization and violence against Black men.¹⁶⁵ Behind this anxiety is a deeper anxiety about Black women's sexuality as the reified site for the persistence of Blackness, equated with the persistence of oppression.

In the face of all of this anxiety Lorde tries to make a space for the survival of Black women within the masculinist life or death battle that Baldwin describes.

¹⁶³ *ibid*, 74, 129. See also Eldridge Cleaver. *Soul On Ice*. New York: Random House, 1968, 122-137.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 130.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 130.

Highlighted as pull quotes are statements that outline the two speaker's positions. Baldwin says "We are behind the gates of a kingdom determined to destroy us."¹⁶⁶ Lorde responds, "Yes. Exactly so. And I'm interested in seeing that we do not destroy each other."¹⁶⁷ Where Baldwin is interested in making the deadly force of external racism visible, Lorde is interested in the possibility of generating survival *among* Black folks. While Baldwin insists that the story of the Black man must be told, Lorde reminds him "Yes. And it is vital that I be alive and able to listen to it."¹⁶⁸ In a conversation that is articulate in describing the deadly struggle between the Black man and racism, epitomized by the uber-articulateness of Baldwin, the Black woman remains "the blank," an absence, a void. Baldwin places Lorde into a mother/father relationship with him in order to re-assert silence about violence against Black women enacted by Black men, revealing the double-edged usefulness of the "Black mother" as a category that subsumes and replaces the subject position of Black women, when it does not radicalize it.

Broadsiding: The Patriarchal Family as Requirement

The figure of the "Black mother" and a focus on the Black feminine has a complicated career within Lorde's body of work preceding her conversation with Baldwin. Lorde's early publication history starts in the early 1960's, even earlier than Jordan's difficult miracle making. And like Jordan, Lorde's early work is enabled and limited by the rhetorical marketability of Black motherhood. Before she published *The First Cities* in 1968, Lorde was already anthologized internationally, as a daughter writing about her father and as a mother writing about her children. From 1962 to 1973

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 74.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

Lorde was anthologized as a family poet. As mentioned earlier, her poems about her father and her children and the death of Martin Luther King Jr. (also a poem about children) appeared internationally and Dudley Randall refused to publish her “Love Poem” about sex with another woman in *From a Land Where Other People Live* in 1973. Over and over again in her first three collections of poems she writes about being a Black mother and having a Black mother. And while I read these poems as indicative of the rival mode of production that her later poetry and essays would continue to assert, Lorde’s legibility as a Black mother poet was treacherous. The example of “Love Poem” demonstrates how Lorde was limited to reproducing a patriarchal understanding of Black community in her early career as a published poet.

Lorde’s time at Broadside Press was vexed and complicated. A close look at Broadside Press’s marketing materials makes clear their investment in Lorde’s image as a non-threatening maternal figure. For example in November 1973 on the Broadside press sheet (sent to bookstores and distributors) announcing the release of Lorde’s *From a Land Where Other People Live* the description says:

Her poetry cuts deeply into the ugly realities of American society without losing the softness of her woman touch. “Teacher” reveals the feelings and concerns of a school teacher filled with lively images like, “As the promises I make children/ sprout like wheat from early Spring’s wayer.” Her poetry releases the inner thought of a Black woman struggling for a better world.¹⁶⁹

Characterizing Lorde’s intergenerational pedagogical critique as “softness,” this description seeks to place Lorde within a narrative of stereotypical womanhood. Her labor is non-threatening, she is a mere “schoolteacher” sharing her “inner thoughts,” not

¹⁶⁹ *Broadside News*, 23, Nov. 1973. Broadside Press manuscript Collection. Manuscript and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

a sexual outlaw, transgressing Black nationalist norms of gender performance and breaking taboos by forming romantic relationships outside of her race and inside her own gender group and bringing generations of deviants with her. The homophobia at Broadside Press was both explicit and implicit. During Lorde's time as a "broadside poet" the press published Broadside No. 45, featuring a poem entitled "The Nigger Cycle," framed as a response to the FBI's attack on Angela Davis in October 1970. All proceeds from the sale of the broadside went to the Angela Davis Defense Fund. The poem insists on Angela Davis's gender normativity insisting

her spirit and vigor cannot, despite how much
we want it to, hide the fact that she's
still a woman
still our woman...¹⁷⁰

In this context Davis's gender makes her property. She is "our women," and the poem tries to encourage Black men to protect "our women" from "the devils." With this poem, the author Mwandishe Kuweka Amiri chastises Black men for allowing the FBI to arrest Davis, seeking to motivate men to action by hurling what is in this context the ultimate insult:

political homosexuality
always makes itself known
to the world.¹⁷¹

The arrest of Angela Davis is not simply a result of a system of state violence, or the threat that Davis poses as a Black revolutionary and feminist, but is a failure on the part of Black men to protect her. Davis, an unlikely damsel in distress, is squeezed into

¹⁷⁰ Mwandishe, *Kuweka Amiri* "The Nigger Cycle" Broadside No. 45, Broadside Press, March 1971

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

the category “our woman” and anything other than a Black patriarchal property relation to her is “political homosexuality.” Clearly “homosexuality” political or otherwise is unacceptable in this context. The editorial practices of the press suggest that homosexuality is also unreadable. In these terms Lorde’s legibility as a “broadside poet” was tenuous. Dudley Randall, who claimed not to understand the pronouns in “Love Poem,” a poem by Lorde about erotic love between women, expressed his bewilderment at Lorde in his *Broadside Memories* a collection released at the 10th anniversary of the press. Admitting that he only considered publishing Lorde because Gwendolyn Brooks insisted that he do so, he characterizes her work as “indirect, metaphorical, symbolic” contrasting her slow reading style with the “rapid machine gun style” of other poets.¹⁷² In an anecdote that would be irrelevant if not for its revelation of Randall’s gender politics at the time and Lorde’s tendency to exceed his expectations, Randall explains that as he ponders how is going to climb up a “breast high” stage, assuming that he will also have to “lift Audre upon it,” Lorde has already climbed onto the stage and offers Randall *her* assistance.¹⁷³ Randall’s self-effacing tone does not mask the real gender politics at play. Lest Lorde’s deviance burst the frame of Black gender propriety constructed in the book itself, Lorde is pictured in her gele and African dress and necklace surrounded by the words of her poem “For Each of You” dedicated to her young children. Of course Lorde’s role as a mother and a teacher, the exact roles that Broadside emphasizes in order to support the project of a patriarchal Black nationalist publishing market are the roles that I am emphasizing in this project for a very different purpose. This is the queer thing. Mother, the very term used to conscript Black women

¹⁷² Dudley Randall. *Broadside Memories: Some Poets I Have Known*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975, 15.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 14.

into a patriarchal project is an unstable term with other dangerous possibilities. But as Lorde will insist in “Need: A Chorale for Black Women’s Voices,” this patriarchal notion of motherhood is enforced by violence. For example in Broadside No. 24 entitled “Earth” by Askia Muhammed Toure dedicated to Mary McLeod Bethune and “the African and Afro-American Woman,” Toure epitomizes the characterization of the Black woman as mother without agency:

Mother of the World!
Fecundant, Beating Heart!
Enduring Earth!
*Only you remain!*¹⁷⁴

This “Mother of the World” is disembodied, she is only the beating heart, she is land, the earth itself. This depiction of the mother who only gives and continues the rhythm of labor inevitably dehumanizes the living women it would describe. The gendered language of the Black Arts lexicon fortifies and seeks to naturalize a notion of Black patriarchal destiny. It is exactly the language norms that Broadside Press circulates that cause the lacunae in the conversation that Baldwin and Lorde will attempt to have years later. When Kitchen Table Press publishes *Need* as a pamphlet in their freedom organizing series, Audre Lorde includes an introductory essay where she mentions the difficulty of a 1985 public conversation with Baldwin as part of what convinces her that the availability and performance of her chorale remains necessary beyond the wave of murders that it required it as an immediate response.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Askia Muhammed Toure. *Earth*. Broadside No. 24. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971.

¹⁷⁵ Audre Lorde. Freedom Organizing Series #6 *Need*. Latham: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1990, 5.

As Aisha Karim and Bruce B. Lawrence argue in *On Violence: A Reader* violence is not an exception to an existing structure, violence is itself an organizing structure.¹⁷⁶ I argue that ideological, physical and sexual violence is a structure that reproduces, enforces and *teaches* a particular meaning of life such that gendered violence enforces gender as such, racialized violence, enforces the (racist) meaning of race. And violence against Black women is not an aberration, it is a primer in the expendability of life that actively suppresses an alternate vision of life, an alternate expression of value. Which means that violence is also a language in which certain stories about the meaning of life can be told, and which makes the normalcy of its own consequences unspeakable. Karim and Lawrence point out that the violence emphasized in the media is the violence that sells, which is the violence that is seen to exceptional, shocking, violence which can be made to appear as if it is outside of the structure, violence against people who are not supposed to be oppressed. They also remind us that rhetorical/cognitive violence operate on the terms of value where white/anglo-american and European lives as seen as inherently valuable and other forms of life are seen as inherently worthless.¹⁷⁷ Therefore violence against oppressed people (especially by oppressed people who are characterized as violent) is normal, narrated as a natural expression of the differential value of life and therefore illegible as violence. As Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, the distinction of what deaths can be mourned individually, what deaths can be regarded as mere numbers results from and perpetuates a constricted definition of the human.¹⁷⁸ In *Society Must Be Defended* Foucault describes this as biopolitical racism, the

¹⁷⁶ Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim. *On Violence: A Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 11.

¹⁷⁸ Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004, 50-75.

expendability of life along lines of gender, race, and other categories for the devaluation of lives allows for the reproduction of life in the exclusive terms of the dominant.¹⁷⁹ And both material violence and rhetorical violence function to defend this system of value from confrontation on rhetorical and material terms. In *Need*, Audre Lorde is committed to exactly this foreclosed confrontation.

Lorde seeks to intervene into a discourse that makes violence against Black women illegible. The first line of *Need* is “This woman is Black/so her blood is shed into silence,” and it is the fact that this Black person is a woman that makes this poetic project even more difficult than Lorde’s early poems about the violence against King, or even the violence against Clifford Glover.¹⁸⁰ Whereas “Power,” her poem about the police murder of Clifford Glover, appears in her journal almost whole, drafts of *Need* with very different structures appear in more than one of Lorde’s journals across a number of years, navigating the multiplicity of voice differently. In one early version she attempts to give the murderers a voice in the chorale. The question of how to break through the layers of silence about this particular violence against these particularly expendable people takes a careful navigation of voice, audience, subject position and disruption.¹⁸¹

Lorde’s redefinition of motherhood and development of an alternative, non-patriarchal mode of Black life and survival is off beat. Poetry is a need, because it can “fashion” that other language and Lorde’s project is engaged in what Sylvia Wynter in “Ethno or Socio Poetics” calls the renaming of the world on relational terms. I

¹⁷⁹ Michel Foucault. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*. New York: Picador, 2003.

¹⁸⁰ Audre Lorde. Freedom Organizing Series #6 *Need*. Latham: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1990, 7.

¹⁸¹ Audre Lorde. Journal 16. Audre Lorde Manuscript Archives, Spelman College.

understand Lorde's poetry in relationship to her own theories of the value of poetry, that poetry is not a luxury, but rather a need. I also place her my own theorization of her poetry in conversation with diasporic afro-Caribbean feminist poets who theorize the meaning of poetry itself. Though unlike Dionne Brand and Marlene Nourbese Philip, Audre Lorde was not born in the Caribbean, but was rather the child of migrants, Lorde consistently nurtured artistic relationships with a Caribbean born and self-identified third world women writers including Honor Moore and Michelle Cliff, especially after her decision to leave Broadside Press because of the homophobic reception and containment of her work. Lorde began to identify more and more explicitly with the Caribbean after the socialist revolution in Grenada and the U.S. invasion of the island that her parents had migrated from, ultimately moving to St. Croix towards the end of her life, Lorde's position in the early 1980's was definitionally diasporic. As she makes explicit in her essay "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report" she was navigating an ethical relationship to both the privilege of U.S. citizenship and the imperative of diasporic solidarity from the center of a growing, violent hemispheric economic empire.¹⁸² Meanwhile in the US, Lorde is struggling to speak an unspeakable response to the illegible patterns of violence against Black women in the United States. The impact that Lorde's poetry and her vision of poetry have had on Philip and Brand as queer Afro-Caribbean poets is undeniable. So it is the Black feminist theories of the poetic articulated by Marlene Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand, queer Black feminist poets and theorists living in diaspora, that contextualizes the diasporic, transformative understanding of poetry that we are working with here.

¹⁸² Audre Lorde. "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 176-189.

Marlene Nourbese Philip opens her collection of theoretical essays *A Genealogy of Resistance* quoting Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not A Luxury" to frame her redefinition of the process of genealogy, creating a process where "She! She! and She!" can emerge from a biological genealogy characterized and silenced through a history of white colonialist rape of enslaved African women.¹⁸³ In response to this violence, which she explains is enacted and reinforced through the impact of language, imposed or withheld. After mastering the language of the law, Nourbese decided that poetry was a crucial intervention into the colonial language of normalized violence. In her essay "Earth and Sound: The Place of Poetry" she explains that the relationship between a poet and place is equally as important as the relationship between a poet and the word, echoing June Jordan's assertion that "a poet is a person at home." In the context of displacement and dispossession from land and labor, which Philip points out is globally dominant, the relationship of the marginalized poet is a relationship the loss of language.¹⁸⁴ According to Philip: The place we occupy as poet is one that is unique---one that forces us to operate in a language that was used to brutalize Africans so that they would come to believe in their own lack of humanity."¹⁸⁵ Nourbese explains that a relationship to the English language on these terms must be disruptive "to "mine" a language-both in the sense of making it mine, as well as plumbing its depth and, if necessary, exploding it."¹⁸⁶ In her own poetic work her mining of language led her to discover that the only place she could write from, seeking to make it home was her expendable, violated, displaced,

¹⁸³ Marlene Nourbese Philip. "A Genealogy of Resistance" in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997, 30.

¹⁸⁴ Marlene Nourbese Philip. "Earth and Sound: The Place of Poetry" in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997, 59.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 63.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 70.

gendered racialized body, but as she admits in a later essay, she actually writes that body *out* of the essay. In “Dis Place-The Space Between,” Philip focuses on the body as a primary site, focusing in particular on the space between the legs, the site of rape-ability.¹⁸⁷ Ultimately Philip cannot address dis place in academic prose, she creates a dramatic courtroom scene where “jamettes” Trinidadian sex workers assert their definition of embodiment, the rest of the self-critical theoretical text is interrupted by stage directions and the words break into poetry, demonstrating how silence enforces the structure of violence that is rape, which further silences Black women within patriarchy. Poetry is what allows Philip to write what she does not want to write about and what she cannot write about in academic English. As she explains in “The Habit of: Poetry Rats and Cats,” poetry is “risk taking of the highest order,” which requires a formal intervention.¹⁸⁸ In “Ignoring Poetry,” she describes her own process of revealing that the illusion of unity in language is what allows the perpetual reproduction of violence and silence by “refusing to allow the voice, the solo voice, pride of place, centre page, centre stage. Where words are surrounded by and trying to fill all that white space, negative space, blank space---where the silence is and never was silent.”¹⁸⁹

Dionne Brand describes the limits and betrayal of the language, similarly to Nourbese’s characterization of English as a “foreign anguish” in her poem “On The Discourse of Language,” Brand explains that “Every word turns on itself, every word falls

¹⁸⁷ Marlene Nourbese Philip. “Dis Place-The Space Between” in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997, 75.

¹⁸⁸ Marlene Nourbese Philip. “The Habit Of: Poetry, Rats and Cats,” in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997, 113.

¹⁸⁹ Marlene Nourbese Philip. “Ignoring Poetry” in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997, 124-125.

after it is said.”¹⁹⁰ For Brand, poetry is *presence* in time and space, “Poetry is here, just *here*,” a queer thing since much of Brand’s poetry is about Caribbean landscapes she has left.¹⁹¹ Poetry then must be a queer time and space, the way to be here and home, a diasporic place for the displaced to live. Brand admits this of poetry “it’s been just room to live.”¹⁹² Which is to say poetry is a queer form of presence that transforms the present moment and location by making it livable when it is not. Brand ends her essay on poetry with the words: “Something wrestling with how we live, something dangerous, something honest.”¹⁹³ Lorde will practice this intervention 1979 chorale *Need*, a dangerously honest poem speaking against the violence of a Black cultural nationalist definition of gendered expendability.

4.2.6. Broken Drum: The Limits of Rhythm

In *Need: A Chorale for Black Women Voices*, Lorde puts her own work within the Black Arts Movement into relief by demonstrating the danger of “Black mother woman” as a disciplinary trap within the Black nationalist movement. Starting with a violent nursery rhyme,

*tattle tale tit
your tongue will be slit
and every little boy in town
shall have a little bit*¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Dionne Brand. *Bread Out of Stone*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994, 181.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 183.

