

Deconstructing the Erotic: A Feminist Exploration of Bodies & Voice in Lucille Clifton and Audre Lorde's Poetry

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Bridging and Connecting:

Examining the Feminine Erotic

In their poetry, Clifton and Lorde employ an eros that is traditionally deemed as feminine by having their speakers expose their insecurities and educate their readership on the various injustices that men in positions of power impose upon Black women. By doing so, Lorde and Clifton cultivate a community where readers of diverse backgrounds can come together in a safe space and discuss how their differing subject positions inform if not determines how they conceptualize erotic power. As readers discuss Clifton and Lorde's poetry, they see what constitutes and reinforces the differences that divide women and men along racial, sexual orientation, and class lines. They discover how the feminine erotic is a power that bridges gaps of difference, thereby allowing one to understand another person's thoughts, values, and overall subject position, and, additionally, comprehend how a subject position that differs from one's own is neither superior or inferior to one's own.

Lorde explores how to access the feminine erotic via poetry in her essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." She argues that poetry, as a revelatory distillation of experience, provides the illumination by which people examine their lives and give substance to their unrecognized feelings. Lorde asserts that each woman embodies a divine, creative spirit. Yet, this spirit is often left unexamined, unrecorded, and ultimately, silenced. For

Lorde, poetry is the way to *un*-silence this spirit. She writes, “The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep” (37).

Published at around the same time as Lorde’s “Poetry is Not Luxury,” is Hélène Cixous’s essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). Similar to Lorde, Cixous also explores a feminine practice and coins the term *écriture féminine*, asserting how feminine writing is impossible since “it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.” In “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power,” Lorde describes these “phallogocentric systems” as structures of self-abnegation that attempt to suppress the feminine voice (39). Both Lorde and Cixous elucidate the power that fiction and poetry can bring to reclaiming and asserting the female voice. As women write, they not only liberate themselves from that Lordean silence, but they also deconstruct the very social constructions like race, sexual orientation, and class, which limit their erotic potential.

Lorde taps into Cixous’s *écriture féminine* with her poem, “Coal.” The tone of “Coal” embodies the erotic as the speaker claims her right to express and voice her own ideas and feelings: “I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside/now take my word for jewel in the open light.” The speaker recognizes the power of her “word” as a “jewel”; that is, she realizes how her thoughts and beliefs can provide her with financial security. But more importantly, the speaker comes to appreciate her “words” because she sees them to be as transparent as a crystal clear “jewel”; that is, the “jewel” symbolizes the speaker’s essential truth, her erotic spirit.

This particular line suggests the power of the “word,” or more specifically, how language shapes one’s reality. The poem, “Coal,” conceptualizes this very reality through the various forms that the *sign* signifies. As the linguist Marcel Danesi asserts, a sign is “something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity.”¹ In order to read a sign, an *interpretant sign* is needed. An interpretant sign decodes the meaning of one sign by referring to another sign. In the poem, the speaker explores the different sentiments one sign evokes as she alters the interpretant signs she uses to decode the primary sign: “coal.” The speaker uses thought-provoking images in phrases such as, “singing out within the passing crash of sun,” an “ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge,” or “seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ to explode through my lips/ like young sparrows bursting from shell.” Yet, she analyzes words that are simultaneously intermediary and fixed. By doing so, she shows how language can never fully capture or decode sign into a sentiment, feeling, and/or emotion since the interpretant sign (i.e. the signs used to decode that one sign) can change at any given moment.

For example, in the line, “Some words live in my throat/ breeding like adders . . ./ Somewords/ bedevil me,” the speaker structures the interpretant signs like “bedevil,” “breeding,” and “adders” in a way which suggests how the speaker’s ability to speak ironically confines her freedom to truthfully express her feminine erotic: to embody an uncensored voice. Earlier in this stanza, she claims how the “sound comes into a word, coloured/by who pays what for speaking,” implying how one pays to hear what they want to see and hear (Lines 6-7, 616). The act of expression (i.e. communication via language) is a commodity since voice is censored through those Lordian systems of “self-abnegation”: hegemonic forces like patriarchy (57, “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as

Power.”) The initial image of “the total black, being spoken/From the earth's inside” seems to celebrate black heritage and beauty, but it is also “open” to connotations of sexual violation (Line 3, 616). “Earth” symbolizes the female womb which has been penetrated from the “inside”; her womb becomes “total...black.” As a pigment, black is absent of color and absorption from any source of light, thereby insinuating how the speaker’s womb, the place where life and voice can come into being, is silenced. The speaker emphasizes this silence as she withholds those “words” of penetration that “breed” like “adders” in her “throat” (Lines 16-7, 616). By doing so, she reveals her struggle to fully express the “words” that “bedevil” her or rather, the stories behind those words that are too painful to voice.

