



---

In the Realm of Our Lorde: Eros and the Poet Philosopher

Author(s): Lyndon K. Gill

Source: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2014), pp. 169-189

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.1.169>

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.1.169?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.1.169?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Feminist Studies, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Feminist Studies*

JSTOR

LYNDON K. GILL

## In the Realm of Our Lorde: Eros and the Poet Philosopher

I HAVE AN EMBARRASSING CONFESSION. I was not able to attend Hunter College's momentous celebration of Audre Lorde's life and work, held in anticipation of the twentieth anniversary of her shaking free of flesh.<sup>1</sup> But that is not my confession. Undoubtedly, like many of you who could not be present physically for the *séance royale* that was at once a commemoration and an invocation of the original "sister outsider," I committed nonetheless to show up virtually. That I could commit to showing up at all was because the technology-savvy organizing committee had generously decided — perhaps inspired by Lorde's distaste for exclusions — to offer the conference through a livestream broadcast.<sup>2</sup> We are coming closer to the confession now. I readied myself well in advance of the day to experience what I could of the fête through a computer screen. Yet by the morning of the gathering, not only had it completely slipped my mind, but other mundane obligations — a faculty meeting, a

- 
1. On October 12, 2012, the Women and Gender Studies Program at Hunter College — one of the constituent institutions of the City University of New York — hosted a celebratory one-day symposium on the life and work of Audre Lorde, followed by special screenings of films about the warrior poet. The cluster of articles on Audre Lorde in this issue of *Feminist Studies* commemorates that gathering.
  2. See the livestream broadcast, "A Celebration of Audre Lorde," October 12, 2012, from the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, <http://new.livestream.com/roosevelthouse/audrelorde>.

promised tea with a favored student — conspired to fill in the space I had cleared to bring the celebration of Lorde to one small corner of Texas.<sup>3</sup> For any black, queer, Caribbean American intellectual — let alone one as committed as I am to Lorde's vision for our collective future regardless of how we look, where we live, or who we fuck — it is painfully embarrassing to admit that I nearly lost the chance to honor Audre on a haphazard Friday morning.

But in these moments when I feel most lost, my mother has a way of reorienting me, of finding me, and walking me home. I am sure among black mothers this is quite unremarkable, but the steady hand outstretched still feels just a touch miraculous. And here again, a generosity extended via technology — a generosity of spirit that I hope is my inheritance — intervened to cure my absent-minded distraction: my mother sent me a text message. Having committed herself to showing up for the symposium despite whatever might be left undone at work, my mother — Donna Veronica Gill, a labor activist who has worked for Hunter College as an administrator for as long as I can remember — recognized that there was more important work to do that day. In her text to me, she very unceremoniously asked if by chance I was watching the livestream at that moment (perhaps presuming I had stepped away from the computer, but hardly imagining I might have forgotten the day's events entirely) because there was a professor from the University of Pennsylvania speaking who I had to hear. Distraught at my forgetfulness, but curious about this professor who had brought me to my mummy's mind so pointedly, I quickly tuned in to the livestream broadcast and could not have been happier to see that, although she had gotten the details confused (the speaking professor was from Temple University, not the University of Pennsylvania), my mother was, as per usual, quite right. Aishah Shahidah Simmons, newly minted adjunct professor of women's and LGBT studies at Temple University, was in the middle of delivering a presentation that one might best describe as an incantation (the text of her talk follows this article). Simmons called Lorde into that room

- 
3. This would have been a kind of virtual return to Texas for Lorde, who — according to a photograph of her with Meridel Lesuer and Adrienne Rich — visited Austin in 1980 to cofacilitate a writing workshop. We have K. Kendall to thank for an image of this occasion, which can be viewed at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/42401725@n00/820298895>.

and sat her spirit down smiling among the living. Sister Aishah is a dear friend and mentor; this black lesbian meditating warrior artist pulled me beneath her iridescent wing while I lived in Philadelphia. Filmmaker, activist, guide, Aishah continues to teach me to fly, hit the ground without shame, shake the fodder from my wings (with a nod to Nina Simone) and fly again.<sup>4</sup>

It would be untrue to say that I had not imagined that Aishah would one day meet my mum, but even in my wildest dreams, it had never occurred to me that Audre Lorde would be the reason for that anticipated meeting. And thanks to technology—my ambivalence toward it temporarily set aside—I was able to witness not simply these two women in the same room, but something even more special than that. The panel had come to a close and begun to disperse, but the livestream remained watchful—catching the ends of conversations, the lingering remnants of interactions—just long enough to offer me a gift. A shaven-headed beauty in a sweater a shade of green just a touch lighter than the shade Aishah wore that day, my mother approaches Aishah and introduces herself (although their conversation is only barely audible). It is this moment—this moment of recognition that happens in the upper right corner of the screen, nearly beyond the frame, when Aishah hears what this woman, my mother, is saying and the two women lovingly embrace—that I have replayed more times than I wish to admit. Right after that embrace, as if it had been waiting just for that moment and no other, the livestream dries up and ends its flow.<sup>5</sup> What might it mean for these two women who have mothered me—in different ways most certainly—to embrace? What might it mean to witness that loving embrace without standing in its way?