¹⁹² Ibid, 182.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 183.

¹⁹⁴ Audre Lorde. Freedom Organizing Series #6 *Need*. Latham: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1990, 7.

Need denaturalizes the function of ‘family’ poetry and implicates such poetry as a form of teaching that perpetuates violence. *Need* a performance piece written in response to a wave of murders of Black women in 1979, seeks to open up a impossible conversation about violence against women within the Black community, and calls nationalism to task for normalizing and silencing the dehumanization of women. Pat Parker, longtime collaborator and correspondent with Lorde had written *Womanslaughter* a collection of poems speaking out against violence against women a year before, but while Parker (though a former Black Panther and active worker in West Coast Black liberation struggles) situated her critique firmly in the women’s movement, addressing the legal system, Lorde specifically addressed the “brothers” of the Black nationalist movement in *Need*. Bobbie, a character in *Need* named after one of 12 women murdered in Boston during a four month period in 1979, says

Borrowed hymns veil the misplaced hatred
saying you need me you need me you need me
like a broken drum
calling me Black goddess Black hope Black strength
Black mother
yet you touch me
and I die in the alleys of Boston.¹⁹⁵

The phrase “Black mother” inhabiting a line of its own stands out from the litany of ideological falsehoods. Establishing unmediated repetition as a “broken drum” of suspect claims in the mocking line “saying you need me you need me you need me” which becomes a broken “drum” which invokes and pan-africanizes the cliché of the “broken record” which the repeated demands on the bodies of Black women represent to

¹⁹⁵ Audre Lorde. “Need” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 352. Originally in *Chosen Poems Old and New* (1982).

the speaker the repetition of a lowercase set of “Black” ideas becomes equally untrustworthy: “Black goddess Black hope Black strength.” The letter “b” acting as the tell tale drumbeat throughout the passage from Borrowed to Boston emphasizes broken and Black Black Black as an unacceptable status quo within the sound-scheme of the poem. The phrase “Black mother” at once part of and apart from this series of characterization is meant to remind the addressee both of the reality of the labor relationship that Black women perform in Black communities and the accountability due to Black women and to point out the irony of the fact that the term “mother” in the repetitive “broken drum” of the Black power ideology loses its meaning in the inertia of the rhythm.

In the 1990 revision of this poem for publication in Kitchen Table Press’s “Freedom Organizing Series of pamphlets, Lorde makes some changes in structure. In the preface to this edition, Lorde explains that her revisions were in response to working Black women who performed the piece, so we can understand that the changes are not only visual, but also oral. Instead of being recited by “all” the same passage we looked at above is articulated by the character “Bobbie” named for one of the victims of the Boston murders:

Borrowed hymns veil a misplaced hatred
saying you need me you need me you need me.
a broken drum
calling me Black goddess Black hope Black
strength Black mother
yet you touch me
and I die in the alleys of Boston. ¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Audre Lorde. *Freedom Organizing Series #6 Need*. Latham: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1990, 12.

Here Lorde directly links the rhetoric of the Black nationalist movement, accompanied by drums, capitalizing “Black,” and contrasting a pan-Africanized use of “goddess” to describe women to the phenomenon of violence against Black women perpetrated by Black men, arguing that the patriarchal logic of Black nationalism actually amputates the “strength” of a multi-gendered collective with a shared experience of racism. Lorde also inserts spaces into the lines, a strategy that she would not have used in 1979, but which appears in her later poetry.¹⁹⁷ The internal spaces in the lines in this passage set off the suspect claims of the Black power rhetoric: “you need me” “Black goddess” “Black hope” Black/strength” “Black mother.” Each phrase spoken from the mouth of the would-be patriarch, is its own violence. Interrupted with space, these phrases cannot enter a rhythmic continuity with the rest of the syllables in each line. The spaces mark the cost of each invocation of the “borrowed hymn” of patriarchy, missing and silenced women and girls produced by the rhetoric of violent need. Lorde’s poetic intervention seeks to interrupt the violence, forbidding the nursery rhyme consumption of these fantasies, the pedagogical impact of each phrase characterizing the Black woman in an exploitative context requires these breaks within the line. At the same time the broken lines call into question the patriarchal lines that the transmutation of Black women’s lives into symbolic patriarchal props would enforce and imagine. In addition to the spaces of absence in the lines, presencing the absence of human accountability in the “Black mother” as supernatural other discourse the actual line break Lorde places between “Black” and “strength” illustrates the extent to which the “borrowed hymn” of patriarchy disrespects and destroys the actual vitality of Black communities.

¹⁹⁷ see the discussion of internal line breaks in Chapter: 1 “Survival: An Intervention into Meaning.”

In 1973 and 1978 Lorde herself had already published work hailing a “Black mother woman” and invoking the Yoruba mother goddess, but in 1979 she calls out the nationalist “need” for Black motherhood as the articulation of a “misplaced hatred,” a way in which Black men understand Black women as other than human, as rape-able, abuseable, killable. Lorde is illuminating the danger of her own usefulness to a nationalist movement, creating a performance that refuses rhythm. *Need* opens with a nursery rhyme “tattle-tale tit/ your tongue will be slit/and every little boy in town/will have a little bit,” revealing children’s poems as a cruel pedagogy of violence and silence. Likewise the rhetoric of Black nationalism teaches “Black mother” as a category of emptied humanity. “Like a broken drum.” Skin stretched over a void. This is the sound of Black maternity. A drum. But it is Lorde that breaks the drum beat. Against rhythm, with only the slightest moments of internal slant rhyme, Lorde creates in *Need* a verbal relationship in which the beat(ing) does not go on. The haunting lines of the poem though percussive, and repetitive do not cohere into rhythm

Dead Black women haunt the Black maled streets
paying the cities’ secret and familiar tithes of blood
burn blood beat blood cut blood
seven year old child rape victim blood blood
of a sodomized grandmother blood blood
on the hands of my brother blood
and his blood clotting in the teeth of strangers¹⁹⁸

A reader of this passage (and remember this is a chorale written to be performed alive) must trip over the blood in this passage. The reader cannot pass over it gracefully. Blood is placed like a marker. The varieties of blood, the repetition of blood flood the

¹⁹⁸ Audre Lorde. “Need” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 350. Originally in *Chosen Poems Old and New* (1982).

passage and the mouth of the reader. The function of “blood” in this passage allows Lorde’s formal transgression and calls into question the function of blood in a Black power ideology that depends on imagined patriarchal familial relationships (blood) and the attendant violence (blood). Drawing on the use of “blood” within the Black power movement as a slang term through which Black people identified each other as family members, blood is both the agent and subject of this passage. Blood circulates as the haunting relationship of a violent social order, a tithe. But the implications of blood, because of its queer placement on each line of the passage are multiple for all of the inhabitants. Waiting at the end of each of the internal lines of this passage, “blood” is both the conclusion and the transition.

paying the cities’ secret and familiar tithe of blood

burn blood beat blood cut blood

Here blood is the content of the “secret and familiar tithe” but is also the name of he who perpetrates the sacrifice. “blood/burn blood beat blood cut blood.” Black on Black crime is blood on blood. Coming before and after each verb in the second line above and because of its placement at the end of the two consecutive lines, “blood” is he who burns and beats and cuts and also the result of the actions, burn beat, cut. Blood is the unacceptable rhythm that holds the nightmare passage together. Blood and Black because of their repetition, provide the only rhyme in the passage. “blood beat blood” blood is the beat and the family relationship. Intra-racial gendered violence means that violence is what connects “blood” to “blood” or relative to relative. The blood of the “seven year old rape victim” and the grandmother especially belies the supposed accountability of familial bloodlines and instead proves the supremacy of a violent blood relationship that takes the blood and vitality from women and girls. Foreshadowing the

repetition of “Black goddess Black hope Black strength/Black mother” later in this version of the poem, “blood” becomes a suspect connection.

Lorde also revised this passage in the pamphlet version of the poem.

Again Lorde uses space to interrupt the passages:

paying our cities’ secret and familiar tithes of blood
burn blood beat blood cut blood
seven-year-old child rape victim blood
of a sodomized grandmother blood
on the hands of my brother¹⁹⁹

In this version of the poem the line about “his blood clotting in the teeth of strangers” is not included. All of the blood in this passage comes from the bodies of women as wounded by the “burn” “beat” and “cut.” Though Lorde edited this later version of the poem with the feedback and insight from using the poem in performance with other Black women the spatial distance between blood at the end of two of the lines in the passage only makes the function of blood more multiple in relation to each line. Whereas the earlier published version the poem ironizes and exploits the reproductivity of the language around Blackness and blood in Black power rhetoric in the later version Lorde poetically intervenes, creating a queer poetic form that refuses to reproduce the blood(y) relationship of intra-racial gendered violence. Lorde’s formal intervention into her own poem, distances it further from the nursery rhyme offering a pedagogy that instead of masking dangerous lessons in rhyme to make them palatable, insists on the visibility of a violent relation and leaves space for the radical learning of another form of accountability.

¹⁹⁹ Audre Lorde. *Freedom Organizing Series #6 Need*. Latham: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1990, 9.
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Upon reading *Need*, my father internalized it as a radically pedagogical text. He said he felt “taught” by it, comparing it to a film he had seen in high school in which the evidence of the holocaust, piles of hair, bones, mass graves was revealed in all its banal horror.²⁰⁰ Hidden violence becomes visible here, and time splits. The patterns that would reproduce normalcy are derailed. Read aloud, *Need* is a poem that forces the reader to find a spoken relationship that can connect the words to each other. The a-rhythmic quality of *Need* like the non-grammatical accumulation of Jordan’s “In Memoriam,” presences the difficulty of poetry, that at its edges poetry is a testament to the inadequacy of a given language, a need for a new logic. This poetics, describing a social system that reproduces and naturalizes untimely deaths by evacuating the Black feminine of all human content rails against the reproduction of the logic, the language in which the horrors it describes can be true.

At the end of “Need,” Lorde encourages “all” to repeat one line from a poem by Barbara Denning, “We cannot live without our lives.”²⁰¹ While protesting the murders in Boston members of a coalition centered by the Combahee River Collective carried a banner with these words: “Third World Women: We Cannot Live Without Our Lives.”²⁰² This may seem at first reading to be simple statement, even a redundant one, but the question of what Black women’s lives actually are and what it means for Black women to live is a complicated one. The phrase “our lives” is a complicated one because it seems to

²⁰⁰ Clyde Gumbs is a poet and motivational speaker (www.inspireddestiny.com). I asked him to read *Need* after breakfast one day during the Duke Lacrosse Case. Clyde Gumbs, trained in capitalist economics, business and law, was also generous enough to read Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* after I mentioned it in a conversation in 2004. Difficult. Miracle. Indeed. (find the name of the film)

²⁰¹ Audre Lorde. “Need” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 354. Originally in *Chosen Poems Old and New* (1982).

²⁰² See inside cover of Barbara Smith, Akasha Gloria Hull and Patricia Bell-Scott eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1981.

reclaim ownership for lives that, as Lorde makes explicit throughout *Need* are claimed for a movement that is not accountable to their survival, stretched like a drum over the use-value of nation building which becomes waste, immediately available containers for excess rage. This points to the fact that the nation that the construct “Black goddess Black hope Black strength/ Black mother” helps build is not actually a viable context. The product “Black nation” has no context of value. The continuation of Blackness as an ontological situation is despised even by self-proclaimed nation-builders. The conflict of Black nationalism, as elaborated by Kevin Gaines, is that it retains the racist logic that it seeks to obliterate.²⁰³ The Black mother, as a symbol for the persistence of Blackness into the future remains a target for the anxiety of what Blackness continues to mean. If Lorde’s poems about Black mothers provide content and context for Black maternity as a mode of dialogic production, her more widely known poem “Litany for Survival,” Lorde brings the contradictions of the continued production of Blackness into view. “We were never meant to survive,” she says. If Black nationalists are concerned to fight against race genocide, disavowing birth control and hoping to reproduce of nation of Black people, why silence responses to the murder and rape of Black women within the Black community? What form of race survival does nationalism and what form of survival does it fear?

“Never Meant to Survive”: A Poetics of Queer Futurism

Black Nationalism and the dominant nationalism that in embraces like a negative in it’s oppositional stance, both fear exactly the form of queer survival that Lorde and

²⁰³ Kevin Gaines. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the 20th Century*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996.

Jordan threaten to articulate through their poetic futurism. Blackness uncontained is the queerest, scariest thing ever. The threat and the potential of a rival production of Black subjectivity is so dangerous that it makes your skin crawl. June Jordan points out the legibility of martyrdom as opposed to the invisibility of Black survival in her 1970 *New York Times* article on Mississippi. Arguing that people in the north only think of Mississippi when someone has been murdered and only thought to know who Medgar Evers was when he became a martyr, she submits a long article to the times focusing on the everyday survival of teachers, doctors, farmers, writers and other people in Mississippi. Similarly Audre Lorde is interested in a form of futurity that does not transform the fact of death into a mode through which to reproduce a deadly structure. As she lamented in “Dreams bite...” her anti-memorial for Martin Luther King Jr. “the people of sun/ are carving their own children/ into monuments of war.”²⁰⁴

The futurity that Lorde imagines in “Dreams bite...”: “I shall love again/ When I am obsolete,” is not reproductive.²⁰⁵ Survival in this sense is not continued relevance or the reproduction of categories of being.

Jordan and Lorde were able to publish poetry throughout their lifetimes, and were each honored with a collection of their collected poems published after they died. Many of their comrades were never published by official presses. Many self-published chapbooks sit in basements (or for the lucky in archives). Many poems on napkins sit in landfills. Many poetry manuscripts sit in boxes in the basements of aging geniuses. This chapter has read the poetry of Lorde and Jordan through the lens of a reader haunted by their unlikely, undeniable presence. Only one haunted by the ghosts of Lorde and

²⁰⁴ Audre Lorde. “Dreams Bite...” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 55.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Jordan would read their poetry for the traces of words killed before they could be spoken. The poetics of survival in the poetry of Lorde and Jordan combines a marketing practice that makes space to enunciate the unhearable alongside (haunting) the marketable with a desire for another relationship to language. These authors printed themselves, as dark and angry indentations of loving both in their struggles to be in print within and without the markets for Black arts and feminist poetry and the rival “third” “world” market they sought to create. But more than that the poetics of survival is about the dark mark of shadows, past noon, the impact that the absences, failures and inadequacies of language has on the present. My reading has attempted to account for the *presence* of those desires in the artifacts of published works, tracing lines to the bodies of unpublishable words. The final chapter will extend this analysis of the forced poetics in the publishing market that Jordan and Lorde navigated to examine the queer survival of Black feminism in publishing practice.

5. Publishing and Survival: The Meanings of Production

You had this canny ability to shape an untenable reality, mold it, sing it, reduce it to its manageable, transforming essence, which is a knowing so deep it's like a secret. In your silence, enforced or chosen, lay not only eloquence but discourse so devastating that "civilization" could not risk engaging in it lest it lose the ground it stomped. All claims to prescience disintegrate when and where that discourse takes place. When you say "No" or "Yes" or "This and not that," change itself changes.

-Toni Morrison, May 1985, *Essence* 15th

Anniversary Issue¹

If the chapters that precede this are about the forced poetics of Black feminist teaching within a disciplinary economy, of Black feminist mothering within neo-liberalism, of Black feminist poetry within a market of Black Arts Martyrdom, this is a chapter about what of the impossible happened and what of the impossible did not happen. Reading literary production and the vision of an autonomous Black feminist publishing apparatus through the lens of performative diasporic survival, this is chapter about what did not hold, and what I am now holding. Starting from the critiques Lorde and Jordan launched within the white feminist publishing market on the terms of poetry, and moving to the fate of experiments in autonomous publication, the narrative of this chapter has to interrupt itself with a critical poetic stops and starts in the generator of its own survival for fear of reproducing the lusted after triumph narrative of Black feminist publishing precedents and a victorious Black Women's Writing movement. This is not about survival against the odds. As June Jordan teaches us, survival literature means

¹ Toni Morrison. "A Knowing So Deep," in *Essence*, May 1985, 230.

learning something that we are not supposed to know.² As Audre Lorde teaches “we were never meant to survive.”³ This chapter documents breakage, contradiction, haunting, failure, seeking to see what we can learn about the impossible desires that never happened and the ones that did, and the ones that do now. And what we should do with this archive of almost and barely literary products as scholars on the unsurvivable shoreline of queer diasporic poetic study, impossible as we want to be.

The (Im)Possibility of Poetry

On October 27th 1975 Toni Morrison wrote a letter to June Jordan, the poet, on behalf of Random House, the publishing company, in regards to the possibility of publishing her poems:

The answer they gave was ‘we would prefer her prose---will do poetry if we must.’ Now I would tell them to shove it if that were me—and place my poetry where it was received with glee. But I am not you. Nor am I a poet.⁴

Toni Morrison is not a poet. One thing that Toni Morrison learned in her many years working for New York City’s Random House publishing company was that the economy of publishing in the United States was in no way random. Especially not when it came to race. Despite her intimate knowledge of the constraints of the mainstream publishing industry, as an editor Toni Morrison made miracles. She gave words that were never meant to survive a way through to the future. Many of these have been the

² See Chapter 1 Survival: An Intervention into Meaning and June Jordan “Towards a Survival Literature for Afrikan Children” Conference of Afro-American Writers, Howard University 1974 (Lucille Clifton’s Unprocessed Boxes, Emory University Manuscript and Rare Book Library.