This repression is not necessarily a negative quality. In the concluding stanza, Lorde writes:

Love is word, another kind of open.

As the diamond comes into a knot of flame

I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside

Now take my word for jewel in the open light. (Lines 23-6, 616).

The tone of the poem is no longer repressed, but mystifyingly “open.” As readers, we read Lorde’s words of “love” and expose them like “jewel[s] in[to] the open light.” By doing so, we violate the “inside” of the speaker, her repressed “jewels” of expression. This violation is necessary because it helps to create a community of female readers that will discover the speaker’s as well as their own voice.

For Lorde, the political is not separate from the personal; the two are intertwined. Political issues like race, class, and sexual orientation become personal as the language of power, law, enacts if not determines how these social constructs shape the nature of a woman's life. The repressed tone of the poem shows how the speaker is awake to the world; she bridges the gaps between the political and personal by employing the extended metaphor of "coal" which not only expresses her anger towards racist attitudes and sexual harassment, but also elucidates how the use of anger can be a source of erotic power for women. Anger helps invoke and inspire expression instead of repression. With the support of a readerly community, readers of "Coal" learn how to manage the anger that they hold both towards themselves and others. They begin to transform their self-destructive thoughts into the written word of self-affirmation: the use of the erotic. This use is not, in the words of Lorde, "a luxury." Women must actively seek to uncover, unlock, and voice this erotic power.

Similar to "Coal," the speaker in "A Woman Speaks" shows how the erotic is accessible through language; she claims her right to "speak" and develop a system of signs and signifiers that do not result in "self-abnegation" but, rather, creative potential. That is, the speaker's words intrinsically relate to her visceral sensations: her erotic truth. Lorde describes how poetry helped to strengthen her voice, particularly during her fourteen-year long battle with breast cancer. Towards the end of her life, she expresses how her voice had weakened. Nevertheless, she kept speaking, writing, and embodying the very words that made up her poems.² As we will see later, much of Lorde's work draws upon West African traditions which, in effect, transforms Lorde the poet into Lorde what Paul Oliver terms as the griot or, one who extemporizes events and uses their vocal

expertise for gossip, satire, or political commentary.³ Like the diverse patterns of interpretant signs and imagery in “Coal,” the speaker in “A Woman Speaks” becomes the griot figure and provokes readers to discuss the identity politics surrounding race, gender, sexual identity, and class.

According to Eurocentric thought, the speaker of “A Woman Speaks” would be at the bottom of the society since she is black, lesbian, and female. Yet, throughout the entire poem, the speaker asserts her right to have a voice. She does so most explicitly in the concluding lines, “I am /woman/ and not white.” These lines specify how the speaker identifies as a woman of color and, additionally, how a woman of color becomes the status quo or norm instead of the always already differed, “othered” group. By doing so, the poem emphasizes how there are different types of discourse which are largely based upon race and gender. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Lorde states: “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us — the poet — whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (38). This whispering “Black mother” is the erotic force which is willing to be and feel vulnerable. Essentially, it is the voice outside of Eurocentric rationalism.

The speaker in “A Woman Speaks” moves beyond Eurocentric ideals and white and black patriarchy by interweaving West African religious tradition with her own experiences. She taps into the spiritual power of the West African religion and describes herself as “Moon marked and touched by sun” (Line 1, 4). “Moon” and “sun” are commonly attributed to MawuLísa, the Dahomean sky goddess-god. Mawu creates the world and is the mother of all the other *orisha*, or deities. She represents the female

sex, bounded by Lisa, the male sex as well as Mawu's son. Hence, the MawuLisa figure counters traditional gender roles where men are perceived as the rational, logical beings and woman are seen as the irrational and emotional ones. The poem turns the "isms," or social constructions such as *racism*, *sexism*, and *classism*, on their heads; MawuLisa, for instance, depicts a subordinate entity since she is black and female. Yet, MawuLisa embodies "[unwritten] magic" or a quality that has not been captured through language (Line 2, 4). Contrary to being defined by socially limiting labels like "black," "female," and "lesbian," the speaker narrates her life's journey and acts as the definer. As a definer, the speaker reconsiders these marginal categories and becomes Lorde's "Black Mother" poet, whispering her "magic" into readers' ears via poetry.