Black lesbian literary theorist, community curator, and poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs (also in this issue) offers us some direction here both

- 
4. Give a listen to Nina Simone's "Fodder in Her Wings," performed with an eerily stern grace at Ronnie's Scott's Jazz Club in London on November 17, 1984. The performance appears in the 2003 film *Nina Simone—Live at Ronnie Scott's* and can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prmHgpXY3bo>.
  5. For anyone interested in witnessing that hug along with me, it can be found on the livestream recording of the very first panel of the conference (at the very bottom of the website) between roughly 1:50:30 and 1:50:40, <http://new.livestream.com/roosevelthouse/audrelorde>. Those ten seconds are my joy.

in terms of how to recognize all of our mothers as well as how to take Audre Lorde seriously as a theorist—the ultimate endpoint toward which this article walks. In her *We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968–1996*, Gumbs insists that

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.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the queer (in its larger norm-refusing sense) potential of black mothering as a pedagogy here reminds us also of transnational Trinidadian lesbian feminist M. Jacqui Alexander's proposition that we understand pedagogy as a fundamentally epistemological process; in other words, what we know about ourselves and our world we gather through the incessant lifelong processes of teaching and learning (both within *and* beyond formal educational institutions).<sup>7</sup> This process most often begins (as Gumbs reminds us) with our first teachers, the women who first care for us — our mothers, biological or otherwise. Many of our black mothers have cultivated in us the very antinormative posture that queer theorizing requires even if they could not explicitly teach us how to be same-sex desiring; my mother taught me “a set of social values that challenged a social logic” that was contrary to my well-being as a young black man in a racist society.<sup>8</sup> When that young black man discovered his queerness, the lesson still held because the foundation for an uncompromising self-worth, even in the face of a general presumption of worth-

- 
6. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968–1996” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010), 51. Gumbs's extensive community-building work beyond the academy is a powerful and passionate indication of where else a scholarly and personal commitment to the principles and poetics of Audre Lorde (alongside other queer black feminist visionaries such as June Jordan, Barbara Smith, and Alexis De Veaux) might take us. See [www.summeroffourlorde.wordpress.com](http://www.summeroffourlorde.wordpress.com).
  7. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 6–8.
  8. Gumbs, “We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves,” 51.

lessness, had been so lovingly and securely placed. My mother — perhaps beyond her intentions — made me a black queer theorist.

However, not all of our mothers give birth to us. This too is a vital part of Gumbs's proposition. Gumbs is "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."<sup>9</sup> Our *queer* mothers may or may not be same-sex desiring, may or may not be cisgendered women, may or may not be old enough to be our mothers, but they are always harbingers of that promising alternative sociality necessary for a new vision of community that is encouraged by their example and points toward a new home for our hearts and our consciousness. One of my queer mothers, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, just happens to be a fierce black lesbian only a decade or so my senior. And I would have it no other way. This recognition of the capacity for those who may not have given birth to us to mother us nonetheless is intimately connected to the mantric challenge Gumbs proffers through Lorde: that we can learn to mother *ourselves*. And this "queer act of loving ourselves despite everything" is in essence the "same act that enables us to love each other (and our own otherness) across difference."<sup>10</sup> Mother love — as a way to describe a kind of "ethical social relationship" to someone else and to oneself — begins to function here as a grounded metaphor for dealing with both external and internal differences (parts of ourselves that at times seem shameful, inadequate, or foreign perhaps).<sup>11</sup> Grounded in an unwillingness to relinquish a relationship to the actual experience of motherhood without being so overdetermined by that experience that it cannot reach toward a philosophical significance, the mother love metaphor approaches an existential proposition.

I will say more about Lorde and existential theorizing in what follows, but for now it suffices to say that Gumbs is at least in part helping us to read Lorde for the existential theory of mothering she offers. In other words, through Gumbs, we come to recognize Lorde's concept

---

9. Ibid., 59.

10. Ibid., 188.

11. Ibid., 192.

of “mothering” as a paradigm through which to describe our relationship (when we are at our best) to each other as human beings, our relationship to ourselves, and perhaps our relationship to the living, breathing natural world through which we move—in essence, our “mother love” relationship to our existence. The reach of this Lordean existential theory of mothering was clearest for me in those ten seconds when I was able to witness the loving embrace of two of my mothers and have that embrace also mean a kind of self-affirmation; by embracing each other, Donna and Aishah were also in that moment giving me permission to embrace myself, the self they had comothered. But what I want to highlight and elaborate on in what follows is not so much this expansive theory of mothering (Gumbs already does a brilliant job of shedding light on the nuances of the praxis of mothering in her work), but rather the audacious commitment to approaching Audre Lorde *as a theorist*. There is a double entendre I intend here in the phrase “as a theorist”: we might consider what it means to approach Lorde as one would approach a philosopher, as well as what it might mean for us as theorists to approach Lorde at all. I offer these fruits in ideological solidarity with a generation of black queer scholars who are intent on taking Lorde seriously *to think with* in a philosophical register—and toward more expansive ends than those who have often made of Lorde an exemplary token of someone else’s (usually, white, male, European, and preferably dead) theorizing or of “marginal” black/lesbian/feminist theory.

