DECONSTRUCTING THE EROTIC: A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF BODIES & VOICE
IN AUDRE LORDE, LUCILLE CLIFTON, NELLA LARSEN, AND TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

My thesis focuses on bodies, voice, and the erotic in Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, Nella Larsen, and Toni Morrison’s works. Their texts show how the erotic is a way to empower Black women. Through writing, these authors give voice to Black women and women of color at large. Each author engages the erotic in a different manner, demonstrating the subtle nuances of how a woman can utilize the erotic. Cultural and Black feminist critics find these differing uses of the erotic to be problematic since they contradict one another; that is, one expression of the erotic includes the use/mis-use of men whereas another relies solely on sisterly/female bonds. My thesis deconstructs these differing expressions of erotic power, explaining the value that scholars can gain from analyzing the varying ways women express erotic power.
I would like to extend my deepest gratitude and thanks to my Graduate Mentor and Thesis Advisor, Dr. Angelyn Mitchell. I would also like to thank my Secondary Thesis Advisor, Dr. David Gewanter. Thank you to the Department of English at Georgetown University for providing me with several Conference Grants that helped further develop the research and writing of this thesis. Thank you to the Department of American Studies at Georgetown University for granting me a Teaching Assistantship in 2009-2010; the pedagogical experience I gained from this position enhanced my research and scholarship. Thank you also to Georgetown University’s Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship for granting me the 2010-2011 Graduate Writing Fellowship; this fellowship helped to support me as I conducted the last nine months of this thesis project. Thank you to my mother, Shahin M. Rashedi, for your unconditional love and support. I could not have conducted this two year project without your encouragement. Lastly, I would like to dedicate my thesis to women who have felt silenced at some point in their lives. I hope that my exploration of as well as deconstruction of the erotic will help express all of those repressions in thought and in action.

Many thanks,
Roxanne Naseem Rashedi
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Introduction: Uses of the Erotic: The Birth of Bodies, Voice, and Agency in Black Feminist Thought

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects — born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (55).

Black feminist theorist, poet, essayist, and gay lesbian activist, Audre Lorde, writes to explore what Robert Patterson describes as “the hierarchies of oppression” (90). Though she wrote poetry in the early 1970’s, Lorde becomes well-known and one of the leading figures in Black feminist studies in the mid to late 1970’s for her poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and later in the 1980’s, her biomythography, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. In conversation with her literary contemporaries like Toni Morrison and bell hooks, Lorde’s writing makes the invisible become visible. As bell hooks notes, Lorde voices the voice of “the people who all in literature were always peripheral — little black girls who were props, background; those people were never center stage and those people were me.” By employing Morrison’s concept of “rememory,” Lorde critiques dominant critical discourses as well as discourses categorized as “left-winged” like the Black Arts and Black Power and Feminist movements. Lorde not only discusses the concept of intersectionality along gender, racial, and class lines, but also in relation to sexuality, or more specifically, identity politics surrounding sexual orientation. As Farah Jasmine Griffin asserts, Black feminist scholars like Lorde were the ones who helped create the conditions for the emergence of other “minority” fields like black queer studies and black masculinities studies (507).

Lorde’s 1978 essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” explores this very
intersectionality of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In this essay, Lorde argues against the traditional uses of the erotic; an example of this usage is pornography where the female body is objectified, thereby never affording the female an opportunity to express and/or recognize her feelings. The pornographic erotic relies on what Lorde notes as the “abuse of feeling”: the repressed voice or more specifically, the voice that relies on policing, censoring, or what French feminist theorist, Hélène Cixous describes as the *marked language* (59). Countering the traditional take on the erotic, Lorde develops a more transgressive form of eros, inviting female readers to participate actively in the act of reading. She challenges readers to question how their subject position (i.e. in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality) influences if not determines their moral, social, and political views.iii Lorde shows women how to access the “creative harmony” of the erotic by emphasizing a system of *expression instead of repression*. The reader can access this expressive, erotic voice by recognizing her deepest vulnerabilities and insecurities, by investigating her sensations in the spiritual, mental, and bodily realms, and, lastly, by experiencing her exploration of self-doubt and self-discovery in a supportive, nurturing community of women where sensations (which now have been transformed into feeling after being recognized and acknowledged) can be shared.