Aside from MawuLisa, the speaker draws upon other erotically empowering figures from West African religion. The line "no favor/untouched by blood" perhaps refers to the "blood" shed by the Dahomean Amazon warriors. The tone of the poem is proud since the speaker asks for "no favor" and is full of "pride." Yet, the tone also indicates the speaker's vulnerability towards making any mistakes, similar to the goddesses and gods of the Dahomean and Yoruba traditions to which Lorde refers to (Lines 5 and 9, 4). The speaker associates herself with the birth of Aphrodite from the "entrails" of Uranus and admits that this passionate connection causes great chaos (Line 14, 4). This chaos is represented by those "pound[ing]...restless oceans" from which Aphrodite originally surfaced (Line 15, 4). Situated in the present, Lorde interweaves West African religious tradition and Greek mythology to recreate the Eurocentric vision of erotic womanhood. This vision is not solely for "white...women" but for women of all colors (Lines 31-3, 4). The speaker reclaims black women's agency and shows how forms of self-expression

like poetry help cultivate erotic power. First wave feminists ignored issues of race and class but through writing, a black woman can recognize and expose the hegemony of these constructions which, in effect, allow her and her readership to access their erotic powers and gradually discover their own identities.

The speaker reflects upon her self-discovery when she asserts: "I do not dwell / within my birth nor my divinities," thereby suggesting that she chooses not to be limited solely to her physical, raw self and/or her deeper sense of a spiritual self (Lines 16-7, 4). As an "ageless and half-grown" entity, the speaker simultaneously fuses spirit and body as one (Line 18, 4). She only becomes fully "grown" once she "seeks" to find her "sisters / witches in Dahomey" (Lines 18-20, 4). However, the speaker is "*still* seeking" to find her "sisters"; "still" signifies a shifting of temporality (emphasis added). The speaker is in the present, past, and most importantly, positioned in an ancient or more rooted sense of the past, a past which always permeates the present. Lorde scholar, Margaret Morris, describes this temporal transition as "*Apo koinou*...where a single word or phrase is shared between two distinct, independent syntactic units" (emphasis original, Morris, 179). She writes:

Apo koinou in Lorde's poetry is a way of subordinating the sentence structure to the association of ideas as they are explored further and more deeply through the sequence of the poem...*apo koinou* suspends the temporality or causality normally implied in discrete sentences and their orderly sequence, it allows Lorde's voice to reveal feelings that are

chaotic...sometimes contradictory, without undoing those very features by subordinating the feelings to the ordinary rules of syntax. (Morris, 179)

To build upon Morris's theory of "apo koinou," I would add that Lorde inserts signifiers like "still" to cause a temporal shift in time and space and, additionally, to depict the speaker's erotic emotions. In other words, the speaker elucidates how confusion and chaos stem from "Eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of *Chaos*, and personifying creative power and harmony" (emphasis added, Lorde, 55). The "I" appears to be "still seeking her sisters, the witches of Dahomey"; however, this same line also suggests that "her sisters" are "still seeking" to find the speaker. The speaker and the witches attempt to trace and retrace their spirits from past to present and vice-versa in order to discover their true identities. In the concluding stanza, the speaker returns to the past and refers to herself as "treacherous with old magic" (Line 27, 4). This "old magic" is the erotic power: the unacknowledged force that lies deep in all women.

As Lorde discusses in "Poetry is not a Luxury," sexist and racist groups like those "white male forefathers" have repressed, negated, and silenced black women's knowledge. Yet, as the speaker claims, women continue to hold onto their erotic power at a "magic[al] unwritten" level. This "old magic" seeps into the present and transforms into "the noon's new fury" (Lines 27-8, 4). This transformation implies that black women will no longer remain silent since they will learn to utilize the "old magic" of their "sisters" and fight contemporary hegemonic forces with great "fury." In an interview with Karla Hammond, Lorde comments on the lines "I am treacherous with old magic/and the

noon's new fury"; she discusses how these words relate to "power, strength, what is old and what is new being very much the same" (Morris, 180). Morris argues that readers do not know the addressee to these specific lines because "...the woman is speaking to those who acknowledge for the first time that women have a future of their own but who have not let go of the assumption that she who speaks as a woman must of necessity be white and male-identified" (180). In other words, readers should not assume that she is white and male, given the fact that she openly expresses her thoughts. Morris concludes that the speaker is a "magic, erotic woman" since she chooses to speak at her volition and "embodies authorization not despite but because of being a woman" (181).