In her bristling recent text *The Erotic Life of Racism*, literary scholar and black queer studies midwife Sharon Holland notes quite pointedly:

While feminists have utilized Lorde’s work somewhat, little attention has been paid to it in feminist *theory* as a whole. It is interesting to note that the editor of *Sister Outsider*, Nancy Bereano, thought of both the collection and Lorde’s work as *theoretical*. As she noted, “There can be no doubt that *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays and speeches drawn from the past eight years of this Black lesbian feminist’s nonfiction prose, makes absolutely clear to many what some already knew: Audre Lorde’s voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory. She is at the cutting edge of consciousness.” I find the use of the word “consciousness” to be an allusion to feminist philosophy, and to the [Simone de] Beauvoir legacy

in particular—a point that might have been missed in most utilizations of Lorde's oeuvre.<sup>12</sup>

Positioning Lorde as part of a feminist genealogy of existential philosophers in which Holland imagines de Beauvoir as a critical (although in truth reluctant) foremother, the argument here anticipates the same general direction toward which I am headed in this article.<sup>13</sup> Still, I call for a bit more careful attention to Lorde herself as an existential thinker while harboring a slight caution about a family tree of a (feminist) philosophy whose roots are always and only deeply spread in continental European thought. Perhaps there is still much hard work to be done in the service of a truly global philosophical canon that does not begin with the Greeks (in isolation from the various Middle Eastern and North African thought traditions with which they shared ideas) and that does not find itself confined to Western Europe in the long contemporary period. Jamaican philosopher Lewis Gordon (whom I will discuss shortly) and Argentinian Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel—surely among others—provide the most focused examples I know of for approaching this momentous opening in philosophy.

#### PRECIOUS LORDE AND THE BOOK OF EROS

Before attending to my proposition for how we might read Lorde more closely and more carefully, we must step back and contextualize what several scholars across disciplinary and national borders have begun to recognize—explicitly or not—as Audre Lorde's Second Coming. Contributing to a recent two-week online forum on *The Feminist Wire* dedicated to honoring Lorde, Jacqui Alexander offers the following confirmation of this Second Coming in the first epigraph of her contribution, "Medicines for Our Survival: The Continuation of the Life of Audre Lorde":

Recently, I asked my Madrina, Teresa Ramirez, whether there comes a time in the afterlife, in the other domain, when a Spirit revitalizes and returns to bring her work to another level and to assist us in rais-

12. Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 133n21. Nancy Bereano's quote within this note is from her introduction to Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 7.

13. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 46.

ing our own vibrations to another level. Her answer: "Yes." Audre Lorde's Spirit has entered another dimension of consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Presaging Alexander, Barbadian Canadian cultural studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott lends lead voice to a now distinctly resonant chorus of interest in Lorde's oeuvre among a generation of scholars determined to hold together black studies, queer studies, and diaspora studies.<sup>15</sup> For Walcott, this return to Lorde is primarily about recognizing that conversations between black diasporic feminism and postcolonial feminism form the nexus at which black queer diaspora studies and its new register of black queer theorizing take shape.<sup>16</sup> A (black) queer theory unwilling to relinquish its engagement with feminists-of-color critiques cannot avoid recognizing Lorde—although the recognition comes belatedly—as a queer theorist. Lorde is a theorist so queer in fact that only two decades after her passing have academics finally begun to brave the broadest and deepest implications of her thinking. Walcott ushers us in her direction: "I want to read Lorde as a queer theorist, a queer theorist for whom queer theory's disavowal of feminism and its white gay masculinity means that she is too difficult to digest in terms of its institutional claims and positioning."<sup>17</sup> What might it mean to add "theorist" to the mantric litany of descriptors used to summon the warrior poet? In part, it may mean that scholarship on queerness in the African diaspora is one breath closer to recognizing some of the fruitful theoretical

- 
14. M. Jacqui Alexander, "Medicines for Our Survival: The Continuation of the Life of Audre Lorde," *Feminist Wire*, Feb. 18, 2014, <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/02/medicines-for-our-survival-the-continuation-of-the-life-of-audre-lorde>.
  15. Rinaldo Walcott, "Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and "Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory," in *Blackness and Sexualities*, ed. Michelle Wright and Antje Schuhmann (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007).
  16. In addition, black queer literary theorist Omise'eke Tinsley has encouraged me in private and public conversations at the University of Texas at Austin (where we are both faculty in the African and African Diaspora Studies Department) to recognize that one of the distinguishing features of an emergent queer Caribbean studies is its grounding in black (lesbian) feminist scholarship. This lineage is certainly one that my work proudly inherits while working hard to earn its place at the (kitchen) table.
  17. Walcott, "Somewhere Out There," 36.

interventions cultivated from the soil of black queer diasporic experience and artistry. But what if this recognition of Lorde as a theorist—a black queer theorist of diasporic scope—misses placing a fine enough point on the value of thinking deeply through the legacy that Lorde has left us?