³ Audre Lorde. “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, 255.

⁴ Toni Morrison. Oct. 27th 1975 letter to June Jordan. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 84, Folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

words I needed to survive up to this moment. The Library of America edition of James Baldwin's *Collected Essays*, Toni Cade Bambara's post-humously published novel (*Those Bones Are Not My Child*) and short stories (*Dream Sightings and Rescue Missions*).⁵ It was Morrison, before she even published her own first novel, who supported Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker's rocky adventures in print. Often the difference between whether a particular book is or is not in print today is literally whether or not Toni Morrison got involved. Without the diligence, strategy and vision of Toni Morrison there is no reason to think the category "Black Women Writers" would be teachable or even imaginable in the literary field. Which is a long way of saying that Toni Morrison knew what she was talking about.

(Black) Poetry is a problem in the American publishing market. (Publishing is a problem in the Black market of poetry.) Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant's concept of forced poetics an analytic which I have used throughout this dissertation in order to examine the problem of poetry in the American market or the danger a poetic approach can wreak upon the violent idea of the American marketplace, where people are still for sale. For Glissant, the dilemma of the situation of forced poetics is a result of oppression. Everything the oppressed person says, in the language of their oppression, reproduces the situation of oppression because it comes from that same situation.⁶

Poetic right? In other words nothing we say is actually free from oppression, because we

⁵ James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1998. (Essays selected by Toni Morrison.) Toni Cade Bambara. *Those Bones Are Not My Child*. New York: Pantheon, 1999. Toni Cade Bambara. *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*. New York: Pantheon, 1996.

⁶ Original talk Edouard Glissant. "Free or Forced Poetics" in *Alcheinga* Vol. 2 No. 2, 1976, 95-101. In print as: Edouard Glissant. "Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics," in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays (trans J. Michael Dash)*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989. (French Language version 1981.)

who are speaking are still oppressed. Nothing is free, not even our mouths, our hands and the words we choose to toss towards one another.

On the level of publishing, within a market, this is even more pervasive. How, in a capitalist market, could you possibly publish something that does not consent to a capitalist system (even while appearing not to)? How in a dominant society that presumes and benefits from the unfreedom of Black people could you publish poems by or for free Black people?

June Jordan, the same difficult-to-publish poet Morrison addresses above, had some ideas about this problem. As we explore in chapter 3: Difficult Miracle, her essay “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” June Jordan illustrates the paradox thusly

“A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home.
How should there be Black poets in America?”⁷

Elaborating on the impossibility of Black poetry in a country that enforces illiteracy and homelessness for Black people, June Jordan describes the existence of Black woman poet Phillis Wheatley as a miracle. And if publishing a book of poems as a slave was difficult, Jordan mentions Wheatley’s lost second book of poems to assert that it would have been even harder to publish the poems of an independent Black woman than to publish the poems of a slave.

The poems of the enslaved are easier to sell than the poems of the free.

And that’s if you can sell poetry at all. In Toni Morrison’s letter to June Jordan, the poet, she explained that the rejection of June Jordan, the poet, as a poet by the very

⁷ June Jordan. “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley,” in *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 88.

strategic Random House was based on “a rudimentary capitalistic principle” prose is a commodity that can be sold, poetry, is something else.⁸ I agree with Random House on the distinction that they make between narrative form and poetry. Stories, novels and essays as mind-expanding, affirming transformative and beautiful as they may be when in the hands of someone like Toni Morrison are nonetheless contained when compared with poetry. Remember, Sylvia Wynter defines the “poetic” as the way we create a world by trying and failing to describe a human relationship to an environment.⁹ Poetry is an unwieldy product because it never quite stops being a process. Poetry, as Sylvia Wynter defines it, is dangerous to capital because it challenges the presumption that human beings are related to each other and to their environment through a means of production, and through access to commodities. Poetry, thus defined, says maybe I’m related to you through a process of creation. Maybe we can’t buy or sell each other, maybe the fundamental shape of our relationship is the way my words fit in your mouth. Or vice versa. Who is Phillis Wheatley? What is Black poetry after slavery? How do you sell poetry by poets if a poet is a person *not for sale*?

And who would you sell that poetry to anyway? The problem of profit in the mainstream publishing market is a primary determining factor in which books stay in print and which words become inaccessible to the future. How then, could one possibly be accountable to an audience of the rare, marginalized, silenced, under-taught, criminalized people we love? To be blunt: Is it possible to publish anything on a wide

⁸ Toni Morrison, Letter to June Jordan. Oct. 27th 1975. June Jordan Manuscript Archives Box 84, Box 4. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

⁹ Sylvia Wynter “Ethno or Sociopoetics” *Alcheinga* Vol. 2 No. 2, 1976, 78-94.

scale in the United States that is not ultimately *for* white people with access to education and disposable book-buying money? Who cares if I have something to say to you?

In 1977, only two years after Toni Morrison's realist letter to the poet June Jordan, the two writers were part of a New York based group of Black women writers called the "Sisterhood" along with Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange and many others. These women envisioned an autonomous Black women's publishing initiative that would have been called Kizzy Enterprises and a Black poets and writers network which Ntozake Shange offered to house, in her home. This new and needed institution was intended to be a not for profit Black publishing enterprise, which would keep important Black texts in print, publish a periodical targeted to the Black working masses, and be supported, not by sales, but by the contributions of like-minded people. According to the minutes taken in the Sisterhood planning meetings for Kizzy Enterprises Toni Morrison made it very clear that none of the plans for Kizzy should be mentioned to Random House until much later in the game.¹⁰ Evidently Morrison understood Black non-market publishing to incompatible with a mainstream publishing market in which she was still struggling to support Black women writers. In the end, Kizzy Enterprises was never born. A mentee of Shange asked her about it the other day and she barely remembers the idea.¹¹ I would never have known about it if June Jordan hadn't kept the meeting minutes and if Harvard hadn't kept June Jordan's files. Kizzy remains an idea haunting the Black presence in the literary market, which remains determined by mainstream publishing

¹⁰ The Sisterhood. Meeting notes Feb, 20 1977. Box 101, Folder 3, June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

¹¹ Ebony Golden, personal conversation, June 12, 2008.

interests.¹² This chapter is about the haunting remains of the poetic process of Black feminist literary producers to create an alternative to the enslaving narrative of the tokenizing and exploitative capitalist literary and academic markets.

Haunting Remains

This chapter is informed by two theories of death and haunting that are in turn informed by the fictional and theoretical work of Toni Morrison. Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead* positions itself as both a participant in Morrison's literary critical project of revealing the Africanist presence at the haunting center of white literary production, and a text that uses Morrison's fictional work in *Beloved* to elaborate the connections between death, slavery and mothering. Holland points out that the BLACK FEMALE ghost in *Beloved* is also the BLACK FEMALE specter of transformation haunting the US imaginary.¹³ Holland goes on in her extended reading of *Beloved* in conversation with Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" that Sethe only obtains "Mother Right" through her act of infanticide. Due to the contradictions between the constructions of motherhood and slavery (discussed at length in chapter 2) the action of killing her daughter is that which can force the *press* to acknowledge her as the author of her daughter's life.¹⁴ Holland weaves this insight into a compelling argument about death and subjectivity, the association with black life with death in the dominant imaginary. But I am interested in the specificity and source of the point. It is Toni Morrison who reveals the association between publishability, Black female authority and

¹² Publishing houses like Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press operated on explicitly anti-capitalist terms when they decided that every book they published would stay in print, regardless of sales.

¹³ Sharon Holland. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 57.

matricide. Matricide makes Sethe (and her real life referent) mothers in print. What is the relationship between claiming what you create and killing it in a context that criminalizes and expropriates that which Black women produce? How does our reading of the Black Women Writers phenomenon in the late 20th century shift if we take this point seriously. First, that Black female authority and subjectivity is at the center of a narrative about what life means, and secondly that this secret can only be revealed with great sacrifice, at the edge of life and death, with impossible choices for cutting at the point of reproduction. What dies in the claimability of Black Women's Writing as a marketable product in a literary apparatus that was becoming, as Barbara Smith explains, even more completely controlled by multinational corporations which owned publishing companies outright? What are the multiple manifestations of haunting, not just the haunting of a white literary establishment scared to death of the transformative work of Black women as literary producers, but the haunting of the Black feminist literary producer who must navigate her own criminalized and erased relationship to authority? What does she have to kill? And what, repressed, comes back to teach us with its haunting?

Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* explains some of the danger and potential of "following ghosts," framing her own work thusly "It is about putting life back where only a vague memory or trace was visible..."¹⁵ Gordon also starts with Morrison, framing *The Bluest Eye* as a study of "why dreams die."¹⁶ My work to find and create an archive of Black feminist literary production has taught me that in publishing, some dreams die in

¹⁵ Avery Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 22.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.

infancy, some dreams are sacrificed for others, and some dreams die in our forgetfulness, our complicity in a market that halts their reproductive potential. Invoking Wahneema Lubiano's practice of pointing out the haunting presence of what "cover stories" seek to cover, Gordon's work offers a method of reading for foreclosure.¹⁷ I am thinking of foreclosure here in an economic sense, not so much in the Lacanian psychoanalytical sense, but more in the Spivakian sense where the foreclosure of the native informant reveals the function of credit in an economy of ideologies.¹⁸ Some of us are unbelievable, our meanings are not meant to survive. This chapter takes on the work of re-answering the question of why dreams die, of authority and of haunting as an important pedagogical form of survival.

With a self-imposed pressure not to create new cover stories to hide the haunting contradictions of how Black feminist literary production does and does not survive this chapter traces the cutting, decisions, fights, dreams, hauntings, almossts and barelys. Starting with a fight at *Chrysalis* where Audre Lorde and June Jordan frame an argument about their authority in relationship to poetry in the magazine in the terms of maternal imperative, moving to stories of Kizzy Enterprises and the Black Feminist Resource Manual, two examples of the dream children that did not survive the Black feminist publishing movement and finally elaborating the terms of survival of Kitchen Table Press and the independent initiatives of Alexis DeVeaux, this chapter creates an

¹⁷ See Wahneema Lubiano. "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in. Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Pantheon, 1992. 323-363.

¹⁸ See Gayatri Spivak. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards the History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

intergenerative reading practice for literary history that reveals the queer survival and contingency of our beloved words.

The White Feminist Market and the Enraged Poetics of Black Feminist Publishing

In the late 1970's Audre Lorde was poetry editor of a "magazine of women's culture" called *Chrysalis*. June Jordan was a contributing editor. Adrienne Rich was also a contributing editor, and then there was an (white feminist) editorial board. So (to be clear) there were the "advising editors" and Lorde as poetry editor who ostensibly had input into the magazine and then there was an all white set of women who made the day to day and final decisions and there were no women of color in that room. A number of important pieces, including an early version of Lorde's classic essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" and appropriately, June Jordan's poem "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies."¹⁹ Lorde used her role as poetry editor to highlight poetry by emergent women of color writers, but from the beginning the editorial collective, which was based in LA and the far-flung poetry editor had communication issues, and in response to the very first issue, Patricia Jones, a Black woman writer, complained in a letter to the editor that it seemed that women of color were marginalized within the magazine.²⁰ As poetry editor, Audre Lorde had a critique of the magazine that specifically centered around poetic form and space. In October 1977, Audre Lorde wrote a letter (really a small essay) complaining expressing her frustration with the *Chrysalis* collective for devaluing poetry. The third issue of the publication had only 9 pages of poetry, but it had 11 pages

¹⁹ Audre Lorde. "Poems are not Luxuries," *Chrysalis* 3, 1977, 7-8. June Jordan. "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies" *Chrysalis* 3, 1977, 62.

²⁰ Patricia Jones. "Letter to the Editor." *Chrysalis* 2, 1977, i.

of blank space, used ostensibly to provide transitions between articles. Lorde was most distressed by the fact that two poems by June Jordan were crowded onto the same page, which Lorde complained gave the misperception that they were parts of the same poem and “nullified the impact of each one.” Lorde copied June Jordan on this letter. It might be the case that Jordan herself had complained to Lorde about the way that her poems appeared on the page. In a letter the next year to her new publisher, Beacon Press, Jordan insists that her poetry should get the same space the Seamus Heaney’s got, increasing the projected page-length of *Passion* to over a hundred pages. Comparing the spatial treatment of Heaney’s poems to her own, Jordan explained to Mary Ann Lash at Beacon Press “At no time is there more than one poem on a page even though many of the poems could double up: I am looking for the same consideration in the formal presentation of my poems.”²¹

In 1979 the Chrysalis collective received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to produce a special issue on poetry.²² By this time however, Lorde was fed up with the collective and had resigned as poetry editor, an act which was covered up by the editorial board which published a special poem in honor of Audre Lorde and continued to list her on the masthead months after she had resigned. So Lorde wrote another angry letter, this time structured with numbers. She starts with the marker of second wave feminism and questions its very existence through her critique “If the personal is indeed political then grave questions are raised by your printing a poem to me under a paragraph of factual errors and insults to contributors at the same time as the editorial board is

²¹ June Jordan. “Letter to Mary Ann Lash” Feb, 4 1980. Box 83, Folder 11, June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²² Chrysalis Collective. “Letter to Audre, Adrienne, Susan, Honor, June and Deena.” July 25, 1979. Box 85, Folder 1. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

apparently unable to deal with me as a peer.”²³ Lorde highlights three points that she says have “fallen on deaf ears” in the past. First she critiques the objectification “thingdom” of Black women in the magazine, particularly in response to what she sees as a fetishistic racist article about primitivism in women’s art in issue 7 of the publication. Second, she protests the expendability (superfluity) of work by women of color within the magazine, pointing out that the one poem by a woman of color that was to be included, a poem by Toi Derricote’s was missing from the issue...she predicts that the board will respond “we never noticed” and finally, Lorde protects her own authority. She is angry to have her name associated with “a poetic composition over which I have no control.”²⁴ These three issues, objectification, expendability and authority are the exact issues that are contested in the narrative about Black mothering and the reproduction of racism. Lorde is making an accusation. You are stifling the poetic work of women of color because you are afraid of what we will create. Here it is useful to remember Lorde’s (1981) essay “The Uses of Anger,”:

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony*, because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so they do not tear us apart.²⁵

In list format, in this letter Lorde orchestrates anger at being unchosen, that anger at being objectified and used.

²³ Audre Lorde. “Letter to Chrysalis Collective.” July 20th 1979. Box 85, Folder 1. June Jordan Collection. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Audre Lorde. “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 129.

In solidarity, Jordan wrote a letter resigning from her role as contributing editor to *Chrysalis*, “in absolute support of my sister Audre Lorde, who, as you know, but as your readers may not yet know, has demanded that you remove her name from your masthead.”²⁶

She then goes on to chastise the editors for:

your continuing flagrant disregard of the Black woman in America: Black women issues, Black women priorities, Black women poets, Black women painters, Black women political analysts, Black women storytellers, Black women activists, Black women laborers, Black women mothers, Black women wives, Black women lovers.²⁷

Clearly this is not written in the form of a poem. It is written in the form of a formal letter. Enacting (or terminating) a contract, Jordan uses the words “hereby” and “consequent.” She begins the last sentence with the word “as.” The poetics of rage also make this letter a poem. Listen to the repetition, of the key words. Black and profoundly. This is a profoundly Black feminist letter. Contesting the universality of the “women’s culture” the publication claims to represent Jordan continues:

It is amazing to me that you dare persist in claiming to be a national magazine of “women’s culture”: Two weeks ago, myself and another Black women poet and another Black woman artist came within 18 inches of losing our lives inside an unbridled police riot in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our crime: To be Black and breathing on the streets of the 79th precinct. Tell me/show me how your hopelessly academic, pseudo-historical, incestuous, and profoundly optional profoundly trifling profoundly upper middle-class attic white publication can presume to represent or women’s culture: the very tissue of our ongoing, tenuous, embattled experience.²⁸

Jordan brings the important topics of labor, mothering, and state violence explicitly into the conversation and points out the connection between the personal

²⁶ June Jordan. “Letter to *Chrysalis* Collective” Sept. 10 1979. Box 85, Folder 1, June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

miscommunications within the publication, the ideological violence in the magazine's content exclusions and editorial policies and the state violence that this narrative violence reproduces. After Susan Griffin, spokesperson at that time for the Chrysalis editorial board, failed to respond to either Lorde or Jordan's letters and instead wrote a long pleading letter Adrienne Rich, who had also resigned in alliance and agreement with Lorde and Jordan's accusations of racism, merely cc'ing Lorde and Jordan on what remained an exchange between two white women and, as you can imagine, incensing Jordan in particular even more, Jordan makes her connection between the ideological violence of the publication and the violence of racism and imperialism writ large even more explicit:

She writes "I am most angrily and disgustedly hereby confirmed in my viewpoint that Chrysalis and its allies do not fail Black and Third world people by accident. It is a failure guaranteed by a concept of identity that excludes my own, in the broad sense of my own."²⁹

She goes on to elaborate on "the process whereby persons such as S. G. may avoid indefinitely, it would seem, an adult and serious consideration of her particular responsibility for the fact that I must tremble for the survival likelihood of every young Black man in this country, including that of my own son."³⁰ Jordan then describes listening, in public to a radio report about "yet another white police murder of an unarmed young Black man," in her neighborhood and sincerely thinking that this time it might be her son.