To add to Morris's reading, I would argue that the speaker deconstructs traditional gender binaries of the rational male versus the emotional female and accesses her erotic powers. She becomes a culmination of both genders; that is, the speaker embodies the ancient MawuLisa figure. She recognizes the history of her ancient sisters: a history that includes voicing not only the narrative of African-American enslavement but also the exploitation of black women as "breeders." The speaker becomes more erotically charged as she explores the ancient history that informs and influences the nature of her subject position today. "A Woman Speaks," then, creates Lorde's ideal female readership: an intergenerational, bi-racial community of female readers. The poem invites readers from diverse demographics to join together and uncover their erotic powers. As a unified group, these readers can fight against patriarchal forces as well as acknowledge the impact of those ancient histories which have shaped the nature of black female subjectivity today.

Both Lorde's poems, "Coal" and "A Woman Speaks," exemplify Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality in relation to black female empowerment. These poems specifically show readers how social constructions like gender, race, and class intersect on multiple and often simultaneous levels, thereby contributing to the silence imposed upon black women and women of color at large.⁴ But more importantly, both poems demonstrate how to counter these hegemonic forces by writing and voicing the poetic word: the repressed, unrecognized erotic knowledge.

Similar to Lorde and Cixous, Lucille Clifton also explores an *écriture féminine* through poetry. In the early 1980's, an interviewer asked Clifton "Why do you write?" She responded with, "I write to celebrate life" (Johnson, 70). Like Lorde, Clifton's speakers tap into their erotic powers as they un-silence the brutal histories which many (i.e. white males in particular as Lorde notes in "Poetry is Not a Luxury") do not like to remember and record, the history African-American enslavement, particularly the role of the "breeder" that was imposed upon black women. Clifton's poems positively reshape and redefine black people. In succinct, subtle, and insightful verses, she elucidates their vitality and beauty. Stephen Henderson attributes Clifton's short, concise poetry to "mascon" images that pervade much of her work. Mascon is an Afro-Americana phrase that signifies a "massive concentration of black experimental energy" (Johnson, 70). Often, they represent "verbal expressions which evoke a powerful response in the [reader] because of their direct relationship to concepts and events in the collective experience" (Johnson, 70).

While she does not directly hearken to the “mascon” image, Clifton’s autobiographical poem, “i was born with twelve fingers,” definitely invokes a collective experience (*Two Headed Woman*, 1980). Like her mother and daughter, Clifton was born with twelve fingers: six on one hand and six on the other. Mary Jane Lupton argues that the “speaker associates this congenital difference with European witchcraft and with Egyptian royalty” (10), though the speaker never implicitly nor explicitly refers to European witchcraft or Egyptian traditions. Rather, the poem describes this “congenital difference” through vivid bodily images in order to render the black female body as an allegory. By doing so, the speaker highlights the tension between what constitutes a disfigured/disabled body versus a figured/able-bodied individual. More importantly, the speaker celebrates a societal stigma: polydactyl. As she celebrates a seemingly disabling feature, the speaker challenges the Anglo-European model of what Rosemarie Garland-Thompson notes as “the canonical body”: that which adheres to the social paradigm of being white and able-bodied (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 105). Thompson discusses how various twentieth century black women writers like Toni Morrison, Ann Petry, and Audre Lorde depict and celebrate disabled and disfigured bodies as a means to transcend social and cultural limitations. For Thompson, these authors create African-American female characters who are “grounded” in a singular body which bears the etchings of history; their sense of self-validation, power, and identity derive from their physical differences as well as their resistance towards cultural norms (105). These “grounded” characters “...enable a particularized self who both embodies and transcends cultural subjugation, claiming physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior” (105). In other words, Clifton offers this depiction of an African-American female

self “grounded” in an “identity” that resists “cultural norms”; her speaker celebrates her congenital difference of polydactyl and redefines it as a source of power rather than something to be concealed from both the public and her own eyes.

The speaker does not merely celebrate Thompson’s widely quoted expression of the “extraordinary” or disfiguring body. Rather, Clifton shows how the speaker’s difference invisibly connects her to other female members in her family as she reflects:

And we connect

My dead mother my live daughter and me

Through our terrible shadowy hands. (Line 14-8, 166).

This passage includes two medial gaps: one between “my dead mother” and “my live daughter” and another between “my live daughter” and “and me.” The medial gaps symbolize the hiatuses in the past (e.g. death) and present (e.g. live) time. Despite these lapses in time, the disfigured and socially marginalized image of the black female body, those “terrible shadowy hands,” are actually what “connect” the past to present. As the speaker reconnects to her dead mother and daughter, she also taps into “me” or that intrinsic power which lies inside of her body, thereby experiencing Lorde’s erotic power. That is, the disfigured “shadowy hands” symbolically connect mother to daughter and daughter to mother; in doing so, they affirm the speaker’s sense of self (Line 15, 166).