Inspired by Lewis Gordon's insistence that the abstract thought of critical reflection (the principal domain of the theorist) reaches toward philosophical inquiry in part on the shoulders of perennial questions that echo through Lorde's oeuvre (*What does it mean to exist? How is life meaningful? How do we know what we know?*), I consider what it might mean to read Lorde as a philosopher.<sup>18</sup> And even more precisely still, I propose that we include Lorde's work—poetry, prose, fact, fiction, and all the supple spaces she delighted in between them—in a long pedigreed lineage of what Gordon calls “existential philosophies” and place it apart from, but by no means subordinate to, the distinct ideological movement that is called “existentialism.”<sup>19</sup> A prolific thinker who may not have defined herself as an existentialist, but whose positions nonetheless have an existential dimension (among others, of course) premised on philosophical questions about embodied agency and situated experience, Lorde has bequeathed us a vast intellectual inheritance that I would not pretend to properly parse here in toto. However, it is vital to foreground one theme in Lorde's work that has garnered very eager attention in recent scholarship about African diasporic communities, queer sexualities, and composite subjectivities: the erotic.

Nowhere in Lorde's oeuvre is her conceptualization of the erotic more explicit—although perhaps not the most transparent—than in the conference paper she first delivered in 1978, which would become enshrined as “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in her now near canonical collection of essays and speeches *Sister Outsider*.<sup>20</sup> These

18. Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.

19. Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10–11, 16.

20. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider*, 53–59. Before being published in *Sister Outsider* in 1984, “Uses of the Erotic” first appeared in a pamphlet published by Out and Out Books, a feminist press based in Brooklyn, New York, in October of 1978. See Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2004), 401.

seductive and yet troublesome seven pages have been the most heavily cited and strategically deployed by the cadre of scholars deeply interested in using a Lorde-inspired erotic to think through quotidian experience and imaginative possibility in the African diaspora.<sup>21</sup> Before I offer my own humble reading of this essay that has invited so many to return to its poetic prose again and again, I would like to briefly outline some of the uses to which it has been put in a family of very recent texts whose strengths and weaknesses this inquiry inherits.

Black queer Caribbeanist literary theorist Omise'eke Tinsley's masterfully close readings of people, places, and texts in her *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* reaches toward Lorde's erotic in order to specify what exactly she means when she insists that women of color's same-sex eroticism serves "as a wellspring of resistance to colonial symbolic and economic orders."<sup>22</sup> For Tinsley — following her interpretation of Lorde's essay — eroticism is best understood "as a sharing of deep, possibly but not necessarily sexual feeling that emerges as a resource with the power to motivate individual and collective change."<sup>23</sup> Tinsley's text extends from women of color's "mutual sharing of eroticism," which she interprets principally as women *feeling for* each other in contexts that were supposed to preclude feeling (or an empathic compassion), to their "mutual sharing of sexuality" or their *feeling upon* "each other's breasts, thighs and waists" as a kind of sensuously shared self-possession.<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on a broad landscape of (anticolonial and anti-imperialist) sensuality as an interpretive map to eros is certainly informed by Lorde and does the important work of pulling the erotic beyond a mere euphemism for sex acts (where the erotic so often remains bound in the popular imagination and a large portion of scholarly literature). But might it be possible to chart an erotic that extends even beyond the

---

21. Although Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" has been and will certainly continue to be indispensable for generations of scholars interested in her interrogation of the erotic, black feminist scholar Emily Owens has made an argument — as persuasive as it is elegant — for looking to Lorde's poetry for a much clearer articulation of the erotic than one can hope to find in her prose. See Owens, "Are You Sisters? The Impossibility of Black Lesbian Subjectivity" (undergraduate thesis, Harvard University, 2009), 57–75.

22. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 20.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 20–21.

widened map of sensuality? Might Lorde's erotic use sensuality to feel toward other ideological and actual imperatives?

These are the very questions motivating black queer Barbadian American anthropologist Jafari Allen's conceptualization and hermeneutic deployment of a "politics of erotic transcendence" in his lyrical ethnography *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Self-Making in Cuba*.<sup>25</sup> Aligned with Tinsley, Allen acknowledges that the erotic must extend beyond mere sex acts and their corollary identificatory seductions toward a broader range of quotidian intimacies; however, his interpretation of Lorde's essay leads him toward a multiply transcendent politics that provides the foundation both for self-making and community building, two interrelated modalities of subjectivity. Allen's orientation toward a principally political articulation of the erotic cannot (and would not) ignore the vitality of sensuality for the liberatory emphasis that is the lifeblood of his text, but the personal and shared freedoms that he insists on are most firmly felt conceptually through the political gestures he outlines as private-public interventions. From momentary transgressions of normative boundaries to more drastic transformations of norms, Allen is clear that his politics of erotic transcendence must embrace the spiritual and sensuous impulses that traffic across any usage of transcendental language; however, his sights are acutely set on contesting oppressive — often state-sanctioned — hegemonies as a distinctly holistic political act that attends as closely to the self as it does to the society surrounding and infusing that self.<sup>26</sup>

Allen uses the term "erotic subjectivity" to give language to what he describes as "deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul... [which work] toward not only transgressing but transcending and finally transforming hegemonies of global capital, the state, and of bourgeois, limited, and limiting notions of gender, sexuality, or blackness."<sup>27</sup> Erotic subjectivity describes "everyday erotic and sensuous practices as a ground for liberatory politics."<sup>28</sup> This erotic subjectivity is

25. Jafari S. Allen, *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Self-Making in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 96.