Published just a year before Lorde’s erotic is Barbara Smith’s “Toward a Black feminist Criticism.”iv Similar to Lorde, Smith argues how a Black feminist approach to literature must discuss the politics surrounding sexuality (or more precisely, black lesbianism), race, and social class. She asserts how white feminist and black male critics fail to seriously and critically engage with Black women’s writing. To that end, she proposes a model for the Black feminist critic, guiding her through three key steps: “(1) work from the assumption that black women writers constitute an identifiable tradition; (2) look for precedents and insights in
interpretation within the works of other black women and be aware of the political implications of her work and assert the connections between it and the political situation of all Black women; and (3) overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions” (Patterson, 94). Smith’s methodology elucidates how a critique of Black women’s writing must utilize Black women’s own writing in order to consider the ways in which Black women writers have conceptualized their life experiences. She argues that Black women writers use a “specifically Black female language to express their own and their characters’ thoughts” (417). Hence, her approach aimed to show the relationships that exist among all Black women writers. To further emphasize her third claim, Smith provides, at the time, an extremely provocative reading of *Sula* (1973). She classifies it as a “lesbian novel.” Patterson discusses, thought, how Smith does not literally mean lesbian; she characterizes *Sula* as a lesbian novel since “it critiqued the institution of marriage and focused on the relationship between women” (95). *Sula* is a “lesbian novel” since Sula the character is skeptical towards heterosexual relationships (i.e. marriage and family), and Sula and Nel form an intimate bond which helps them discover their sense of self. For Smith, *Sula* creates a sacred, homoerotic, safe space between two women.

Smith and Lorde see the erotic as a means to generate voice for silenced women, particularly African-American lesbian women. One wonders though if the erotic is still useful in light of the institutionalization of feminist studies since 1978. While Lorde’s essay helped “bridge” those “intersectional” gaps between women (i.e. in terms of racial and class identity and sexuality), contemporary students and scholars of Black feminist studies should deconstruct Lorde’s theory of the erotic by asking the following questions: If a woman still feels silenced by what Cixous describes as a patriarchal, *marked language* (i.e. that which
reinforces traditional heteronormative gender roles) and, additionally, how exactly a woman should *express* and *utilize* her erotic power. But more importantly, critics should recognize that how a woman expresses her erotic power varies greatly; that is, how the erotic is expressed and utilized depends on the social, historical, cultural, and gender norms of the time that a particular literary text was published. Lastly, scholars should challenge Lorde’s notion of an erotic space that embraces female community and instead, explore the possibility of an erotic power that does not depend upon cultivating sisterhood but rather, *deconstructing* the very parameters that *construct* female communities.

My thesis investigates this deconstruction of the erotic in the works of Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, Nella Larsen, and Toni Morrison. The thesis is divided into three chapters: “Masculine versus Feminine Eros: Sisterly Communities or Divisions?,” “From the Harlem Renaissance to Second and Third Wave American Feminism: Contextualizing and Re-contextualizing the Erotic in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula,*” and the concluding chapter, “Is the Erotic still Useful? (De)-constructing the Twentieth Century Erotic Voice.” The first chapter offers detailed close-readings of Clifton and Lorde’s poetry, focusing on how these poets simultaneously engage in masculine and feminine gender performances to cultivate erotic power. In order to contextualize gender performance and sexuality, this chapter briefly draws upon Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity.* Halberstam’s discussion on the butch/femme concept helps further deconstruct the erotic in Clifton and Lorde’s works. The second chapter compares and contrasts the homoerotic subtext in Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), analyzing the strong, intimate female bond between Clare and Irene and Sula and Nel. This chapter does not merely compare the two works. Rather, it historically situates how these four Black American female characters
defined and expressed their erotic power in the cultural and social moment of their time. My analysis of these texts demonstrate how characters like Clare and Sula transgress heteronormative gender roles in order to tap into their interpretation of erotic power; that is, one that is not contingent upon cultivating female community and/or supporting the goals of the Black Arts and Black Power movements (i.e. that of “uplifting the race.”) The concluding chapter, “Is the Erotic still Useful? (De)-constructing the Twentieth Century Erotic Voice,” analyzes how the erotic is expressed across genres: poetry, fiction, non-fiction. In this cross-genre study, I elucidate that how the female speakers’/characters’ choose to utilize their erotic power influences and inform the stylistic form of the genre. This chapter situates the text socially, historically, and culturally; additionally, it discusses how the writer transgresses the stylistic norms of the genre. That is, the traditional readerly expectations of the genre are challenged and brought to question as the reader encounters differing and often, as we will soon in Lorde’s poetry and non-fiction/poetics, contradictory utilizations of erotic power.