In “i was born with twelve fingers,” Clifton portrays how fragments of the black female body can represent the voices of women not only in her own family, but also to her

readership. As the speaker vividly describes each of her twelve fingers, she becomes vulnerable to her readers. She uses poetry as a medium to fragment her body apart on the page which in turn helps her to facilitate an erotic connection towards her readers. By severing her eleventh and twelfth finger, Clifton ironically intensifies the erotic power of the women in the poem since the fingers that were cut off “take what we want” and “connect” the generations of the women to each other through their invisible, ghostly, “terrible” appearances. In other words, the speaker rejects the poetic formula of, to use Lorde’s words, white male forefathers, by rejecting the sonnet form which concludes on a happily ever after, concluding sestet. Similar to Lorde, Clifton conveys how the erotic power livens when a woman embraces the weaknesses that stem from inside and outside her spiritual and physical self. But more importantly, these are insecurities that she must seek to connect and reconnect to from the generations before her (e.g. ancestors), during her time (e.g. her female readership), and the generations to come (e.g. future offspring). The “ghostly image” of Clifton’s fingers, then, disconcert readers while also inviting them to explore a relationship of fragmentation—the very essence of erotic power.

Clifton’s “homage to my hips” also celebrates the self-affirmation of black women through an isolation of bodily features: the hips. Tracing back to its root in 1595, “homage” referred to a lineage of successors and ancestors. Clifton pays “homage” to her large hips which represent what she once was ashamed to claim ownership over. It is subtle but still apparent how the speaker pays tribute to her forgotten ancestors, enslaved African-American women. But most importantly, the word “homage” represents the reverence one is granted when one sacrifices the self; that is, the

speaker delves into the *écriture féminine* that various systems of self-abnegation attempt to repress. “Homage” is given by the speaker to what embraces the “my” of her “hips” which greatly differs from being claimed through self-definition (i.e. the defined versus the definer). Clifton explores how hips influence the roles of African-American women. She moves from the size of her hips, which is related to confinement, to the freedom of her hips, and concludes by describing the “might” and “magic” of her hips (Lines 1-5, 5-10, 11-5, 168). The speaker rejoices that “these hips are big hips” which implies how tiny hips are neither desirable nor more beautiful (Line 1, 168).

“Homage to my hips” shows how society has imposed a paradigm of slenderness upon women through a) the mass media and, b) the limitations in public and private spheres. The speaker expresses how the “space” of her hips “don’t fit into” small “places,” which suggests that her hips are larger and, therefore, do not represent the model that society endorses (Lines 2, 4- 5, 168). The alliterating p-sound in “little/ petty places” emphasizes how the speaker literally refuses to be tiny, in terms of her physicality, and also figuratively in terms of her mental capacity (Lines 4-5, 168). Robert French reads the speaker’s refusal as knowing “...how to laugh, even when laughter is not the expected response; and what it [i.e. the poem] celebrates, it celebrates against the sorrows of being black and a woman, in this time, this place” (187). French fails to consider, though, how the speaker does not wallow in the “sorrows of being black and a woman”; alternatively, she embraces these supposed “sorrows” and vehemently negates pettiness. Similar to Lorde, Clifton’s speaker refuses to be defined as grotesquely abject and “othered.” The speaker becomes an active subject for she redefines her large hips, the social marker of stigma and ugliness, as a source of

“magic” empowerment. The speaker uses the alliterating m-sound in “mighty” and “magic” to emphasize the empowering qualities of her large hips. These adjectives provide a stark point of contrast for connotations of the adjective “petty” (Lines 11-12, 168). By using uses adjectives like “mighty” and “magic,” the speaker attributes a sense of mysticism to her body.

This same magical quality is also present in Clifton’s “homage to my hair” where the speaker envisions her body parts as separate, alive entities. This particular poem echoes Clifton’s earlier poem, “the way it was,” where she describes how she straightens her hair in order to become more “white” (Johnson, 74). Joyce Johnson, a Lorde scholar and philologist, argues how Clifton pays “homage” to what she was once deeply ashamed of: her body. To further develop Johnson’s reading, I would add that Clifton also claims ownership over her body and asserts her right to define it through celebratory verses. As I discussed earlier, this is a poem where Clifton provides a mascon image: “nappy hair” (Lines 1 and 3, 167). Throughout history, this image has caused shame and humiliation for many black women, causing them to feel socially estranged and “othered.” Stemming from biblical stories such as “Adam and Eve,” the word “hair,” particularly female hair and especially hair of a black woman, holds numerous connotations. “Good” and “bad” adjectives are attributed to female hair in terms of its texture, length, and color. But more importantly, these adjectives supposedly gauge the beauty and self-worth of a woman. While “nappy” is traditionally deemed as a pejorative term, Clifton reinterprets it through succinct, festive verses. She uses verbs like “jump” and “dance” to elucidate the very celebration and aliveness of her “nappy” hair. Coupled with “music,” these words turn reinterpret the signifier, the “bad”