26. *Ibid.*, 3, 95–97, 187, 192.

27. *Ibid.*, 97.

28. *Ibid.*, 189. More recently Allen reiterates his interpretation and theoretical deployment of Lorde's erotic as a guide for his usage of "erotic subjectivity" in his introduction to the special double issue of the journal *GLQ* on

premised on an interpretation of a Lordean eros that attempts to read what Lorde might be saying the erotic is through her various, oft-ambiguous attempts at explaining what it does. Allen cites one such offering in which Lorde avers that erotic knowledge becomes “a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those parts honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.”<sup>29</sup> Even the least hasty reader might miss the fact that Lorde has here told us hardly anything at all about what the erotic actually *is* (a lens) while very clearly laying out what that lens might be used to do; we still have little sense of what constitutes this lens, what constitutes our erotic knowledge. Echoing this earlier citation later in the text, Allen adds that the Lordean erotic is a “‘deep longing within,’ a site of knowledge production and energy, which is alternative to regimes of the state and received culture. For Lorde, the erotic is the deep subjective.”<sup>30</sup> But here again we have stepped just adjacent to a precise definition of what the erotic actually *is*—a deep longing (for what exactly?), a site of knowledge production (but what constitutes the site itself?), a deep subjective (would this mean then that “erotic subjectivity” describes nothing beyond a seemingly redundant deeply subjective subjectivity?).

Although my usage of the erotic is neighbor to Allen’s usage and finds vital affinity in his work, there exists still a significant distinction between our interpretations of a Lordean eros. This distinction is the result of taking up the heady challenge of parsing Lorde’s deceptively straightforward and concise prose to get a better sense of what she may be proposing for a reconceptualization of the erotic. My proposal remains unequivocally aligned with Allen’s claim that his politics of erotic transcendence insists on the creation of a new space that might be physical, theoretical, or simply lexical and that “defies, reappropriates or refuses old labels.”<sup>31</sup> In what follows, I propose that Lorde’s erotic is just such a space, cleared precisely in the definitional heart-center of an ancient concept (which in many respects might return it to

---

black queer diaspora. See Jafari Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjunction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (2012): 231, 248.

29. Allen, *¡Venceremos?*, 3; Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 57.

30. Allen, *¡Venceremos?*, 96.

31. *Ibid.*, 95.

its origins). Nevertheless, Allen's insistence on a politics of the erotic—even if the landscape of the political is quite vast, thanks in no small part to the necessary influence of feminism in general and women-of-color feminism in particular on his thinking—certainly adds a political consciousness (that is no less sensual for its emphasis on liberation) to Tinsley's sensual consciousness (which is, of course, no less political for its emphasis on feeling). But what if Allen's language of transcendence is also pointing the way to an important direction in which the erotic might be stretched even further?

This is precisely the pliability of the concept that Jamaican literary scholar Donna Aza Weir-Soley relies on for her repositioning of the erotic in her ambitious and attentive *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writings*. Another look to Lorde's essay reveals for Weir-Soley a definition of the erotic—what she calls an “erotic principle”—that reimagines spirituality and sexuality as “interdependent modalities,” a synthesis of the sacred and the secular that, when in proper balance, impels political and personal agency and development.<sup>32</sup> Weir-Soley's confidence in her belief that “Lorde describes the erotic as a synthesis between sexuality and spirituality” provides the foundation for her proposition that this merger between the sexual and the spiritual is itself an instantiation of and further encourages rebellious political acts—especially for black women in their writerly and quotidian lives.<sup>33</sup> Through foregrounding a relationship between the spiritual and the sexual—which barely resists functioning as a synonym for the erotic in her usage of it—Weir-Soley gestures toward an erotic that *is* a permanent forging of sensuality and spirituality, but ultimately these remain vaguely separate domains of experience (to be fruitfully juxtaposed, but distinct just the same). An implicit impulse to stretch the sexual toward the spiritual effectively enough to strike a perfect balance between them characterizes Weir-Soley's interpretation of the erotic.<sup>34</sup> And once this balance has been ever so lightly negotiated, she proposes we will then be able to harness the (erotic) power to “effect positive growth from the inside out, to transform not only our inner lives but our material circumstances, and

---

32. Donna Aza Weir-Soley, *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 7, 41.

33. *Ibid.*, 41, 69.