²⁹ June Jordan. "Letter to Adrienne Rich," Nov. 16 1979, Box 85 Folder 1, June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

³⁰ *ibid.*

This is the brilliance of June Jordan's anger. For Jordan everything is connected. Accountability is always on the level of life or death. This is one of the reasons that Jordan gained a reputation, especially among her liberal peers for being so "difficult" and uncompromising. A racist editorial policy is never just a racist editorial process for Jordan. Because it is racist narrative that the media reproduces in its mechanics and with its content allows a collective common sense, that among other things enables the public to accept the actions of a police force that treats Black people as if they are not human beings, but monsters to be shot on sight. Jordan's anger is instructive in its logic and its clarity, even if it may depend on a binary. No incident is isolated, every practice, every decision we take on either reproduces an oppressive framework, or helps to produce something different...on the terms of the civil rights mantra, if you are not part of the solution you are part of the problem.

If the racism of Chrysalis is like a death sentence to the Black community...which seems to be the claim Jordan is making, she breaks out of the narrative structure of the sentence, even while parodying it with the contract like language of the letter, by breaking out into repetitive incantatory reveries.

Black women issues, Black women priorities, Black women poets

And on. The impact is cumulative and magical. It is almost as if the exclusion, tokenism, expendability and pigeon-holing of Black women within the publication is undone by the spell that she is working in this first paragraph. In contrast to the publication, the first paragraph of Jordan's letter is full of diverse Black women: Black women political analysts, Black women storytellers, Black women activists, Black women laborers, Black women mothers, Black women with authority.

The repetition of *Black*, capital BE and *women* lower-case “w” breaks out of the marginalizing assumption that Black woman is just a slot to be filled. Or that by tokenizing Black women on the advisory board but not taking their advice seriously you are somehow an inclusive publication. Jordan chooses excess. Its raining Black women hallelujah, Black womanhood is so multiple it is a song. It is certainly poetic. We start with alliteration and move to rhyme, priorities, poets, painters, analysts, activists, mothers, lovers. This is a call. Suddenly the space is filled with Black women, Black women past present and future are called, attracted by the aesthetic, spirit crowds the discourse. This repetition, Black women, Black women, Black women, hails Fannie Lou Hamer back from beyond the grave, it hails me. Eleven times

Black women

Loving Black women over and over again, day in a day out is a queer thing. This in a letter addressed to the white editorial board of *Chrysalis*, and then copied to Adrienne Rich, who Jordan understood to be an actively anti-racist white feminist ally, and 5 Black

women, Audre Lorde “my sister” Alexis De Veaux and Gwendolen Hardwick the Black women poet and artist who were attacked on the street with Jordan, Patricia Jones, the Black woman who wrote the first angry letter about racism to the magazine and Barbara Smith, who as we know is a lifetime warrior for autonomous women of color publishing. Black women everything at the center of the paragraph. This is poetic because it says what we do not know how to know. Right in the center of anger there it is, resplendent: ecstatic, evangelical, transformative love for self.

This is not the first time the repetition of Black shows up in Jordan’s body of angry letters. Ten years earlier in 1969 she had responded to a proto-bell curve pseudo-scientific article in the New York Times Magazine about how Black people are not capable of rational thought, with an eloquent letter with the refrain “Because I am Black.” Basically saying, because I am Black I do not understand what could possibly be rational about you printing this trash to begin with.³¹ Jordan is a poet, so she uses repetition to transform. In her recent poem, delivered as a keynote at the Fire and Ink Cotillion, Nikky Finney, poet and mentee of June Jordan repeated “repetition is sacred.”

³¹ From the September 15th 1969 letter to the Editors of the New York Times Magazine (Box 86, Folder 1, June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.)

“Because I am Black, I cannot understand allegedly scientific ideas of intelligence that imagine I have the wrong kind. Please let me know how I may be useful, in your society, nevertheless...”

Because I am Black, I rejoice to hear about Black children putting horses with apples. We do a lot of primitively functional things: we try to put people together with food, and men with families, and human life in the absolute center of every single category you can name. Is there any hope for us?

Because I am Black, I have terrific problems understanding the humane purpose served by your magazine publication of a racist article. Racist: To my otherworldly, Black mind, anything that insists upon differences between races and then goes ahead to value one race over another, on the basis of these differences is racist. Please show me the error of my ways...”

And Jordan's repetition is designed to transform the meaning of Blackness from that which can be debased in the media, that bottomline where persons becomes property to expend or throw away, to something sacred: a critique, a view of the world that so threatens the organizing logic of society that it must be devalued by any narrative means necessary, including the scientific. So in this 1979 letter when Jordan repeats "Black women" eleven times she is repeating a practice that she has already established in her practice of writing unpublishable letters to the editor.

You cannot read this letter without knowing, *for sure*, that June Jordan loves Black women enough to fight for our existence. All Audre Lorde had to do was cc her on the letter. Beware the fierce love between Black women. Profound. Jordan's use in the next paragraph of the repeated word profoundly also makes a language break. The sentence, or indictment, begins in standard sentence structure; commas punctuate the accusations: "hopelessly academic, pseudo-historical, incestuous." But then the failure is just too profound for the dominant language to hold. The commas drop out and the word profoundly hold the rhythm. "Profoundly optional." Profoundly holds the rhythm. "Profoundly optional profoundly trifling," and this is a turning point. Because you know where we are by the time we get to the word trifling. This is school-yard. This is what Jordan called Black English in her classroom. No commas needed to bring it home.

Profoundly upper middle-class attic white publication.

And then here is the thing that I love the most. After explaining why the publication is so dead, ridiculous and optional that it need not even exist, she then actually proposes that the people publish the letter in the magazine! And this isn't the only place she does this...after a back and forth between June Jordan and the editors of the magazine Seven Days about an article that she wrote about the outrage of a mob

murder of Black youth in Brooklyn, where they ask her to be less angry and more balanced, she tells them off and says if you want your readers to really know what's going on, print this letter and give me my kill fee.

And this is a poetic act too. As Sylvia Wynter explains, the poetic is the way we make an capitalist relationship where objects relate to objects through the mediator of power obsolete, and imagine a different world by describing a relationship that cannot be described. And this is Jordan's gesture at the end of these angry poetic queerly carefully crafted letters. You who know nothing of what publishing should be, publish this. I entirely expect that you will print this, she says. By which she means I dare you. I dare you. Not just to the recipient, but now to us. The shadow audience overhearing her love for us, carbon-copied. And the anger of Black women is like that, a shadow archive of stolen love daring us to be afraid and to act.

In Jordan's 1971 "Poem to the Mass Communications Media" Jordan uses the idea that the poetic act can "will" another reality into being to express her critique:

I long to fly vast feathers past your mouths on mine
I will to leave the language of the bladder
live yellow and all waste

I will to be

I have begun

I am speaking for

My self³²

Of course Jordan's reference to the "yellow" "language of the bladder" invokes the charge of yellow journalism, suggesting the dishonesty in the mass media's relationship

³² June Jordan. "Poem to the Mass Communications Media" in *Some Changes*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971, 81.

to Black women and the communities to which they are accountable. And her use of the term “will” as a transitional term between longing and beginning has the double valence of intention and survival past death. As she makes clear in her critique of the editorial policies of *Chrysalis*, the portrayal of Black people in the media is a life and death matter. As in much of her other poetry Jordan also uses spacing to make her point and to transform the implied relationships of the language she chooses to use. The contrast between the crowded first three lines and the sparse last four lines, and even the space intervening within “My self” suggests a distinction between the function of journalism and the function of poetry. The crowded line space of the newspaper or magazine, contrasts with the breathing room of free verse and the imperative of poetry to disrupt objectivity and make room for a potential relationship. Jordan is also modeling a process of revision that she wishes the media outlets she engages with would enact: “I will to be” revised becomes “I have begun” which further revised becomes “I am speaking.” We see both Jordan and Lorde expressing their right not to be misrepresented in print and insisting on their right to speak for themselves in their critique of *Chrysalis* magazine.

I propose that these angry letters, especially to editors within the periodical publishing industry constitute a shadow archive, a body of work that we can read for its own insights, its robust and consistent critique of the publishing industry and its own poetics which can bear on our reading of Jordan’s angry published poems which also centered the subject position of the slandered Black mother.

For example her 1974 “Memo to Daniel Pretty Moynihan” Jordan invokes her own practice of letter writing and parodies the form of the official memos circulating through the policy circles informed by Moynihan’s work creating one of relatively few

poems that she actually writes in what she would have called Black English, defacing the official narrative with an intimacy where Patrick becomes “Pretty” and Jordan’s critique about the absurdity of Moynihan’s suggestions that Black women should not play the role they have played in the labor force (as if it was a choice) “Clean your own house, babyface,” becomes a teasing, flirtatious suggestion.³³ Framing

Don’t you liberate me
from my Black female pathology³⁴

Jordan’s use of the two nicknames to emasculate Moynihan also reveals a queer form of intimacy that represents the true danger of Black social forms for liberal social policies.

June Jordan is someone who understood ideological racism as an act of violence, actively reproduced through the practices of the publishing industry (on TOP of the actual racist content they continued to publish.) So this is where I am coming from. This is where I come from, this legacy where creation is a queer thing, where mothering retains its deviance. The place where accountability to silenced ancestors and children who public policy says should not be born explodes into voice. This is the problem of poetry.

Chrysalis ultimately never produced the special issue on poetry for which they were awarded a National Endowment of the Arts grant. In fact, while the tenth and final issue of *Chrysalis* did admit to the debate going on between the issues, they certainly did not print any of the critical letters that they received from the poets who were to be

³³ June Jordan. “Memo to Daniel Pretty Moynihan,” in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 83.

³⁴ *ibid.*

responsible for co-editing the issue. The editors describe the engagement as a “dialog” to their readers:

A group of our contributing editors and writers recently engaged us in a dialog on the latent and manifest racism of *Chrysalis* and made us aware of the pain that women of color have felt over the paucity of materials that deal with their lives and give expression to their voices. We have made this concern our top editorial priority, and in fact, one reason for the lateness of this issue has been our determination to confront and right our past deficiency.³⁵

They continue, by inviting readers to fill the pages of future issues, which never came to pass, with investigations of the racism in the feminist movement. I would assert however that part of the reason that *Chrysalis* never regained the level of credibility that would have allowed it to continue to publish is because of the way their supposed dedication to addressing the issue of *racism* could not deal with the issue of *poetry* which was the form of transformation the editors had resisted in the first place. In fact, *Chrysalis's* decision was to manage the critiques launched by the trouble making poets by excluding poetry from the magazine completely. They note that they have stopped accepting poetry in a manner that seems to prove that they have not learned to read the racism of their own narrative. Citing Jamaican poet Honor Moore's encouragement “write poems, women,” they proceed to nullify it, explaining that they are overwhelmed by the amount of poetry they receive and asking “But where is the theory? Where is the hard-hitting, muckraicking investigative reporting? Women write theory...” Conveniently, (speaking of muck to be raked) the editors do not relate their feeling of overwhelm at the amount of poetry to the fact that their poetry editor, Audre Lorde, has long since resigned. Their opening editorial note seems to ignore the article by Barbara Smith that appears later in the issue which is dedicated to Angelina Weld Grimke, Black

³⁵ Chrysalis Collective. “Editorial,” *Chrysalis 10*, 1980, 5.

feminist poet, who according to Smith, white feminists do not want to admit was Black.³⁶ Nonetheless the editors do not want to confront the fact that racism and the issues of space, authority and objectification in relation to poetry seem to be intimately tied up here.

And these issues of racism, which I understand to be a resistance of a dominant narrative that even radical feminists reproduced to the transformative impact of poetry, were by no means limited to *Chyrsalis*. In fact they were not limited to feminist work, and they were not limited to the counter cultural production of the Black Arts movement discussed in Chapter 4: “Difficult Miracle.” These tendencies in Black Arts publishing and white feminist literary publishing were actually manifestations of the intersection of the dominant narrative within each of those oppositional sites at the point of reproduction. So this is about Black mothering again. Experiences like Lorde and Jordan’s experience with the *Chyrsalis* collective were not the exception. They were the norm. Cheryl Clarke mentions a boycott of another lesbian feminist publication *Sinister Wisdom* in a letter to June Jordan in 1982.³⁷ In 1984 W.W. Norton editor Kathleen M. Anderson rejects Jordan’s collection of poems *Living Room* with the critique: “This is the work of a very angry woman. No matter how justified, I just found it all numbing and preachy...”³⁸ It seems that most of the letters and most of the documented conversations between Black feminist literary producers were full of examples of racism within feminist publishing and this is on top of the tokenism and illegibility Black women were

³⁶ Barbara Smith. “Theft” in *Chyrsalis*, issue 10, 1979, 91.

³⁷ Cheryl Clarke. “Letter to June Jordan” Nov. 8, 1982. Box 88, Folder 15, June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

³⁸Letter forwarded from Charlotte Sheedy (Jordan’s literary agent at the time) to Jordan, Box 89, folder 12, June Jordan Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

experiencing within the mainstream publishing industry and the sexism and homophobia we have discussed within the Black Arts Movement. The basic conclusion from these tendencies within the publishing industries and its subcultural counterparts within the white feminist and Black nationalist movements was that Black feminists identifying as part of an intersectional Third World Women's movement needed to create their own institutions. In May 1983 Barbara Smith wrote a letter to the contributors to *Home Girls* (including Jordan and Lorde) explaining why after having production delayed and put off several times by the white feminist Persephone Press, she severed her contract. In this letter she was also able to announce that newly founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, would be publishing the book as its first title.³⁹ Black feminist literary production travels from the threatening anger of a poetic *Living Room* to the alternative of the Kitchen Table. But before we talk about the transformative model of the Kitchen Table as an alternative site for the means of literary production, we also need to talk about two of many important project that were attempted by Black feminists and never carried out. In particular Kizzy Enterprises and the Black Feminist Resource Manual, two projects, envisioned by Black feminist literary produces and never carried out, which through their untimeliness at the time of their conception and their queer survival in these pages, teach us about the contours of the possible within the publishing market and haunt the victories that follow them.

Never Meant: Projects that Did (Not) Survive

³⁹ Barbara Smith. "Letter to *Home Girls* Contributors," May 15th 1983. Box 89, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

Kizzy: Rooted at the Shoreline

From at least 1977 to 1978 in the living rooms of a variety of Black women writers living in the New York Area a constellation of writers including June Jordan, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Patricia Jones, Renita Weems, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy, Marcia Gillespie and others met monthly for pot-luck dinners to discuss the fate of Black literary production and its relationship to social transformation, calling themselves “The Sisterhood.” According to the notes, the first several meetings were in the homes of June Jordan and Alice Walker. June Jordan and Alice Walker were the founding members. Like a cross between a consciousness raising group and a networking circle, “The Sisterhood” was loosely organized and many of the participants seem to have forgotten that it ever existed. While the group was based in a rotating set of New York living rooms, during her travels June Jordan reported possibilities of a Sisterhood in the Bay Area and in Atlanta, other cities with critical masses of Black women writers.⁴⁰ The mindset of the group was diasporic. The notes indicates report backs from the international travels of the different writers in the group, including a report back by Paule Marshall from her trip to FESTAC in Nigeria and a report back from Alice Walker from her trip with a delegation to Cuba. It seems that the Sisterhood served a particular need for fellowship at a particular point in time and was never meant to survive, but luckily someone kept minutes at a least a few meetings and mailed them around, and June Jordan kept her copies. I have never read about “The Sisterhood” in any secondary material or heard about it even anecdotally in any of the interviews I watched or read or in the courses I took on Black women writers. Ntozake Shange claims

⁴⁰ The Sisterhood. “May 15, 1977 Minutes,” Box 101, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

to vaguely remember it.⁴¹ The minutes in June Jordan's correspondence, and an interview that Renita Weems, secretary of the group for a period of time, generously offered me via her very first g-chat conversation, during which she cyber-exclaimed more than once "u r asking me to think back over 30 years ago child!"⁴² Weems describes the Sisterhood as "a very fluid group of women," and thinks that Barbara Smith may have been involved at certain points, but is not certain. "There was no structure, no by-laws and no official joining." According to Weems the group included writers and poets and also included editors, and professors of literature at the local colleges and universities. While Weems remembers that the idea for an autonomous publishing house called Kizzy Enterprises was already "on the table" when a friend of a friend invited her to a meeting it seemed natural to her that "after comparing notes about how hard it is in our profession" such a group would complain about the publishing industry because it impacted all of their work.