image of nappy hair, as something that is utterly worthy of celebration — a festivity of black womanhood (Line 2, 167). The speaker asserts “the grayer she [i.e. the speaker, presumably Clifton] do get, good God, the blacker she do be!” (Lines 10-11, 167). In these concluding lines, Clifton shifts her diction from mainstream English to black dialect. By doing so, she hearkens back to mascon imagery; she reinforces her pride in being a black woman.

The Masculine Erotic: Examining the Disconnected Sisterly Erotic

In the “homage” poems, Clifton’s speakers’ appear to be empowering figures. The speaker of “homage to hips” refuses to hold her hips “back” and keep them “enslaved,” thereby celebrating black women’s bodies. The tone of “homage to my hips” embodies Lorde’s erotic up until the “man” enters the scene: “I have known them/to put a spell on a man and/spin him like a top!” (Lines 13-5, 168). For Lorde, men are excluded from the erotic community since they have traditionally been the ones to restrict the female voice (e.g. ideologies like patriarchy.) Yet, in this poem, Clifton allows for a man to be present in order for the female to cultivate agency. The speaker’s hips possess magical powers which control and spin a man’s mind like a “top.” The word “top” implies that the man is like a toy which the speaker can “spin” and play with at her disposal. The speaker, then, embodies a semblance of Lorde’s erotic; she utilizes her “free” body as a tool to manipulate a man. The “!” indicates that Clifton, and perhaps even her female readership, gain pleasure through this type of manipulation. Nonetheless, Lorde would argue that this pleasure stems from an “abuse of feeling” since Lordian erotic

communities are based on egalitarianism and connection, not exploitation. Clifton's speaker only sees her hips as a means to exercise her sexual authority over a man; she does not recognize the creative potential that lies in her body and, more importantly, how that creativity can both empower herself and inspire her readers. Learning from Clifton's speaker, readers succumb to the traditional, "pornographic" erotic. They gain the semblance of erotic power as they see the speaker perform a masculine gender performance: using the female body to manipulate the "other" (e.g. man.) Clifton, then, transgresses Lorde's theory of eros which argues for an egalitarian erotic community.

Published at the same time as "homage to my hips," "homage to my hair" elucidates Clifton's masculinized erotic performance. Similar to "homage to my hips," the speaker envisions her body parts as living independent of her volition and encounters her hair as another being. As discussed earlier, critics like Johnson argue that her hair becomes a source of pure celebration, exultation, and most importantly, that which reinforces the speaker's "...recognition of and pride in her blackness" (74). Nevertheless, the speaker still sees her hair as outside of herself. Her identity is displaced as she realizes the power of hair: "i hear the music! my God" (Line 2, 167). Through the music of her hairs' "jump[ing]" and "danc[ing]," the speaker meets the other: her "nappy hair" (Lines 1 and 3, 167). Tiffany Kriner, an eschatologist and literary scholar, argues that the speaker actually empowers herself as she fragments and divides her body parts.⁵ Yet, Kriner does not discuss how the speaker explores racial tension by inserting the socially pejorative and debilitating image of "nappy hair" or hair that is sexually deviant and commonly attributed with kinkiness. "Nappy hair," then, fragments the speaker's sense of self since "she" is removed from the "I" of the speaker (Lines 4 and 3, 167). The speaker only feels

powerful when she sees her body parts separate from herself, thereby suggesting a fragmentation of the speaker's racial identity — a fragmentation that the poem never allows to become whole. The self remains *dis*-unified. The speaker reinforces the stereotypes associated to “nappy hair,” using it to seduce a man like “tasty...good greens.” By doing so, she counters the Lordian erotic because she provides the man with kinky pleasure and, additionally, gains the semblance of what Kriner discusses as black women's empowerment. In lines one through four, the speaker introduces her nappy hair and opens up the possibility for redefining and countering the stereotype. However, lines four through eleven reinforce the traditional role of nappy hair as fulfilling the desires of the “black man” and, more importantly, controlling the man through the sensuality of nappy hair: its “electric fingers” (Line 9, 167). By embodying a tone of control and manipulation, “homage to my hair” also counters the Lordian erotic of intimate, egalitarian relationships.