34. *Ibid.*, 41.

to access the divine power within ourselves in order to transform our lives and our communities.<sup>35</sup> Undoubtedly, the present analysis is nearly perfectly aligned with this holistically political end goal that Weir-Soley imagines — incidentally echoing Allen's own wide ranging inner-outer politic. However, I must press for a more subtle reading of Lorde's erotic so that the journey can prove as enlightening as the destination; in other words, how we get to a transformational politic (broadly conceived) is as vital as arriving there. It is my contention that sexuality and spirituality alone, even when held close enough together to begin to approximate a new vision of eros that might get us there, comes up just short of a solution. We are nearly there, but eros wants more.

As part of her *Citizenship From Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*, Caribbeanist sociologist Mimi Sheller outlines Lorde's erotic with just enough close critical attention to point us in the right direction. Sheller summarily marks and pushes forward what she quite adeptly proposes are the three critical theoretical paradigms driving analyses of African diasporic cultural and political life: embodied freedom, sexual citizenship, and erotic agency.<sup>36</sup> Sheller highlights the capacity of this erotic agency (embedded in performative claims to civic and cultural inclusion among marginalized populations) to deploy the "inter-embodiments of race, gender, and sexuality" in a struggle against "the neo-colonial restructuring of citizenship, sovereignty, and power across both national and transnational terrains."<sup>37</sup> Her interpretation of the "erotic power" that infuses this resistant agency is again informed by Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," which she quotes quite systematically in order to insist that

Lorde situates the erotic as spiritual energy, not simply a physical one.... The erotic, then, is clearly more than the sexual, though it may encompass the sexual. It includes the power of love, knowledge, creativity and life force itself.... It is an empowerment of the "I" but also a turning towards the "world" and, moreover, towards the divine. Erotic knowledge, according to Lorde, is a bridge between the spiritual and the political.<sup>38</sup>

---

35. Ibid., 226.

36. Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 20.

37. Ibid., 24–25.

38. Ibid., 244–45.

Sheller's reading is closer to Lorde's text and thus more readily inclined to use the poet's erotic beyond even its broadest sensual implications in order to imagine performative erotic self-possession as a political imperative that contests relations of (symbolic and actual) domination and dispossession, as well as a spiritual imperative that looks to the "larger life horizon in which existence flourishes."<sup>39</sup>

However, even despite coming closest to sketching the ideological architecture of a Lordean erotic that somehow bridges political and spiritual registers to propose mutually constitutive relations among "the self, the social, and the sacred; agency, structure, and the metaphysical; autonomy, subordination, and divinity; the body, the state, and the spirit," Sheller readily admits that her work only tangentially attends to the spiritual, although she quite rightly emphasizes that the work of Alexander on embodied sacred praxis provides a more than adequate supplement to the spirit work her book does not quite manage to do.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Sheller does not quite recognize in Lorde's far-from-unambiguous erotic (an amalgam perhaps, in Sheller's reading, of the political-erotic-spiritual) the very kind of Caribbeanist theoretical intervention that she proposes might be the key to unraveling the knotted "racial-sexual-national subjectivities" that profoundly influence public and intimate behaviour in the region.<sup>41</sup> However, it is just this kind of theoretical intervention that I want to propose through a rereading of Lorde's essay that is not disconnected from the readings of her I have just discussed, but which proposes a distinct way to read her erotic with promising reorienting potential.

#### COME AGAIN? REREADING LORDEAN EROTICS

Although the details of the context within which Lorde delivered her paper "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" seldom find their way even into the most remote endnote in otherwise attentive discussions of the text, these details are crucial if we are to adequately meet any of the challenges the paper seems to pose to its broadest theoretical applicability. Delivered on August 25, 1978, as part of the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, hosted by Mount Holyoke College in Western Massachusetts, Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" was intended for

39. Ibid., 279.

40. Sheller, *Citizenship From Below*, 245; Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 287–32.

41. Sheller, *Citizenship From Below*, 45.

an audience primarily of women historians (exceedingly white and heterosexual), who had organized their own conferences in response to the isolation they had experienced within the exceedingly male American Historical Association.<sup>42</sup> Amid significant protest and rallying around the exclusion of lesbian history from the Berkshire Conference's main agenda, Lorde delivered what has since become her classic treatise on the importance of women scholars—lesbians such as herself among them—resisting a dangerous urge to embrace a pseudo-scientific objectivity sanitized of feeling, emotion, and intuition (then, perhaps as now, stereotypically “female afflictions” in the academy and beyond it) in an attempt to contest sexist presumptions about the inadequacy of female scholars and the significant work they produce. And while these details of context and audience cannot explain all of what Lorde said that day—nor does it give us any clue as to why the irreverent poet uses the language she does for an audience of women historians—I propose that these bits of information do tell us something about why Lorde articulates the erotic as she does in the paper.