According to the notes from the very first meeting, at June Jordan's house on February 6th, 1977 the idea for an alternative publication and press immediately emerged in response to the problems Black women artists and writers face "in seeking publication of their work and surviving from day to day."⁴³ I find it important to document the vision, though unrealized for the periodical and the publishing house because they seem to be the most developed ideas, and they are each instructive in terms of their explicit relationships to several meanings of survival. In the first meeting the Sisterhood

⁴¹ See Ebony Golden, conversation cited above.

⁴² Renita Weems. Interview with the author via g-chat Oct. 9th 2009.

⁴³ The Sisterhood. "Minutes Feb 6th 1977," Box 101, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

imagined their alternative publication as a rival to the *Village Voice* or the *New York Times*, and the intended publishing house would “re-issue important Black works which are out of print.”⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, due to Alice Walker’s role, the example of an out of print and unavailable book that should be re-issued was Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. They also suggested that the press should publish new works and could possibly have a distribution relationship with Random House, where Toni Morrison was, of course, working at the time.

Pat Murray, Toni Morrison and Audreen Ballard were the small group that convened to develop a more specific plan for the alternative press and publication. In that meeting they clarified the audience of the publication that would have to at once “serve as an alternative to the *Voice* or *Times* and simultaneously fill the void for a serious Black literary magazine.”⁴⁵ It should be noted that *Essence* magazine editor and chief Marcia Gillespie was at times associated with the Sisterhood, and that while there was pressure on *Essence* to serve as a venue for Black women’s writing, due to the publishing priorities of the Black male board of publishers, who were committed to maintaining a fashion and beauty market for their advertisers it did not fulfill that function. Clarifying their audience, the visionaries voiced ambition that matched the depth of the need they sought to fill, concluding, in serious revolutionary language that the audience for the publication would be “the oppressed, struggling, victimized masses of America particularly the Black masses of America.”⁴⁶ They also suggested that the publication should be literary in “the broadest sense of the word.” It also notes that

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The Sisterhood. “Update Letter March 15, 1977,” Box 101, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

there is a suggestion that it should have “mass appeal” and therefore “include whatever we need.”⁴⁷ They suggested that the publication should include not only literature and literary criticism and political analysis, but also reports of the treatment of Black writers within the publishing industry and furthermore “survival information,” i.e. “information about and pertaining to the provision of food, clothing, shelter.”⁴⁸ The inclusion of “survival” information within the scope of the literary suggests a critique of the individualism and tokenization of the publishing market, and an understanding of the labor of writers as a practice that should be contextualized within that of the “oppressed, struggling, masses” and which should be collectively supportive. This understanding of the survival potential of writers as collective producers of who should be collectively supported, is akin to the cheap and dangerous socialist mothering that lesbian writers of color theorized when they proclaimed that the children of all Third World Lesbians are our children. This idea of “survival information” as a literary necessity echoes to Jordan’s concept of “survival literature” specifically aimed at teaching children and all people about the false logic of the racist capitalist narrative and enabling them to imagine sustainable alternatives.

The linked projects of the alternative publication and the alternative press come together around survival. The publication should be a resource for the survival of writers and all oppressed people, and the press should be a resource for the survival of works by Black writers that were also never meant to survive. The group envisioning the project was concerned with legacy, and when they decided on the name “Kizzy Enterprises”

⁴⁷ The Sisterhood. “Minutes Feb 20th 1977,” Box 101, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

drawing on the name “Kizzy” which means roots, and which had been used in Alex Haley’s mini-series “Roots” that same year, they “deemed it appropriate in view of the fact that we do consider ourselves here to stay, a group of Black Women to be reckoned with and with an important history and legacy to pass on.”⁴⁹ Although clearly the configuration of the Sisterhood did not last and Kizzy Enterprises never actually came to pass, the context for their vision, a queer desire for survival, participation in legacy and the survival writing certainly did inform the later work of the individuals involved in other configurations. The ideas for funding these ambitious projects were wide ranging, including the possibility of seeking funds from the Deltas Commission on Arts and Letters, affiliated with a Black sorority, and Black corporate funding. The consensus was that “investors should be Black people who really care about the content of these projects, and not profit oriented.”⁵⁰ Even when the women in the Sisterhood were toasting to their perception of the longevity of the project, unlike the Hollingsworth Publishing Group (the male entrepreneurs who founded *Essence*) they did not see it as a venture that would make a profit. Their vision, though unrealized was a space for reproduction in print outside of a profit-oriented market that reproduced Black worthlessness and unsurvivability for Black women writers by devaluing their work and their communities of accountability.

In the end Kizzy Enterprises, a relatively post-capitalist idea, could not survive the capitalist demands on writers. Weems talks about the lack of structure in the group and discussions within the group about the fact that there was not consistency at the meetings and complaints that for some it seemed to be a “social commitment rather than

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

a political commitment” but ultimately when I asked Renita Weems why she thought these projects were never actualized, she reminded me that these were all women with full-time jobs, many of whom were also mothers and that their time was not even always available for their monthly meetings.⁵¹ In the last meeting that I have notes for the women gathered discussed the prevalence of depression in the group and strategies for healing from depression. Weems articulation of the failure makes explicit the capitalist context with which the ideas of the projects and the non-structure of the group were incompatible. When I asked why these things never happened she said, “It takes *capital*. It takes someone who *owns* the idea and sees it all the way through.”⁵² This idea of ownership was contrary to the construction of the group. In fact, Weems left the group after a confrontation around a difference of ideas about the level of structure that the group should have. Having volunteered to be secretary of the group as a 23 year old woman who was at the time unpublished and who mentioned being in awe of the writers gathered, most of whom were older and more established than she was, Weems sent out a note in 1978 expressing concern about the fact that no one had volunteered to host the February meeting and suggesting that this might demonstrate lack of interest in the Sisterhood. Patricia Jones sent a letter which Weems described as “scolding.”⁵³ In the letter, which June Jordan, Alice Walker and others were carbon copied on Jones suggests that Weems might want a more structured group like a CR group or a writing group instead of the Sisterhood which she says, “is not a structured group, there are no profound goals. It is simply a meeting place for a group of Black Women who share

⁵¹ Weems interview.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

certain sensibilities as women, intellectuals, Blacks, etc. Let us be. ...People are free to come and go, to share or not share, to be involved or do other things...The SISTERHOOD exists in all its flaws and marvels. Let it be.”⁵⁴

In contrast to the “we are here to stay” toast at the moment of consensus on the name Kizzy Enterprises, Jones emphasizes freedom to “come and go.” While proposing an alternate means of productions, the Sisterhood, at least as represented by Jones was also resistant to a mandate for a specific form of organizational productivity. Indeed even in 1977 after hearing the presentation from the working group, the Sisterhood clarified their role as a loose association that did not plan to become, Kizzy Enterprises or a Black Poets and Writers Clearinghouse, but rather to be an association of interested people that any of those projects might draw from, based on their own interest. In the notes, disseminated by Pat Murray, she suggests “This would hopefully leave the association free to grow and pursue the all important purpose of unifying us and strengthening our bonds with one another through the sharing of ourselves, our art, our experiences, our food, our love and our ideas.”⁵⁵ In other words the purpose of the Sisterhood was, well, sisterhood. It was envisioned to be a space where literary producers gathered to reproduce their energy, to nurture their relationships to each other and to inspire each other’s ideas, to situate themselves in the context of each other, as an act of reading, recognition. The difference, often frustrating to members of the collective, between what they called social and political commitment, might have been

⁵⁴ Patricia Jones. “Letter to Renita Weems, March 3 1978,” Box 101, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

⁵⁵ The Sisterhood. “Update Letter March 15, 1977,” Box 101, Folder 3. June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

described as a difference between the reproductive labor of literary production and the productive labor of literary production within a capitalist publishing market. However right there, in the zone of the pathologized and sometimes ignored and skipped over reproductive labor lives the excess, the desire, the impossible dreams, somehow seeming possible.

Maybe I should not have used the phrase “in the end” or word “ultimately, ” two paragraphs ago when I was seeking to explain why Kizzy Enterprises never emerged. There is a certain form of undead presence that an idea that never happened retains. Some might say that the goals of the Kizzy enterprises were achieved in different ways, Zora Neale Hurston’s complete body of work is in print, thanks to the diligence of Alice Walker. By the early 1980’s Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was an autonomous publishing and distribution entity that kept its titles in print regardless of sales, and published pamphlets priced at one dollar for mass distribution. Maybe Kizzy was born, maybe she does survive, but there is something to be said for the fact that hardly anyone, even those who were there at the conception can remember what happened. There is something to say for the fact that Kizzy was rooted in a shifting space, ready to defend its own rootlessness from those who would impose unwanted structure. And I think there is something more interesting to do with this queer survival, than to go back and mark The Sisterhood as an origin point for the Black Women’s Writing Renaissance, or for the work that came later in publishing and literary practice. For Kizzy to be a point of forgetting is as significant to our understanding of survival as if it were a revered cherished and oft-mentioned reference point for the authors and thinkers who were involved. Just because we can meet about something and write it down doesn’t make it possible. Just because something is impossible in the terms of capital, doesn’t mean we

don't want it. And just because something does not happen does not mean that it doesn't exist, as a marker of the edge of the world, as a warning, as a shadow as a trace, as a ghost. What if haunting is a form of survival?

In that case we might want to look more closely at the plans that never came to be, what happens to books that are never published. Where does the vision go when the visionaries forget about it and move on to something else? What does the empty space created by desire teach us about the would-be creators, the resilience or deficiency of the collaborators? What would it mean to understand literary producers not only for their products but also for their false starts, their daydreams and their mistakes?

Our Bodies/Our Limits

During the same period of time that the Sisterhood emerged in New York City, the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based Black Feminist Lesbian Socialist which had initially been the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1974, began expanding beyond its local community based organizing in Boston and initiating Black Feminist Retreats for women in the broader NorthEast region. These retreats were explicitly political and included consciousness raising methodologies, socialist self-critique and an explicit connection to organizing with local community based organizations, in prisons and with coalitions. During the retreats in 1978 the idea for a Black Feminist Resource Manual emerged within the group. This is not surprising because in 1977 the co-authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement made it very clear that they saw publishing as a key part of their strategy and purpose as Black feminists:

We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics of other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact

that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.⁵⁶

In addition, as I mention in the introduction, many of these same activists, writers and teacher were instrumental in putting together the first Third World Lesbian writers conference and a number of events centered around the instigation of community, audience and context for writing by lesbians of color and Black feminists in particular. Like the women involved in the Sisterhood, the participants in the Black Feminists retreats were concerned with publishing from the very beginning. At the very first retreat, Akasha (Gloria) Hull noted that “publishing outlets for poets and writers” was a primary concern that should be a discussion point during the retreat. During the fourth Black Feminist Retreat a specific plan to create a publication emerged, however the conversation started on the last day of the retreat. Cheryl Clarke was one of the people charged with the task of creating a newsletter to circulate that would include the thoughts of all of the participants on the retreat and their ideas for the publication. The participants sent their letters to Clarke and she compiled their contents. My understanding of the plans for this publication is gleaned from Barbara Smith’s notes on the retreats, and Cheryl Clarke’s notes on the responses of the varied women, sometimes written directly on their correspondence in her files in the Schomburg Black Gay and Lesbian Archive. Linda Powell’s vision for the “printed resource” that the group planned to produce during the summer of 1978 was that it would be a “workbook” as opposed to a journal, she compared to the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the original news-printed edition

⁵⁶ Combahee River Collective. “Combahee River Collective Statement,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Boston, 1977, p#

of *Our Bodies Ourselves*. She suggested that it should be produced entirely by women in the network instead of via a call for submissions (to “increase efficiency and limit the universe of hassles”) and that they should get funding to print, type and distribute 20,000 to be made available for free and be published by a configuration that she tentatively called “Black Feminist Catalog Publishing Collective” meaning that it would be self-published by the working group.⁵⁷ Powell volunteers to write an article on the history and context of what organizing is and how Black feminists can organize their own health centers, food co-ops, childcare co-ops, study groups, credit unions and so on. Other topics that she recommends are Ageism, Children, Economic Analysis, Religion/Spirituality, literary content, photos, consciousness raising guidelines for Black women, Black feminisms, sexuality, massage, therapy, nutrition and more. Another participant agrees that the printed resource should be tabloid size and format because “this is a size that even women who ‘don’t read’ may feel comfortable with,” revealing an intention to reach a potential Black feminist audience larger than the literary circles that mostly comprised the group.⁵⁸ The same participant suggests that “mother and children,” nutrition, health issues, Black women’s humor, “the herstory of Black lesbians,” and violence against Black women, including violence enacted by Black women are key topics to address.⁵⁹ The summary of what the publication should be reflects these suggestions about format and audience, with the additional specificity that the target audience includes, Black women “in the helping professions” i.e. social workers

⁵⁷ Linda Powell. “Letter to My Sisters in the Black Feminist Network.” April 28, 1978. Cheryl Clarke Papers, Box 2 “Black Feminist Retreats” Folder. Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁵⁸ Cheryl Clarke Papers, Box 2 “Black Feminist Retreats” Folder. Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

and nurses, “pseudo Black intellectuals,” and importantly, “Black women on the last rung of society,” and “adolescent Black women,” two groups to whom the women gathered felt accountable but who were arguably not represented in the composition of the group itself.⁶⁰

Unlike the Sisterhood, this collective had a specific structure, organized committees and a timeline through which to complete this task. The topics were divided into three “accountability affinity groups” with chiefs who would “remind, encourage, nag, harass people to get their materials in on time,” according to the retreat minutes.⁶¹ Most of the topics were covered though most participants had signed up to work on three or four articles. The topics that were not covered by women within the collective reveal the contours of the group itself, Demita Frazier, one of the key organizers of the Combahee River Collective, and a co-author of the Combahee River Collective Statement was charged with finding a young woman to author or co-author the article about young women for the collection and Audre Lorde was tasked with finding someone to write an article about the “Lesbian Welfare Mother.”⁶² There are also no volunteer authors listed for the topics “Motherhood/Children,” “Black Women and Work,” “The Family,” “Incarcerated Black Women,” or “Economics” on the notes, these topics are left open to members of the network who did not attend the 4th retreat. Of course there could be a number of reasons that the volunteer process looked this way and this page of the notes could be from a number of different points in the process of volunteering. But it is telling that while there are three volunteers for the topics, “Black Feminism,” “Black

⁶⁰ Cheryl Clarke and Angela Wilson. “Dear Sisters, July 25, 1978,” Cheryl Clarke Papers, Box 2 “Black Feminist Retreats” Folder. Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Women's History," and four for "Consciousness Raising Guidelines," which we can understand to be key terms and practices of the group, and while internalized issues like "self-hate" and "Women and their body images" are also covered, and even while crosscutting social issues like of "health care" and "violence against Black women" have volunteers, issues that seem more class specific are not.⁶³ And while the group of volunteers may have had reason to expect that the topics that were left blank would be covered by members who were not present at the meeting (and one could hardly expect the volunteers who had already taken on three articles each to take on even more), the articles that members of the collective were asked to seek outside input for demonstrate an honest understanding of the distance between the scope of the proposed resource, the diverse audience for that resource and the composition of the group envisioning the resource. Though more specific than Kizzy Enterprises' founding goal to reach the all of the "oppressed and struggling masses of America," the groups convened around the Black Feminist Retreats also had a vision of their accountability and relevance beyond the self-constitution of their group.

In this way, the publication initiatives of both the Sisterhood and the Black Feminist Retreat participants were different from *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the book after which Linda Powell had suggested the back feminists model their project. As Kathy Davis emphasizes in her study of the complexity and portability of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, creators, their founding collective, made up of mostly white, college educated, middle-class, heterosexual women, blinded by their white privilege actually thought their experiences were representative of the experiences

⁶³ Ibid.

of all women.⁶⁴ While they may have made some efforts to be inclusive around sexuality in early editions, for the most part Davis describes a publication process that is self-centered, where the “self” is a white heterosexual, middle class college educated woman, with a husband to support her while she volunteers to create this publication. As Davis points out, this assumption by the founders that their particular subject position was universalizable to mean all “women” led to problems within the organization down the line, including legal charges that are still pending as to the racism of the founding collective towards the more diverse staff that they hired in later years. In fact, at one point the staff quit en masse with accusations as to the racist and entitled behavior of the collective founders. Davis also points out that although the book has been greatly expanded from its original version, the founding story and homogeneity of the founding group of self proclaimed “ordinary women” becomes complicated with the many translations of the book in use around the world, especially in countries in the global south.