Both “homage” poems appear to celebrate self-possession and self-ownership. As I analyzed earlier, the word “homage” implies that the speaker pays tribute to her body. Nevertheless, the speaker in “homage to my hips” takes charge of her sexuality only to entertain and control a man; she does, after all, “spin him like a top.” Similarly, the speaker in “homage to my hair” celebrates the musicality and liveliness of her “nappy hair” only to feed it like “tasty...good greens” to a *man* (Line 6, 167). Both poems situate the black female as the seductress who tantalizes the subordinate figure, the man; these speakers cultivate a sense of agency but only by having a man present in the scene and, more importantly, gaining self-satisfaction when they see the men enjoy their physical selves. The homage poems are not an authentic representation of Lorde's

erotic or of Kriner's "self-sacrifice" (196). They do not foster a space for exposing and sharing the speaker's as well as the readers' (i.e. the female readership) vulnerabilities since they rely on manipulating men in order to both access and exercise their erotic powers.

Clifton's "homage" poems depict an eros that transgresses Lorde's; yet Lorde herself contradicts her erotic theory in "Love Poem." The speaker in "Love Poem" celebrates lesbian intimacy and likens vast archetypal landscapes, like mountains, valleys, and forests, to particular parts of the female body. "Earth" denotes a piece of land that one conquers or, in this case, penetrates. The speaker assigns the gender of female to "Earth" when she asserts, "And I [the speaker] knew when I entered her [Earth]" (Line 7, 617). This line indicates that the speaker "enters" the "earth," her female lover, thereby showing how she initiates the sexual act. As the initiator, the speaker represents the "butch" while her lover represents the *femme*.⁶ The speaker/butch describes, "howling into her entrances through lungs of pain," emphasizing her butch role since she "howl[s]" or enters into the femme's "entrances" (Lines 14- 5, 618). By doing so, the femme expresses "lungs of pain" which suggests how the speaker/butch has widened her clitoris. "Love Poem," explores the speaker's physical sensations and pleasures but never expresses the reactions of the receiver: the "Earth" or femme. The "earth" signifies the female body; it is the "mountain," the "valley" that the speaker consumes (Lines 3-4, 617). In this poem, Lorde does not cultivate a space for erotic power because feelings and sensations are not recognized by both the initiator and receiver. The "joy" that transpires between the two is not shared ("Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power, 57, Lorde).

Readers of “Love Poem” only catch a glimpse of the speaker/butch’s erotic experience. At the same time though, the speaker can also represent a “soft butch” because she initiates sexual acts without embodying the masculine stereotypes that are associated with being butch. Judith Halberstam, a feminist and queer studies scholar, describes the soft butch as a lesbian “... with butch tendencies who has not completely masculinized [her] identity” (123). Unlike the classical butch, the soft butch does not represent the tomboy figure. She does not adhere to gender norms; rather, she shifts and alters her gender identities. If the speaker is a soft butch, then she would embody Lorde’s erotic more so than the traditional butch because her acts would not derive from aggression, lust, greed— qualities that define the stereotypical butch. In the beginning of “Love Poem,” the speaker is a soft butch. She describes her “entr[ance]” or the act of penetration like a sweet, “honey[-filled]” experience (Lines 6 and 9, 617). As the speaker “enter[s] her,” she compares parts of the woman’s body to “earth” and asks this “earth” to “speak” and bless the speaker with “what is richest...honey”; this “honey” symbolizes the exchange of bodily fluids. Lorde describes the woman’s “carved,” curvaceous figure through natural images like “mountains” and “valley[s]” (Lines 3-5, 617). These natural images emanate the romantic tone of a soft butch (i.e. the speaker) whose actions are sweet like “honey” and who flows from the “tongues...and...breath” (Lines 10, 12-3, 617).

The tone of “Love Poem” seems to convey the Lordian erotic. It depicts a pleasurable encounter between two lovers who picnic on earth’s glorious “mountains” and “valleys” (Lines 3-4, 617). However, the tone of the poem is not erotic since the speaker is not a soft butch but a classical butch. When read carefully, the reader sees how each line

expresses an action that the speaker initiates. The speaker describes, “And I knew when I entered *her* I was/high wind in *her* forests hollow...on the tips of *her* breasts on *her* navel” (emphasis added, Lines 6-7, and 12, 617). “Her,” or the other woman, is repeated several times in the second stanza. This repetition emphasizes how she is an object that the speaker “howls” through, thereby satisfying her own sexual desires but not necessarily the other woman’s (Lines 6 and 14, 617). Since the reader never hears the voice of “her,” the reader does not know whether or not she enjoys the speaker’s “howling...entrance” (Line 14, 617). The lines “howling into her entrances/lungs of pain” suggest that the “her,” the other woman, experiences an orgasm. Nevertheless, these lines indicate that the speaker forcefully “howls” or thrusts into the other woman, which, in effect, causes “her” discomfort.