Lorde's black lesbian feminist underpinnings are undeniable in her oeuvre and one cannot (certainly should not) avoid the centrality of women's struggles—especially the challenges faced by women of color in general and black women in particular—to the vast majority of Lorde's writings. I do not mean to undermine the ideological and political importance of Lorde foregrounding women in “Uses of the Erotic,” but I do want to better situate the seemingly singular emphasis on women and the erotic in the text. Remembering that Lorde is delivering a paper to a conference of women historians at a women's liberal arts college perhaps begins to help us explain what might be misread as Lorde confining the erotic to the exclusive domain of women—or at least of the female within each of us—as seems evident (without contextual

---

42. De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 220. Alexis De Veaux's *Warrior Poet* remains the most meticulously comprehensive, thorough, and compassionate treatment of Audre Lorde's life and work. In it, De Veaux notes the importance of the essay for Lorde herself: “In retrospect, [Lorde] felt that the passion and energy to return to work [following her mastectomy] came from having written ‘Uses of the Erotic.’ ...[Lorde herself confesses that] ‘The existence of that paper enabled me to pick up and go to Houston and California; it enabled me to start working again. I don't know when I'd have been able to write again, if I hadn't had those words.’” (227)

considerations) in the troublesome second sentence of the essay: “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling.”<sup>43</sup> This sentence is merely the beginning of Lorde’s return again and again to articulating the importance of the erotic for women exclusively. Even if one is willing to accept that Lorde’s “deeply female plane” may exist within men as well, scholars would be more comfortable perhaps with the notion that the erotic exists in a deeply *feminine* plane that men can also access within themselves. And this feminine erotic may have been Lorde’s implicit intention, but of course the text predates more recent gender theory on sex-gender distinctions and there really is no way around Lorde addressing women directly about women exclusively with regard to relationships (sexual or otherwise) between women. So, most scholars who take up this essay either embrace what appears to be Lorde’s theorizing of the erotic as exclusively female or chalk that emphasis up to an essentialist failing on Lorde’s part and make use of her erotic while ignoring her gynocentrism.

While it may be the case that Lorde conceived of the erotic as the exclusive domain of women, I contend instead that we must read Lorde for the audience gathered and not presume that she would reject the proposition that eros as a principle be allowed to retain the widest possible applicability — without losing its necessary attention to the ground of lived experience (of women, men, trans people, heterosexuals, queers, and people of color, etc.). Perhaps Lorde would disagree with my reading and insist on a politically and ideologically vital essentialist perspective on the erotic, but for the task at hand I require a broader definition of eros that places Lorde among a long lineage of philosophers who have wrestled with the concept from as early in the history of human thought as ancient Egypt and Greece.<sup>44</sup> Approaching Lorde’s erotic as a philosophical principle about which she is offering a theory positions us to

---

43. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 53.

44. See Karol Mysliwec, *Eros on the Nile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. Frisbee Sheffield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). In a public conversation at the University of Pennsylvania (gracefully hosted by Caribbeanist anthropologist Debora Thomas) about an earlier draft of this article, lesbian literary scholar and queer theorist Heather Love gently reminded me that this charge of “essentialism” is in fact anachronistic; however, I use the term not as an indirect

more accurately read Lorde's definition of the erotic without being distracted by the poet's many seductive forays into the nearly magical work the erotic can be used to do. This work is of course important, but we must not put the cart before the horse; it is more important to work with Lorde to figure out what she may be trying to say about eros and why it may indeed save our lives.

Much scholarship on "Uses of the Erotic" has been hesitant to admit what appears quite clearly from even the most cursory reading of the essay. True to its etymological roots and to its historical usage, Lorde's essay on (at once an essay with) the erotic is far from an easy definitive statement. In fact, in it one recognizes Lorde herself trying to write through a still uncertain investigation of what it might be while struggling with the inadequacies of how it is popularly defined. In this struggle with the erotic we are able to witness in a single finished piece — perhaps more readily than in much of Lorde's other prose work — Lorde as existential philosopher *and* poet pushing her theorizing to uncertain extremes in an attempt to redefine an ancient principle. Certainly Lorde's essay deserves a much closer reading than I am able to offer here, but I do offer the clearest articulation I am able to manage of where Lorde may have been going with her reconceptualization of the erotic.

Nearly in the perfect center of the paper — at its heart, if you will — Lorde offers her clearest (though still not absolutely transparent) definition of what she means by the erotic:

It has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical.... In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth... The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic — the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love in its deepest meanings.<sup>45</sup>

---

accusatory gesture that presumes Lorde should have known better, but rather as an admittedly retrospective gloss on a particular kind of focus.

45. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 56.

Even in her attempt to define erotic knowledge as that which defies false dichotomies between the political and the spiritual as well as between the spiritual and what Lorde eventually calls the sensual, one recognizes a slippage (a seeming redundancy) in which she struggles to decouple the sensual from the erotic.<sup>46</sup> This decoupling must not be misunderstood as Lorde's attempt to deny the sensuality of her new erotic, but rather to accommodate the political and the spiritual alongside sensuality in her new theoretical architecture. If "our erotic knowledge" requires that we attend to the political and spiritual alongside sensuality, intimacy, feeling, affection, empathy, and love, then the erotic as mere euphemism for sex or even sensuality cannot persist. It is in the moment when Lorde is forced to replace "the erotic" with "the sensual" that her reconceptualization of the erotic itself achieves its most potent coherence. If the sensual ("those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love in its deepest meanings") provides a bridge between the political and the spiritual, then "the erotic" constitutes the entire structure and ought not to be reduced to an easy symmetry with any of its composite elements even if the popular imagination still gets lost wading the rapids beneath Lorde's bridge.