While the participants in the Black feminist retreats had some things in common with the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, including Boston as a locus of power and a consciousness raising process, there were clearly some important differences. Many of the women in this group were single mothers, almost everyone worked full time and while the groups was in some ways as a specific as the BWHBC, mostly comprised of college-educated, Black lower-middle class and middle-class, Black lesbian women, they had no claim or pretense to the privilege of universality. While the Black Feminist Retreat structure sought to address class inequities by giving participants

⁶⁴ Kathy Davis. *The Making of Our Bodies Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

the opportunity on their registration forms to donate money towards travel and childcare for other participants (a practice which participants with jobs in the university such as Audre Lorde and Akasha Gloria Hull consistently contributed to), there were certainly people for whom the idea of travelling, even within the NorthEast to a retreat for a whole weekend, or three days was much less accessible. And while the writing workshops, public readings, classes in women's prisons and public events that the members of this groups created did change the general literary and cultural climate of cities like New York and Boston, there were still many Black women for whom the activities of this collective were completely off the radar. However, the important distinction, demonstrated by this publishing vision is that while their events may have been inaccessible to many Black women, the Black women "on the lowest rung of society," incarcerated women, young women and lesbian welfare mothers *were* on the radar of the collective members. Furthermore the collective members not only believed that they needed to make the book accessible to people who might not be as readerly as they were, or who might be navigating welfare, or still in high school, they also believed that people directly impacted by these experiences should have a role in *writing* the resource on their own behalf. The collective made contact with social service workers in New Jersey and was involved in the creation of a Women's Studies program at Madison Park High School, an underfunded majority Black school in Boston, which is evidence of their commitment toward collaboration across age and class, and their outreach.

I am about to explain why and how this vision was *not* achieved, but it is important to remember that this practice of broad accountability and outreach coming from a specific collective did not die with the blueprints for the Black Feminist Resource Manual. At the founding meeting for Kitchen Table Press in 1981 a group of Black

women, who identified as African American or Afro-Caribbean, created a vision for a publishing house with an accountability broader than their constitution. As Barbara Smith emphasizes on several occasions, they decided to create a press for the work of all women of color, or Third World Women even though Asian American, Latino and Native Women were not represented in their original group, and they fulfilled that vision. While the vision of this collective may have been expansive, it was not universalist. The Kitchen Table Press Collective sought to address a specific need. However, the later achievement of Kitchen Table Press to reach and represent audience of women of color across racial communities, does not nullify the implications of the fact that the Black Feminist Resource guide, imagined to be a free, cross-class, resource that went beyond traditional literary and academic circles was never produced.

Though a September 23rd interim meeting at Audre Lorde's home in Staten Island was circulated in the newsletter to the participants as a time to compile the rough drafts of the different sections of the books, it is possible that many of the participants who were also committed to participating in the fundraising events for the Conditions 5 and also for contributing articles did not meet the deadline.⁶⁵ It seems from the correspondence that the timeline was delayed again due to the focus of the group in early 1979 on organized responses to the Boston Murders, another haunting presence in the Black feminist literary production of the 1980's. The 5th retreat unlike the earlier retreats which were about three months apart, did not take place until a full year after the 4th retreat, after the wave of murders in Boston seemed to have ended. At this closing discussion in addition to a need for submissions for the "Lesbian Herstory" issue of the

⁶⁵ Cheryl Clarke Papers, Box 2 "Black Feminist Retreats" Folder. Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

journal *Frontiers* and a Third World Women's issue of *Heresies* (which just 2 years earlier had been a site of protest for their failure to include women of color), edited by Yvonne (Maua) Flowers, Barbara and Beverly Smith announced the possibility of a book contract with Beacon Press to publish a book on Black feminism, explaining that they have brought the prospect to the group "because of our prior discussions about doing a publication."⁶⁶ Barbara and Beverly Smith explain that they will continue to negotiate with Beacon and keep the retreat group informed. The idea, initiated by the editor in chief at Beacon⁶⁷ was originally for a two author book written by Barbara and Beverly. The Smith sisters however created a counter offer for a more collective approach, and anthology which they compared to Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*. This clearly represents a major transformation in the vision of the publication. Obviously any form of book agreed upon through a contract with Beacon Press would not fulfill the vision of a resource manual produced and self-published and distributed for free by a Black Feminist Collective. The economic implications of that difference are profound, however, as alluded to earlier, the possibility of a volunteer collective creating a publication is a different prospect for working, over-extended Black lesbian women than for middle class white wives with free time to dedicate to such a project. The vision that Barbara and Beverly describe is also different in format from the resource manual in that they see it more as an "anthology" that, like *Sisterhood is Powerful*, documents a movement. A proposal that Barbara and Beverly Smith prepared, which is clearly

⁶⁶ Black Feminist Retreats. "Notes: Closing Discussion Fifth Black Feminist Retreat, Jul 8th 1979." Cheryl Clarke Papers, Box 2 "Black Feminist Retreats" Folder. Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁶⁷ I have not confirmed yet whether this was the same editor in chief who dismissed Jordan's work as the preacher work of a "very angry woman" or not.

informed by the earlier set of topics to be covered in the resource manual seems to seek to do it all. Their 1979 proposal, entitled “Black Feminism: A Resource Book” explains that they intend to have a juxtaposition of approaches and topics as a consciousness raising tactic to reach Black women who would not usually identify as feminist towards the “growth of Black feminist consciousness.”⁶⁸ They explain “We see this work as one which will inspire our movement.”⁶⁹ The Smith sisters make it clear that their “primary reasons for wanting to create an anthology on Black Feminism are political.” The purpose of the book at this level of proposal retains the energy of the earlier idea in that it is intended for a broad audience and is not understood primarily in academic terms, however the outline that the Smith sister’s while diverse and inclusive, seems like more than one book in one. Comprised of 8 sections the proposed book starts by contextualizing Black feminism, and identifying a first wave and a second wave by reprinting documents from the 19th century (by proto-Black feminists including Ida B. Wells et al) and a second wave, which would include manifestos articles and documents from the 1960’s and 70’s and also include Black feminist theory. The section that follows counters the seeming academic style and approach of the first section by seeking to provide anecdotal and experiential material about Black women’s lives including the topics, (self hate, mothering, young Black women, ageism, and self hatred) which were included in the collectively proposed resource manual. The sections seem to oscillate in this way throughout the outline. Section C. entitled “Roadblocks to Liberation” seems

⁶⁸ Barbara and Beverly Smith. “Black Feminism: A Resource Book, July 2, 1979” Cheryl Clarke Papers, Box 2 “Black Feminist Retreats” Folder. Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

like a blueprint of the “myths” section that will later appear in Barbara Smith’s introduction to *Home Girls*, focusing on the debate on feminism within Black communities and the debate on racism within the white feminist movement, followed by a section that centers specifically on the tangible aspects of health, and a section on “the cutting edge of oppression” addressing the groups of women that the collective earlier felt accountable to but could not represent, Black women on welfare, Black women in prison with the addition of Black lesbians (the primary composition of the original group) as an intersecting cutting edge group.⁷⁰ The proposed collection (which it seems would have had to be even longer than this dissertation) would have included a how-to section about the practice of organizing, reprints of important works of Black feminist arts and culture, and a comprehensive bibliography.

My specificity about the vision for the changing publication envisioned within this group is in order to make it clear that such a book was never produced, by this configuration of women, even after many of them went on to be founders members, supporters and authors published by Kitchen Table Press. So although a vision for autonomous publishing was fulfilled, and catering to Beacon Press became unnecessary, the two famous anthologies that these women did publish *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* and *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* represent only certain pieces of this wide ranging outline. The historical documentation of a context for Black Women’s Studies show up in *But Some of Use are Brave* and the literary ambition is mostly fulfilled by *Home Girls*, but important components, such as writing from Black women on welfare and in prison, tangible information about health or about how to

⁷⁰ Ibid.

organize Black feminist institutions and groups remain unachieved, haunting the achieved books with their absence. There is also a change in the scope of audience. Though *Home Girls* was ultimately published by Kitchen Table, and not Beacon it was also designed to speak to a broader audience. In an interview with *Gay Community News* about *Home Girls*, conducted by Nancy Wechsler with occasional questions by (Akasha) Gloria Hull, who sat in on the interview, Smith explains that her intention with *Home Girls* was “so that anyone who didn’t know anything about Black feminism could get some idea of what it is about.”⁷¹ And in fact, though some of the work proposed in the Smith sisters’ outline for the Black Feminism: A Resource Book does show up in the other two anthologies, there is no reason to say that, for example, *Home Girls* is a descendent of the imagined Black Feminist Resource Book. Smith’s origin story about *Home Girls* is that she simply wanted to keep *Conditions 5: The Black Women’s Issue*, in print, which she and Lorriane Bethel were compiling at the same time that the collective Black Feminist Resource book idea was stalling. Inevitably, the two processes influenced each other, but one of these books was never produced. Here we are again, with intention and absence, a desire that we somehow realize is queer because it was impossible at the end of the day. But the queer thing about survival is: the end of the day isn’t the end of the day. When all is said and done, all has not been said or done, because we are still in a process of learning from the implications of what did and did not happen. We were never meant to survive, and yet here we are speaking with dead feminists and unborn books.

⁷¹ Nancy Wechsler. “Thoroughly Black Feminism,” *Gay Community News*. Oct. 29, 1983, 14-16. (14)

To Survive: Barbara Smith and Alexis De Veaux

Needed to Last: Kitchen Table Sacrifices

I have dreamed of completing a collection of my own writing for many years. My work as a publisher was the primary obstacle. –Barbara Smith, Introduction in *The Truth that Never Hurts*⁷²

It is difficult for me not to write a simple triumph narrative for Kitchen Table Press. To be transparent, Kitchen Table Press is my favorite institution that I know to have existed, ever. I have their Freedom Organizing Series Pamphlets in the central place of honor on my altar. Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Toni Cade Bambara, Cherrie Moraga, Matt Richardson, Cathy Cohen, some of the people I admire and identify with most, created, held, labored and sacrificed for that institution. Several of my life decisions, research decisions, publishing decisions, my own decision to be a publisher, have been influenced by my embrace of the Kitchen Table Story as a success story and a model to follow. And it's true. Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith spoke on the phone and said "we need to do something about publishing."⁷³ African American and Afro-Caribbean women met in Barbara Smith's apartment and decided they would create a press, not just for Black women, but for all Third World Women centering the experiences of and voices of lesbian women. They invoked the undervalued energetic economy of the kitchen table, bringing centuries of ancestors without means to the means of literary production into the conversation. And they did it. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press published anthologies, short story collections, poetry collections by some of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century and kept them in classrooms, and

⁷² Barbara Smith. *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race Gender and Freedom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, xvi.

⁷³ Barbara Smith. "Memorial Speech for Audre Lorde." Box 1, Folder 4, June Jordan Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

kept them in print for almost two decades. They distributed important self-published works, and small press runs of work by and for their constituency. Kitchen Table Press created accessible booklets with matching pins to distribute poems, speeches, and creative feminist work with accompanying resources for action for \$1 through their freedom organizing series. They participated in the Feminist Bookfairs all over the English speaking world and helped to nurture an international network of autonomous women of color presses including SisterVision Press, BlackWomon Press, Between Ourselves Newspaper and more. They inspired projects like RedBone Press and BrokenBeautiful Press which exist to this day. Kitchen Table holds a bright space full of pride in the historical memory of radical literary women of color. And the existence of Kitchen Table Press is a victory, because the words of women of color, for women of color imagined as an anti-imperialist community of accountability and not a market, were definitely never meant to survive. But there is something else for us to learn here.

As the epigraph suggests, Kitchen Table Press survived at great cost. Kitchen Table was an activist press. It was not necessarily designed or intended to be a profitable venture. It survived within capitalism not because of a revolutionary socialist structure where many committed feminists of color shared the labor while eating amazing locally grown organic food. It survived at great personal cost to Barbara Smith. In Smith's own words:

By 1984 most of the women who had initiated the Press had moved on. I still believed strongly that it was critical for women of color to have our own writing outlets. Most women of color and lesbian of color periodicals that began during this period published for a few months or years and then disappeared. We had pledged from the outset that Kitchen Table would be an institution, which meant that it needed to last.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Barbara Smith. *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race Gender and Freedom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, xvi.

Unlike the loosely associated Sisterhood project mentioned earlier in the chapter, for Smith, Kitchen Table was an institution that could not be contingent on the continuation of the configuration of women who founded the Press. Smith was more than aware of the short shelf lives of the variety of publications created by and for women of color and lesbians of color who were not considered a viable community because they were not a stable market in the 1980's and 90's. The irony is that Smith's commitment to maintain a space dedicated to the words of lesbian of color writers and to keep those words in print also sacrificed her own work as a writer.

I had never wanted to run the Press...In 1986 however I found myself moving the by-then-bankrupt business to Albany and starting again from scratch. I genuinely believed in the Press's mission and did everything humanly possible to keep it alive. The level of rigorous, unpaid labor it required had a definite impact upon my writing. Much of the writing collected here was written in early morning hours, on weekends, or at the ends of twelve-hour days following my tasks as a publisher.⁷⁵

For a visionary whose primary goal was to make the words of Black lesbians, and lesbians of color available to future generations this was worse than irony. Remember, this is the person who with her sister had compiled letters between Black feminists because "we have no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical."⁷⁶ Smith complains, "It has been frustrating to know that even those who are quite familiar with my work have not read all of it and that new generations of readers have even less access to it."⁷⁷ And while Smith laments the fact that her political and social writings which were scattered in publications, anthologies

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Barbara and Beverly Smith. "I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978," in *Conditions 4*, 1979, 63.

⁷⁷ Barbara Smith. *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race Gender and Freedom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, xvi.

and periodicals before the release of her collection of essays, I want to point out that Smith's fiction writing, with the exception of one short story in *Sinister Wisdom* did not even exist to be scattered.⁷⁸ Even though Barbara Smith had dreamed of being a fiction writer her entire life, she literally has not had time up to the writing of this dissertation to actualize that dream. What happens to the intention unfulfilled, or to invoke Langston Hughes, the dream deferred? While it will be important to discuss the theory of survival that Kitchen Table generates in its praxis for us in the present it is also important to read the legacy of Kitchen Table Press in the context that we have established in this chapter, and that June Jordan and Audre Lorde have articulated for us in earlier chapters: this was a difficult miracle that was never meant to survive. Which is not at all to suggest that Barbara Smith's life is ultimately tragic.

Clearly Smith has played a major part in the Black feminist literary publishing movement and women of color publishing as a whole. But the costs are not only in terms of the distribution of her time. In a letter to Joseph Beam, who she advised in his editing and publication of *In the Life* the groundbreaking Black gay anthology, she talks about commuting 2 hours each way for part time teaching jobs and rolling coins to try and pay the expenses of Kitchen Table Press. As she explains,

I could not earn a living from my work for Kitchen Table, nor from my writing, but scraped by on whatever I earned from speaking engagement and occasional part time teaching jobs.

I think it is important to know the material conditions which many artists, especially ones who are poor, working class, and people of color, share.⁷⁹

And this is still the case, Lisa Moore, publisher at Red Bone Press finances the publication of each of the titles she publishes personally.⁸⁰ A difficult miracle, a miracle

⁷⁸ See Barbara Smith. "The Convert," *Sinister Wisdom* Vol. 19, Winter 1982, 61-72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, xiv.

of love, undervalued labor in this economy towards an energetic ecology to come. Survival. Though Smith was the most consistent and persistent warrior for this vision, she was not the only person to make difficult economic choices in order to fulfill the vision of Kitchen Table Press. Matt Richardson, former Associate Editor at Kitchen Table explains the choice to work for Kitchen Table over a more glamorous publishing job, though the interview for which included packing boxes in a back room with Smith. Turning down a job with United Colors of Benetton Magazine (which was going to pay a great salary and pay for travel between New Hampshire, Manhattan and Milan) was a major sacrifice for Richardson right out of college. Richardson explains the reasons for the decision accordingly:

I made a decision to go with a Black feminist history. I didn't quite understand, but I knew somewhere in the back of my mind that the publishing house was part of something much larger than myself, and that the Benetton magazine would be forgotten and anything I did there would be forgotten but being a part of Kitchen Table Press meant that I would be making history in some way and I decided to go with Kitchen Table and I took that job. And I was Associate Publisher there from 1992 to 1995.⁸¹

As Richardson points out, Kitchen Table Press was a historical venture, and the belief that made Smith prioritize it above her own monetary benefits, her goal to be a writer and all else was related to the poetic intervention that a press accountable to the literary production of women of color meant within an economic context where women of color, and Black women in particular were being deployed in narratives designed to justify and anti-social, social order.

⁸⁰ Lisa Moore. "Publishing" Panel Presentation at Fire and Ink Cotillion, Austin, TX, Oct. 2009.