In “Love Poem,” the speaker, Audre Lorde, objectifies the “her,” the other woman; as a result, the tone of the poem does not embody the Lordian erotic since the speaker fails to bridge her feelings to the other woman’s. For Lorde, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, 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” (56). In “Love Poem,” the “joy” is not shared since we only hear the speaker’s voice. Hence, the speaker is disconnected from the other woman. Like “her,” readers too are disconnected from the speaker because we never receive an opportunity to engage in the experience of the “Love Poem.” The speaker is always there to “howl” away her own experience and in doing so, dismisses the chance for her partner and readerly community to “howl” back.

Feminine and Masculine Eros: Is there a Correct Utilization and Expression of the Erotic?

Readers share, experience, and interpret the erotic differently in both Lorde and Clifton's poetry. As my analysis shows, the poets shift their stances on the erotic, altering how it is expressed in each of their poems. For instance, the speakers in the "homage" poems tap into the erotic by exercising their sexual agency over men. Contrarily, the speaker in "i was born with twelve fingers" uses the erotic as a means to connect herself to other female members in her family. As we just saw, Lorde herself contradicts her interpretation of the erotic in "Love Poem" where the speaker expresses only her own physical and sexual pleasures. By doing so, this speaker suppresses the other voice that "bridges" the gaps of Lorde's "difference"; the joy is not shared ("Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 57). If the reader reviews the poems discussed in this article, comparing and juxtaposing one to another, he or she sees how the erotic is conveyed contradictorily. This discrepancy suggests that the erotic is more intricate than Lorde's initial definition in the "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."

Through their poetic speakers, Lorde and Clifton manifest how the erotic consists of many layers. The expression of these layers drastically shifts depending on the individual's emotional and physical states as well as their overall objective; that is, what they plan to achieve with their erotic power. While "Love Poem" might not embody an egalitarian, erotic tone, it is still an erotically empowering text since it breaks free from heterosexual gender norms by allowing the speaker, Audre Lorde, to embody a more

masculine persona. That is, Lorde objectifies the other woman as she howls into her entrances. Therefore, the poem cannot simply be deemed to be transgressive through a reversal of gender roles. By allowing her speaker to be the dominator, Lorde challenges established notions of love, sexuality, and ultimately, the poetic conventions of the Eurocentric tradition. She makes the “black mother” the powerful dominator instead of the “white man,” breaking free from Cixous’s marked language of patriarchy and asserting her right to voice the *écriture féminine* (“Poetry is Not a Luxury,” 23). Poets like Lorde and Clifton use poetry as a platform to express a transgressive, provocative, and empowering form of eros. Their poems invite female readers to discover their own “black mother” voice—that voice which whispers thoughts and ideas which misogynistic and traditionally deemed feminist circles have tried to censor and suppress.

Endnotes

¹See Marcel Danesi and Paul Perron’s *Analyzing Cultures* for an excellent, comprehensive overview to the field of cultural semiotics.

²See the documentary *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* for an excellent overview of Lorde’s life and work.

³ For an extensive discussion on blues, West African traditions, and other forms of African-American music, see Paul Oliver’s *Savannah Syncopators: African retentions in the blues*.

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to coin the feminist sociological theory of intersectionality. See Crenshaw’s *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* for an overview on the history of intersectionality in relation to the labor market and feminist theory. For further discussion on how to study intersectionality

as a methodology, see Leslie McCall's "The Complexity of Intersectionality."

⁵ Eschatology is a branch of theological science that often explores concepts like death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Clifton's work is sometimes, but not always, studied by eschatologists since her poems explore the psyche, self, and body in such a way that fragments the self and, as shown in this article, delve into a form of destruction that actually represents creation and life.

⁶ Butch and *femme* are used to represent the gender roles in a homosexual relationship; the word *femme* is the French word for woman. Butch is the woman who performs a masculine gender performance. The butch's behaviorisms, actions, and overall demeanor are characterized as masculine (i.e. the tomboy figure). For further reading, see Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, where she explains the different degrees of being butch (i.e. "stone butch" verses "soft butch," etc).

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