Following Lorde, I propose that the erotic must be reconceptualized as a perspectival trinity that holds together the political-sensual-spiritual at their most abstract; in other words, "the erotic" describes various formal and informal power hierarchies (the political), sexual as well as nonsexual intimacy (the sensual), and sacred metaphysics (the spiritual) simultaneously. Attentive to the interconnected elements that give substance to a Lordean erotic, it becomes easier to recognize how a fundamental impulse to connect areas of experience that may seem disparate also lends itself to the linking work that Lorde reveres in eros.

---

46. Attentive readers will note that there is one dichotomy missing in Lorde's description: the political vs. the erotic (which Lorde later specifies as "the sensual"). Again, her audience may provide a clue to explain this omission. Perhaps for a group of female scholars not unfamiliar or altogether hostile to many of the theoretical interventions of feminism, recognizing the link between sensuality (the private) and politics (the public) was by the late 1970s a given. Certainly we still feel the force of the enlightened feminist mantra "the personal is political" as evidently as we feel the ideological and legislative forces pushing back with a bullheaded faith in the exact opposite.

This philosophical impulse to connect (ideas, experiences, identity categories, people, feelings — often through poetry’s metaphors and similes) across differences will not surprise anyone even vaguely familiar with Lorde’s work; in fact, this search for connection (seldom easy or effortless or safe) is one of the most important governing principles in Lorde’s work. And it is this connection to others — a deep sharing of pursuits (physical, emotional, intellectual) — that, according to Lorde, “forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”<sup>47</sup> It is important to recognize here Sharon Holland’s sobering challenge to consider the various ways in which the erotic has been and can be used to reinscribe and entrench differences without too swiftly presuming that Lorde proposes erotic connection “as a means to undo difference” or erode its relevance.<sup>48</sup> If Lorde’s oeuvre has insisted on nothing else, it has quite forcefully made the claim that difference — internal and external — is unavoidable; it is our relationship to that difference (as a threat to be feared or an asset we might embrace) that determines its effect on us and our effect on each other. Lorde reassures us that once we are in touch with the erotic — something that can be achieved only through fostering deep connections with others even if those connections bring difference into stark relief — we are not only less willing to accept feelings of powerlessness, despair, depression, but also more inclined to pursue structural changes in society.<sup>49</sup>

#### A VERY BRIEF, BUT PLEASURABLE CONCLUDING GESTURE

As a concluding gesture toward the uses of the erotic as methodology, I look to a particularly intimate citation chain that both symbolically and conceptually enhances the present conversation. When black queer anthropologist Jafari Allen reminds us that “Black queer studies serves as a space in which one might experience freedom in the form of pedagogical and epistemological pleasure,” he is invoking black queer literary scholar Vincent Woodard’s paraphrasing of black queer literary and cultural studies scholar Wahneema Lubiano.<sup>50</sup> Lubiano’s enduring call for attention to the “libidinal economy of knowledge production” — first

47. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

48. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 59–60.

49. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 58–59.

50. Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora,” 215.

delivered at the momentous Black Queer Studies in the Millennium Conference in 2000 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and repeated by Woodard and then Allen in a loving citation structure that preserves some semblance of what was said, echoed over a decade later — points to the perseverance of pleasure shared.<sup>51</sup> And although, as has been discussed, this is not the sum total of what Lorde means by “the erotic,” one must not lose a feel for the importance of pleasure to a Lordean eros — pleasure in coming to know what we know about ourselves and our world (epistemological pleasure) and pleasure in teaching what we have learned and learning from those who find pleasure in teaching us (pedagogical pleasure).<sup>52</sup> This article is the result of that kind of abstract epistemological and pedagogical pleasure; yet I want us to consider pleasure here in a much simpler register too. Quite literally, the writing that constitutes this text is intended to give you, the reader, pleasure. As this work gave me significant pleasure in the writing of it — made richer by the requisite moments of unpleasantness that crowd any project — so is it given to you in the hopes that it might give you pleasure in the reading and the contemplation. In fact, this article has been crafted at least in part with your pleasure in mind.

My desire to share a bit of pleasure with you is not arbitrary, and it is certainly not intended to push you away. If you will allow me, I will leave you with one final proposition that may clarify my intentions a bit. Although we have likely never met, what might it mean for me to declare a love for you? This love is rooted in the recognition that we share something as divine as breath between us. How might this love help us to see that we are not nearly as distinct as we seem? This is not always a comfortable recognition, but this vision for us across our dividing differences is certainly part of our Lordean inheritance. What if we embrace Lorde’s invitation into the truth that when we are at our best, we are reaching for each other with love? Shamelessly then, offering this love and anticipating yours in return, I reach toward you assured, before an audience of witnesses — in spirit and in flesh — that there is infinite potential in our embrace.

---

51. Vincent Woodard, “Just as Quare as They Wanna Be: A Review of the Black Queer Studies in the Millennium Conference,” *Callaloo* 23, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 1280.

52. This juxtaposition of epistemology and pedagogy brings Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing* to mind once more.