⁸¹ Matt Richardson, Interviewed by Ana-Maurine Lara on December 18th 2006. (<http://themagicmakers.blogspot.com/2008/02/matt-richardson-interviewed-on-december.html>)

Black Feminist Means: Of Production

While Barbara Smith's labor to sustain Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press overshadowed and delayed her career as a writer, in order to sustain, fund and justify Kitchen Table Press, Smith actually produced an body of work that we can read as a definitional theoretical archive for the practice of Black feminist literary production, which is distinct (though clearly interconnected with) the corporately supported "Black Women Writers" movement or trend. Despite the narrative above, I would assert that Kitchen Table was not merely dropped in Smith's lap in 1986. In fact from 1976 if not earlier Smith was a key theorist investigating the question of what Black feminist publishing meant and what it had to do with economic, social and political transformation.

In 1976 Smith served as the only Black person on the MLA commission on the status of women, a role that she acknowledged as a tokenized position. She sought to recruit other women of color to the commission and to use the position and her access to publishing records and the administrative function of the MLA to theorize a strategic relationship to the publishing apparatus at the same time that she and Alice Walker were teaching some of the first literature classes focusing on writing by Black women in the United States. In addition to her first momentous meeting with Audre Lorde in 1976 after her remark on the MLA plenary that she wondered "whether it was possible to be a Black lesbian feminist literary critic and live to tell about it," Smith also did some important behind the scenes research on the position of Black women writers and critics within the academy and the publishing industry.⁸² In an unpublished manuscript,

⁸² See Audre Lorde's account in Jennifer Abod. *At the Edges of Each Other's Battles*.

marked as a report for the MLA commission on the status of women, Smith lays out some of these first ideas about publishing. After outlining the extreme tokenism within the mainstream publishing industry for Black women, and the almost invisibility of Black lesbian writers, Smith clarifies that her she does not think that the strategic remedy would be to demand that mainstream publishers publish work by Black women:

The immediate solution, however, does not necessarily lie in trying to convince trade publishers to publish Black women writers, although we need to continually pressure them to be accountable. Creating our own autonomous means of producing the works we need is a vital way of affecting change.⁸³

While maintaining her critique of the lack of accountability of the publishing industry for the full diversity of literary producers, Smith rejects a program that would put Black women writers in the position of selling their ideas, and conforming their vision to become legible and accessible within a dominant publishing market. Instead she argues for the creation of an autonomous network of publications and publishing outlets created by and for Black women.

Through publishing ourselves not only do we create the books we need now, but we also have impact in establishment publishing by creating tangible examples of the books we want....I feel strongly that we need to create a variety of our own Black women's newspapers, magazines and presses.⁸⁴

Smith's suggestions demonstrate an understanding of the role that co-optation plays in the publishing industry and a prescience for the way that a movement of Black feminist literary production *would be* co-opted and marketed as a Black women's writing market. By creating autonomous institutions, Black women could create accountable work for their own communities without conforming, with the knowledge that the

⁸³ Barbara Smith Papers. Lesbian Herstory Archives Box 1 Folder 20, 11.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

visibility of that work would make Black women's writing in general more legible to the existing publishing machine.

Smith celebrates the existence of autonomous women of color publications including *Azalea* and *Truth* which she praises for being independent of the mainstream publishing industry and heralds them as the first wave of independent Black feminist publishing. Like the members of *Azalea* who published an issue on self-publishing, Smith notes that the context for self-publishing within a marginalized population is important for the production of works that speak to a particular purpose, and do not aspire to mass appeal within the publishing market.

Self publishing is also an alternative that works and which must be re-evaluated in the light of understanding the nature of cultural oppression. Self-publishing by women is not a matter of "vanity", but occurs because commercial publishers do not perceive the value of our work or disagree with its explicit or implicit political content.⁸⁵

In conversation with (Akasha) Gloria Hull, Smith's understanding of a strategic relationship to literary production exists within the context of a holistic political transformation which acknowledges that the value of the words of Black women and all women is also linked to the value of women in society in general.

Finally the key to changing the situation of Black women in publishing is commitment. Commitment to working for the fundamental social and political changes that will transform the content and process of cultural production in the future and commitment in the present to the freedom of all women and the validity of their words.⁸⁶

For Smith and the political and intellectual community of Black feminists she worked with, Black feminist publishing was a political project which they believed would inspire a transformative Black feminist movement. At the same time, the full self-

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

expression of Black women was also valuable in itself and would *require* a political transformation at the level of the means of production.

The 5th anniversary Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press Catalogue makes this mission clear as the context and relevance of Kitchen Table Press.⁸⁷ Explaining in the first paragraph that “our work is both cultural and political connected to the struggles for freedom of all of our peoples,” and elaborating that in addition to publishing and distributing title, Kitchen table also sponsors cultural and educational events and acts as an information clearinghouse of women of color writers, Kitchen Table shifts the paradigm of what publishing means, and what literary production means, much along the lines of the ideas of the Sisterhood. The Kitchen Table Press materials argue that the creation of cultural space to receive the work and the creation of the world implied by the work is a key part of the process of literary production. In the 1986 and 1988 catalogs, the notes from the publisher emphasize the international reach of Kitchen Table and the multiplicity of the communities of color they serve in the United States, not in order to participate in the universalization of the media that the rising global economy would suggest, but to imply an oppositional majority consciousness.⁸⁸ In 1979 Barbara and Beverly Smith had emphasized the need for work that demonstrated that Black feminism was a viable movement, not an aberrant viewpoint espoused by a clique of individuals. At the same time, the specific itinerary of the Press’s travels actually provide their own critique of US foreign policy, by boasting their travel to and solidarity with readers and

⁸⁷ Kitchen Table Press. *1986 Catalogue*. Latham NY: Kitchen Table Press, 1986. Found in Box 1 Folder 8 “Correspondence with Barbara Smith,” Joseph Beam Papers, Black Gay and Lesbian Archives, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁸⁸ Found in Box 1 Folder 8 “Correspondence with Barbara Smith,” Joseph Beam Papers, Black Gay and Lesbian Archives, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

writers in Cuba and Nicaragua in particular, the very PR of the Press critiques the hostile actions against these two countries as sites of recent socialist revolutions.

At the same time, the publicity materials of the press also served as their own educational materials about the status of the publishing industry in the united states and the world. In the 5th anniversary edition of the catalog, the introductory text points out that “Only four U.S. commercial publishers, among the hundreds that exist are autonomously owned and operated.” And that “All branches of the commercial media, including book publishers are tied to multi-national corporations whose bottom line is profit, not the production of literature and information for a racially and sexually diverse, multi-cultural and multi-class society.” Toward this end, of educating their readers about the significant political role of the alternative press, Kitchen Table distributed a letter entitled “Alternative Publishing Makes a Difference,” to university faculty and teachers explaining the limited imagination resultant in the profit motive of commercial presses and the significant role of alternative publishers which “are willing to take financial risks to support” books with literary merit and social relevance. The letter suggested practical measures for supporting alternative presses, including using alternative press books in courses, and making sure they are carried in campus libraries. Again, taking an oppositional majoritarian stance, Kitchen Table encouraged teachers to support alternative presses in general, for the sake of a democratic intellectual conversation, not just Kitchen Table Press books specifically.

Not surprisingly, Smith articulates this relationship between the political value of life for Black women and the means of literary production through the language of survival. In a 1979 article for a communications anthology, Smith reflect on the survival of the press, pointing out that “If any one had asked in 1980 whether books by women of

color could sell or a press that published only work by and about women of color could *survive*, the logical answer would have been ‘no.’”⁸⁹ She then goes on to explain how through an autonomous movement of teachers, writers, and activists of color who have been making the literary work of women of color visible, not Madison Avenue. This statement disrupts an origin story for the Black women’s writing renaissance that would start in the office of Toni Morrison at Random House, and instead emphasizes an unauthorized activist movement. Chronicling the victories of the press and its impact on the creation of other autonomous women of color presses in Canada, England and India, the article ends returning to the “never meant to survive” instant of triumph at the beginning, “We have been able to come this far because we have not been afraid to defy white male logic, which will always tell us no, when our hearts and spirit tell us *yes!*”⁹⁰

Here Smith frames the existence of a means of production accountable to and organically supported by a movement of women of color intellectuals and cultural workers as an intervention into what she calls a white male logic or racist narrative about what is possible. The Kitchen Table triumph narrative is important for that intervention even while a closer view of the potential lessons to be learned from the costs and sacrifices of the process of creating the Kitchen Table as an institutions must be a part of our inquiry. In addition, it is important to follow the lead that Smith takes in her contextualization of Kitchen Table as part of a movement and to examine the smaller initiatives and institutions of Black feminist literary production as their own alternative demonstrations of the impossible in action.

⁸⁹ Barbara Smith. “A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press” in *Communications at the Crossroads: The Gender Gap Connection* eds. Ramona Rish and Donna Allen. Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1989, 202.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Forgotten Flamboyance: Alexis De Veaux

The name “Alexis De Veaux” is not written in lights. In fact, it is not even consistently spelled in encyclopedias. Some references insert a space between De Veaux and some references leave it out, some misspell it altogether. As I have researched this project I have had to explain who Alexis De Veaux is to people who are familiar with the other three figures that I focus on in this dissertation. De Veaux’s most accessible work is *Warrior Poet*, her comprehensive biography of Audre Lorde. Her close friend and former colleague at *Essence Magazine* Cheryll Greene explains that this is because De Veaux chose integrity over institutional acceptability every time. “She was brave. She was committed to her art, even if it meant going without basic needs, like healthcare,” Greene remarks.⁹¹ The evidence would support this conclusion. For example, in her dissertation “Concealed Weapons: Contemporary Black Women’s Short Stories as Social Change Agents, 1960’s to the Present” De Veaux ends her first chapter with an attitude, concluding that Black women’s contemporary short stories are social change agents because:

“When we speak and write it, we become the history of who we know we are. In your face.”⁹² De Veaux herself explains her choices to privilege behind the scenes publishing work and autonomous small scale projects through an economic analysis: “By the time Reagan came to power, opportunities for Black women writers and artists, began to dry up in drastic kinds of ways. Publishers say ‘we have enough Black books.’

⁹¹ Personal Conversation with the author, Fall 2008.

⁹² Alexis De Veaux. *Concealed Weapons: Black Women’s Contemporary Short Stories as Social Change Agents, 1960’s-Present*. SUNY Albany PhD dissertation (on file at Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.)

The NEA becomes explicitly conservative.”⁹³ De Veaux uses the language of survival to describe the tactics that she and other Black feminists who created their own alternative means of production used during that time period: “We did what we had to do to survive. If white publishers wouldn’t publish us, we would publish ourselves. Our resistance to being completely silenced was to be deeply creative. We are going to be here.”⁹⁴

To De Veaux her choices may have seemed pragmatic, but I want to emphasize the point that this is a bold person, someone who ended the first chapter of her dissertation with the sentence “In your face.” I choose to describe De Veaux using the word that she and her collaborator Gwendolen Hardwick used to describe their radical performance collective, “The Flamboyant Ladies.” Flamboyant. First an architectural term describing the construction of castles with framing blades, the colonial understanding of flowering trees, the Oxford English Dictionary remembers that flamboyant meant many things before it meant us, those of us who do not know better than to hide our brilliance, the transformative ones, burning like hell as we walk the earth. This meditation examines the way that Black feminism survives in the queer bodies of work, bone, muscle and breath that remain, invoking the understudied work of the *Flamboyant Ladies*, a performance group created by De Veaux and Hardwick in their living room. I situate the forgotten work of the Flamboyant Ladies, who created radical t-shirts, performance pieces, salons and a full day presentation about the impact of the nuclear moment on Black communities in the 1970’s as a haunting, illegible precedent for the more contemporary work of UBUNTU and BrokenBeautiful Press, two

⁹³ Interview with Alexis De Veaux, Nov. 16, 2007.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

initiatives based in Durham, North Carolina that similarly use embodied poetics to respond to systemic violence, against women of color in the wake of the Duke Lacrosse and Dunbar Village rape cases and the torture and sexual assault of Megan Williams.

Seeking an embodied intergenerative queer poetics, a relationship between ancestors, elders and youth that survives by rejecting the social reproduction of oppression, rejecting the assumption that queerness and intergenerationality are mutually exclusive especially given the mandate that some of us are criminalized when we reproduce life and create family, I take Flamboyance, that dangerous, queer stance, as a trajectory for the livelihood of Black feminism, taking seriously the (often cancerous) impact of the unceasing labor of and punishment for radical feminist work on the bodies of queer elders and ancestors including De Veaux. After decades of confrontational work in the publishing industry, angering the advertisers at *Essence*, visiting and writing about Black revolutionary struggles all over the world, and hosting diasporic writing workshops and salons in her home with no stable healthcare, De Veaux had multiple ulcers. This is a work towards healing and survival. Healing and survival are queer methodologies for oppressed communities because we were never meant to survive. This is a collaborative offering of our bodies across time to the intergenerational work of performing, and making possible, the world we deserve.

Flamboyant Ladies co-founder and radical Black lesbian feminist Alexis De Veaux explains that in the 1980's, Black women artists cannot support themselves with grants and publishing contracts from a lustful consuming public fascinated by the glamour of the self-articulation of Black and feminine subjectivity. The novelty has worn off. It is no longer interesting that someone can be a woman and a Black person at the same time. In fact, by 1981 the Moynihan's matriarchy thesis has become law and the

danger of Black women has become apparent. Reagan has by this time, coined the term “welfare queen,” that Black woman who threatens the new neoliberal economic order by the criminal act of bearing Black children, expendable and expensive drains on an increasingly anti-social economy, that Black woman who threatens the logic that flesh and labor have differential values by loving Black children as if they were priceless, that Black woman who threatens the anti-social norms of late capital by raising and mentoring children that will not consent to the terms of the economy, this crazy Black woman who lives as if housing, and education, and food were community concerns. That crazy Black woman, with the nerve to survive *and* to wear bright colors, big hair and a loud mouth while doing it. She is not an intersectional example, she is a problem.

The intersection is not a radical sexy place of queer and salient knowledge production at this point. The intersection is the place where June Jordan, Gwendolen Hardwick and Alexis De Veaux witness the violence of the New York City police occupying Black neighborhoods in Brooklyn, as Jordan details in her letter complaining about the racism of the *Chrysalis* collective. That intersection has much more in common with the intersection that Kimberlé Crenshaw actually described, the traumatic scene of a violence that neither the law or the existing anti-oppressive theory could fully address, than with the logic of accumulation that we use to market ourselves as increasingly complicated scholars in an academic industrial complex primed to consume our difference.⁹⁵ Lest we forget what we face, let us remember that what these Black feminists created at their particular juncture has something to teach us, now.

⁹⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” 1989 *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 480

I never knew that waking up every morning with a new idea and ironing it on to a t-shirt for two years was an apprenticeship. I didn't know that navigating the issue of socially transformative childcare with the idea that queer folks should dance and prisons should be abolished forever was a vigil I participated in towards the survival of my elders, I didn't know that enacting healing as performance with a women of color led group of survivors of gendered violence was much older news than I could have imagined. I thought that we were, to quote Joseph Beam, "making ourselves from scratch."⁹⁶ Our stories are not recycled and distributed on the wings of capital, so I became an eclectic priestess, ritualizing cotton, stickers, and the word yes, experimenting in community with how our needs became analysis. I had no idea that I was an initiate in a practice called Black feminism because the mode of Black feminism that I practice, that we practice in my community is the forgotten, unpublished part of the story. But here we were speaking the lines, setting the scene, dancing the navigation home.

This is the only way I know how to tell you about the experience I had one day in the files of the African Ancestral Lesbian Archive, files of an archive that no longer exists, held in the all volunteer run brownstone of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. My hand brushed across a flyer, a woman and then that same woman printed twice, partially hidden by the other's hair, because it was big hair wild hair, familiar hair, from my standpoint. Huge earrings, and full open mouths, the Flamboyant Ladies were hosting a performance to benefit "No More Prisons" a campaign by women to stand in

139-67 (1989). Reprinted in *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique* 195-217 (2nd ed., edited by David Kairys, New York: Pantheon, 1990).

⁹⁶ Joseph Beam. "Making Ourselves from Scratch," in Essex Hemphill ed. *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*. RedBone Press, 2007, 335-336. (Originally published in 1991.)

solidarity with women in prison followed by a “women’s only” party with free childcare. I didn’t breathe as I turned to the next sheet with those same mirror image women thanking a community for supporting the daylong festival and t-shirt making initiative they had held about the question of how the anti-nuclear movement impacted Black communities in the United States. I found an invitation to a traumatic mythic performance designed to ignite healing by examining the sound, feel and timbre of embodied oppression. Alexis De Veaux, who held writing workshops and instigated public performances and self-published anthologies in her living room, laughed on the phone when I finally got up the nerve to call her up and ask her how and why she did everything, but I nearly cried, because she was never meant to survive. And I had never expected to make sense.

Looking at the work of the Flamboyant Ladies, an eclectic and radical Black feminist performance group that has been almost completely forgotten by Black feminist scholars and performance scholars alike, and meditating on the queer way in which that work survives, unintentionally and often unknowingly in the lives of some other, loud, belligerent creative, underfunded radical Black women who came late to the game of Black feminism, we have the opportunity to meditate on survival as a performance. Survival as a queer echo, a manifest lust in the bodies and work of those of us, who were never meant to survive. I think that this examination is especially crucial in this political and economic moment, which like the Nixon and Reagan eras is characterized by the gutting of social services, the channeling of huge amounts of public funds to the private sector and of course military interventions around the world in the name of so-called democracy. If we would survive, in any material sense, we must take heed of the strategies enacted by these earlier social actors.

So first let us remember that performance is not a stable mode of social reproduction, in fact, like the criminalized Black mother, performance can be policed, paid, begged and pleaded with to re-establish the terms of the status quo, but it cannot never be trusted to do so. Homi Bhabha makes a famous distinction between the performative and the pedagogical in the imagination of the social and political unit of the nation and reminds us that performance is queer, that is non-reproductive.⁹⁷ And as we know, the vast majority of performances remain undocumented, like classrooms, moments of possibility that you either witness, hear about after the fact, or miss completely. I have never seen any of the performances of the Flamboyant Ladies, and I never will. And before I was born all the Black feminist organizations had fallen apart. And Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Gloria Anzaldua, Barbara Christian, Pat Parker...so many of my strongest feminist ancestors who would barely be elders by now are dead. Never meant to survive. But the queer thing is they do, and that survival is performative and *it is happening right now*. This performance of survival, the survival itself, protests and makes visible the conditions that make it unlikely, but it also threatens those conditions with the fierce reminder that, as Wahneema Lubiano has said, "Power is never complete." This form of survival demands a queer rethinking of time and space, a queer reframing of body and memory, a diasporic inhabitation of the temporality of trauma, that our gaps in knowing, our post-dispersion decalage does not mean that our herstories are not everywhere waiting. This is research and it is also ritual because it requires action and faith.

⁹⁷ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

While Barbara Smith and others worked hard to make sure that Kitchen Table would survive as an institution I want to read the work of Alexis De Veaux and her collaborators as diasporic performance in as much as they produced transformative space in the presence of the anti-social empire as represented by the domestic and foreign policies of the Reagan Era. As performance in the sense that Bhabha distinguishes it, this interrupts the national pedagogy of Black mother as bad teacher, of Black woman as producer of worthlessness. These performances, as alternative practice of literary production also challenge our readings of the modes of productions we have grappled with earlier. What if Kizzy Enterprises was not a failed intention, but rather a performative intervention? What if the Black Feminist Resource Manual was a performance that revealed the limits of the Black Feminist Retreat participants to themselves? (How) Do performances survive properly, if they do not survive as property?

Gaptooth Continuity

Take the case of Alexis De Veaux's writing collective, The Gaptooth Girlfriends, convened in Alexis De Veaux's living room. De Veaux opens the introduction to the Gaptooth Girlfriends: The Third Act, an anthology self-published by the Third Act Press with a meditation on survival.:

CONTINUITY. The will to survive. Believe in the unseen. Sheer and delicate. Belief in self. In another Black woman. A risky idea. To support it by paying for it. Unite to ignite. To know that we are doing it. Got to do. To be a Movement: build it in stages: like a bridge. Be one/a bridge. Change the world. And take our lives and make them better. Thrust them forward.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Alexis De Veaux. "Introduction" in Gaptooth Girlfriends ed. *Gaptooth Girlfriends: The Third Act*. New York: The Third Act Press, 1985, 14.

The passage is performative. Continuity defined or deconstructed barely gets an uninterrupted sentence. Commands are the closest thing. Otherwise we have subjects alone, infinitive predicates, a floating implied “you” for the reader. This passage causes the reader to question whether continuity is real or a trick. And if survival is the way we become bridges to each other, based on the risky practice of investing in Black women (clearly aligned on as a risky practice in the punitive welfare queen discourse of the 1980’s), where is the forward that we are thrusting ourselves towards with these consecutive, but punctually cut off bridges?

When I asked Dr. De Veaux about her motivation to begin teaching writing seminars in her living room in the 1980’s she described it in terms of not only the economic impact of Reaganomics, but also the rupture wrought by the AIDS epidemic:

We lost so many artists of color during that period of the AIDS epidemic. I lost so many friends. It was about making a decision to be alive. When you’re doing these things, the hindsight is wonderful.

When you’re in the thick it you know that you are just trying to stay you.⁹⁹

Survival on De Veaux’s terms is a decision to be alive in the moment, despite a social narrative of death. Continuity in relationships is not something to be taken for granted. Clearly dispersed Black communities whether enslaved or economically compelled to migrate do not experience continuity of relationships all the time. The deaths waged in Black communities during the first wave of the AIDS epidemic further threatened the idea of intergenerational continuity. De Veaux responded to this wave of death by creating an intergenerational diasporic space in her apartment. In the introduction to the Third Act, the only anthology produced by the collective with an

⁹⁹ Interview with Alexis De Veaux.

ISBN number, and therefore the most accessible one in the present, she describes the participants of the workshop as “Women of all persuasions: a community of Africans. We come from South Carolina New York City Puerto Rico South Africa and blood-places in between.” Disdaining to put commas between the geographic locations that the “Africans” in the workshop might be from, DeVeaux performs diaspora, the possibility of bridging these spaces through the relationship building that goes on in the workshops. It is also clear however that though the workshops took place in De Veaux’s apartment, the Gaptooth Girlfriends context was a space to move through. According to De Veaux, “they went on without me and formed a performance group,” which seems fully appropriate because De Veaux described the workshop as a place to “explore writing as a catalyst for change.”

Survival Unbound: *Blue Heat*

Continuity then, for De Veaux was not necessarily bound. De Veaux took an explicitly unbound approach to the subject in *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings*. Published in 1985, after De Veaux had already published collections with Doubleday and Harper and Row when she decided to create this publication, in the form of a blue folder with typewritten poems and photocopied drawings, through the self-created Diva Publishing Enterprises. In her poetic preface she makes it explicit. “This book is for independent publishing. Is for the women who came before me. And for love. And for faith found.”¹⁰⁰

She continues “This book is for this book. And the sheer naked pleasure of rebellion.” Independent publishing was important to De Veaux who refused to cater her

¹⁰⁰ Alexis De Veaux. *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings*. New York: Diva Publishing Enterprises, 1985, 5.

art to a mainstream market or to consent to the dominant channels of literary distribution. When I interviewed her she said that her stance in the 1980's was, "I will make my own books if publishers don't want my own books and I will sell them in my house, I will sell them on streetcorners."¹⁰¹ De Veaux's relationship to space is one of her major performative interventions. For De Veaux, the same interviewer who focused on June Jordan's declaration that "poems are housework," the living room was a place for holding salons, writing seminars and selling books if necessary. This is a performative take on the idea of Kitchen Table Press, which for most of its existence was able to actually afford its own space, and therefore not operate out of someone's house. Space is also a key element to the performance that is *Blue Heat* which has a table of contents but which dares you to rearrange the loose poems into your own reading experience. In her poem "Rooms" she suggest that her radical relationship to space might be related to her mother's spatial practice:

My mother
manipulated space
what you call
change the house
around
that is, the contents
ever so often
taught me this skill:
try on these rooms
one has got to fit.¹⁰²

This small poem on its own 8 by 11 sheet of paper is itself a manipulation of space, the implied "you" addressing both the speaker/daughter in the poem and the

¹⁰¹ Interview with Alexis De Veaux.

¹⁰² De Veaux. *Blue Heat*, 8.

reader suggests that this collection of poems might be a set of rooms to try on, suggesting similarly to Jordan's *Living Room* that a context transnational enough to include Atlanta and Nicaragua is also a domestic space, and therefore not only that the domestic and foreign policy of racism were interconnected, but also that the possibility of intimacy between sheets of paper passed hand to hand in a folder had geopolitical implications as well. De Veaux organizes space in her poem performatively, towards accountability. In her poem "But: Who Got the Wings in Atlanta" she discusses the Atlanta child murders in the shifting voice of the negro spiritual "All God's Chillun Got Wings" a simple listing of the names of the murdered children and their ages, journalistic coverage of the murders of the two girls whose murders no one was ever charged with, and the voice of the questioning poet, the outraged witness. Centering the list of the dead and keeping the repetitive "who" "got" and "what if" at the left De Veaux suggests that the speaker would interrupt the repetition of death but cannot.¹⁰³ In "One Letter Alphabet Song" she uses space even more intentionally to interrupt the pedagogy of global capitalism. An approximation looks like:

A: my name is Africa
there hasn't been much
rain fall in twen ty two countries
in ovah a decade
the desert is
ad van cing

¹⁰³ De Veaux, *Blue Heat*, 21-23.

and we
are star
v i n g¹⁰⁴

Survival. To be a bridge. June Jordan said that children's literature had to disrupt the narrative that shared accountability for the livelihood and access to food of the people on the planet was "unrealistic."¹⁰⁵ Using the child's pedagogical alphabet game, De Veaux, seeks to portray the simplicity and the horror of the situation. Is "a" also for accountability? De Veaux, offers an inverted broken down reflection of the letter a, as if in a dirty reflecting pond, (but that would imply the presence of water of which there is none.) De Veaux's rage is larger than typescript. The "A" before the colon is written into the manuscript in pen. Larger and wider than life, it provides yet another reflection, this time along a diagonal plane against the common sense learning of the basics of the American standard version of the English language. That to paraphrase Jordan's angry letter, *does not fail my people by accident.*¹⁰⁶ The distorted reflection of the English language is a ground for the production of diaspora as an ethical relationship. By 1985 De Veaux was not working consistently for *Essence* and in fact, Cheryl Greene remembers that their diligence in promoting an unlikely theme of articles on diasporic solidarity had stalled because after printing an article on the invasion of Grenada in 1983 that showed an image of an American soldier standing on the neck of a Grenadian child, advertisers had finally said, that's enough, that's un-American, we're

¹⁰⁴ De Veaux, *Blue Heat*, 32.

¹⁰⁵ See discussion of Jordan argument against realism in Chapter 1: Survival an Intervention into Meaning.

¹⁰⁶ See Jordan, "Letter to Adrienne Rich," above.

pulling our ad.¹⁰⁷ Talk about the reflection that you don't want to see. Black American soldiers deployed to destroy the first Black socialist republic in the Americas on the pages of your favorite beauty magazine, next to an ad for how to disguise a blemish by bleaching your skin. Once advertisers pulled their accounts the actions of the De Veaux and Greene were more closely policed. One way of understanding De Veaux's relationship to *Essence* is as a strategic performance. If you read *Essence* between 1979 and 1983 you can see the juxtapositions that seem almost didactic. Alongside travel, beauty and gourmet food articles that encourage Black women, always addressed with a normalizing gaze as if they are middle class, are encouraged to participate in the new global economy as exploitative tourist, voyeur and consumer of raw materials (like Grenadian spices), is the unlikely article by Alexis De Veaux about how Black Americans had better stand against U.S. interventions into Haiti and welcome Haitian refugees as kin. The approach is repetitive mimicking and interrupting the pedagogical repetition of ads that normalize Black consumption and complicity in an imperialist relationship.

Immediately following "One Letter Alphabet Song" in *Blue Heat* is a poetic performance called "Modern Day Living is Hard on Black Women" that seems to distort and play with the mission of her workplace, the full name of which was *Essence Magazine: For Today's Black Woman*. Whereas *Essence* take a moralizing yet intimate tone with its readers, guiding them on how not to be matriarchs, how to be homemakers, and most importantly to look like worthy homemakers despite working. In *Black English* De Veaux writes about the reality of violence within Black communities illustrating the everyday impact of the repetition of rape

¹⁰⁷ Personal conversation with Cheryll Greene, Fall 2008.

You could be coming from a meeting
You could be wanting to help a dude get straight
You could be in the vestibule of your apartment building
You could be sleep Sunday morning in your mommas house
in Philly
some teenage boys come in rape you
rape your momma house
they Black you Black¹⁰⁸

and talks head on about the experiences of Black women with the repeated
suggestion “You could be” as in

You could be expecting your check
phone bill overdue
You could be got to fight of
White man and the Black man too¹⁰⁹

articulating the mundane life of the “modern” Black woman, and explaining that
being a modern woman is not a glossy seamless experience and does not exempt one
from the gendered violence within Black communities. In distinct contrast to the
tendency of *Essence* and other magazines to create false distance between the
experiences of trauma and poverty of their potential readers the chilling closing
sequence of De Veaux’s performance is percussive, seeking to thump out accountability
from silence

You could be 15
You could be 15 on a school day
You could be sitting in a grown mans lap
in the morning in the park
You could be feel his thing press your butt
You could be sleeping in Penn Station
You could be wanting some love: syncopated
as sucking: want it to swallow you
in a juice of surprise
You could be need your mother
You could be aint talking to her

¹⁰⁸ De Veaux, *Blue Heat*. 33.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

You could be aint talking to your best friend
You could be need some good sex regular
You could be got too many dependents
You could be cant go to the hospital
who gonna pay for it
You could be dont want to die
You could be don't want to live
You could be killed that baby for crying
You could be killed that baby for crying so much
You could be time to grab somebodys hand
You could be better get a hold of yourself.

raising the specter of teenage sexuality, of welfare mothers, of homeless women, of lonely traumatized women, of young mothers abuse and even kill their infants from within isolation and despair. Down and down repeating the possibility, the suggestion that it “could be” you in a manner that adds depth to counter the superficial media representation of these instance of deviance pathology and blight that must be blamed on social degeneracy, not the lack of social support. These are not the women in *Essence* magazine. These women are not supposed to be understood as properly modern, or as the audience of a magazine like *Essence* but they are, thoroughly modern and alienated. De Veaux’s repeated “you could be” demands identification, how many missed paychecks, or bad days, or experiences of rape and abuse would it take “today’s Black woman” to get to this place of needing to “grab somebodys hand” the penultimate insertion of present time into the space of the poem, “could be time to grab somebodys hand” buildings on the insistent identification with a request for community.¹¹⁰ It is for a community to lift up the person descending with these “you could be’s” into isolation and harmful desperation, and it is not the uplift narrative about “today’s Black woman” that will do the lifting. It is honesty about the ways that “living is hard” that distinguish what

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 34.

survival will take. Remember? De Veaux told us, *Belief in self. In another Black woman. A risky idea. To support it by paying for it.* What are the implications the “who gonna pay for it” logic of neoliberalism. What is the psychological impact of understanding that you are not thought to deserve access to sex, peace, time, health? This nightmare poem is hopeful, taking the weight of all the “you could be’s” into a final “you could be better” sharing the “better” with a colloquial command “better get a hold of yourself” where “yourself” is a collective designation. In 1983 in *Essence Magazine* Audre Lorde said, *We can learn to mother ourselves.* Survival is a queer thing.

Change Itself Changes

And the forms through which Black feminism survives are contested. This dissertation seeks to present a narrative in which survival is revealed as poetic and queer, and the survival of Black feminism into a context in which is still very much needed as an intervention against violence is at stake in our reading. But the other important point about this dissertation is the fact of what does not survive here. The artifacts we have, the published exceptions whose papers have recently been archived, those who are still around to talk with me about what happened, were made possible, made possible and legible by a knowing so deep, a discourse made up of countless publications, with small audiences and no ISBN numbers. Countless conversations that never resulted in one printed word. Countless plans and propositions that proved themselves impossible or at least untenable. One way of telling the story of how we were blessed with a Black women’s writing canon is to believe that New York Marketability made Black women’s literature a possible commodity and to believe that Toni Morrison, as she insists to June

Jordan, is not a poet, but look again at what she says herself in the unlikely pages of *Essence Magazine*:

“You had this uncanny ability to shape an untenable reality, mold it, sing it, reduce it to its manageable, transforming essence, which is a knowing so deep it’s like a secret. In your silence, enforced or chosen, lay not only eloquence but discourse so devastating that “civilization” could not risk engaging in it lest it lose the ground it stomped. All claims to prescience disintegrate when and where that discourse takes place. When you say “No” or “Yes” or “This and not that,” change itself changes.”¹¹¹

Survival is poetic. And it is happening. Now.

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¹¹¹ Morrison, “A Knowing So Deep,” 230.

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Biography

Alexis Pauline Gumbs was born in Summit, New Jersey on June 12, 1982. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from Barnard College at Columbia University in 2004. During her time as a graduate student at Duke University she was the guest editor of “This Instant and this Triumph: Women of Color Publishing” a special issue of *American Book Review* and published several articles including “The Black Feminine Domestic: A Counter-Hueristic Exercise in Falling Apart,” in *(Un)Gendering the Transatlantic: A Special Issue of Symbiosis*. “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: A Dialogically Produced Audience and Black Feminist Publishing 1979 to the “Present” in *Gender Forum: Black Women’s Writing Revisited*. “The Life of A Poem: Litany for Survival in Post-Lacrosse Durham” in *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy*. “Degalar Magalama: A Blue Airmail Letter”, *Macommere: Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* and “Slavery is a Language: A Review of Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*.” *Obsidian, Special Issue on Ghana*.

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