Before turning to my analysis, I will provide an introductory overview of the history and tradition of Black feminist studies. My introduction is by no means meant to be comprehensive; it highlights the key figures, communities, and texts pertaining to Black women’s writing and scholarship. Understanding the historical, political, and social factors, as well as the literary predecessors of Larsen, Clifton, Lorde, and Morrison, helps scholars to better understand Black women’s bodies and the role that the erotic plays in cultivating agency and voice.

Historical Overview of Bodies and the Erotic in Post-Modern African-American and French Feminist Thought: “La Venus Hottentote” A.K.A. Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman: The Violation, Abuse, and Exposure of the Black Female Body
During the nineteenth century, Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman, was exhibited as a
freak show attraction all over Europe under the notorious name, Hottentot Venus. In 1652,
European immigrants colonized Southern Africa, particularly the Cape region where Baartman
originated from; as they colonized this region, they also decided to mock the Khoikhoi people,
labeling them as Hottentots in imitation of the sound of the Khoisan languages. Thus, the term
Hottentot is now considered as a derogatory, offensive term. Many historians, feminists, and
cultural critics are reclaiming and re-signifying “La Venus Hottentote’s” true name: Saartjie
(Sarah) Baartman.

Baartman was exhibited in England and Paris as “the Hottentot Venus.” She entertained
Europeans by spinning her nude buttocks. Europeans treated Baartman like an animal; often,
she was caged in these freak show exhibitions as the audience jeered and laughed at what they
perceived to be highly unusual, excessively large bodily features. Baartman was taken to
France, in the interregnum of Napoleon's exile where she became the object of “scientific”
research as well as crude entertainment. When she died in 1816, Baartman’s body was
dissected, leaving her pickled brain and sex organs for display at Paris's National Museum of
Natural History. In 1985, nearly a hundred and seventy years later, there was an international
outcry for the return of Baartman's remains to her hometown: The Cape of Good Hope.
Baartman was stripped of her land, language, and culture. She was forced to live in exile,
suffering immense violations of human rights. Hence, her return to The Cape of Good Hope
restored the dignity and proper place of a Khoisan ancestor; an ancestor that represented “the
recognition of indigenous identities that had been eclipsed not only by colonialism and
apartheid, but by the rhetoric of rainbow nationalism as well Paris museums up to 1985”
(Warner, 182).
During and shortly after Baartman’s proper burial, numerous academics retold the “Hottentot Venus” story by questioning early nineteenth-century understandings of race and sexuality, as well as scrutinizing the practice of imperialism. They elucidated how the Black female body has been categorized as “the other”; that is, how “others” (i.e. primarily white Europeans) have exposed and violated Black women’s’ bodies, thereby “othering” them as objects, rather than human subjects. However, as Nadja Durbach notes, many scholars have relied on “a rather limited, and almost exclusively European, archive, as it has been widely assumed that it is impossible to uncover other source material that sheds light on Baartman herself” (858).vi In other words, critics reproduce the kind of essentialism that they intend to critique (Durbach, 858). Recent scholarship, namely, Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais’s Sarah Baartman and the Hottentot Venus, investigates Baartman’s story through a biographical approach. Over years of archival research, Scully and Crais discover that Baartman was actually thirty years old when she moved to London rather than being the vulnerable fourteen-year-old that many scholars assumed (306). Prior to the exhibitions, Baartman had worked as a nursemaid and a washing woman, and had moved from rural frontier to the urban diversity of Cape Town. Scully and Crais conclude:

Despite the obvious appeal of the image of the noble savage wronged by avaricious colonizing men, the trope of Sara Baartman as the innocent indigenous woman occludes a more complex rendering of her…she was no colonial naïf wrenched immediately from the frontier…taken to London….Her considerable time in Cape Town and her experiences as a servant, mother, and lover suggest a life that was complex and rich, framed by violence, and ultimately tragic. (306)

Cultural critics are reproducing the very essentialist approach that they critique, mimicking the
“othering” behaviors of early Europeans by not adequately researching and educating themselves as well as their audience on Baartman’s complete biography. Instead, they choose to tell the story that reinforces the “other” stereotype: the tragic story of the Black woman who was eroticized and “othered” as an object/commodity due to what society labeled as an excessively large physique. While white Europeans manipulated and took advantage of Baartman, Scully and Crais trace how Baartman had ownership over her property rights (i.e. her exhibition tours, etc.) Though, as Crais and Scully claim, this does not discredit the fact that Baartman was not in control of her life choices; however, it reveals the “other” silent threads of Sarah Baartman’s life, showing how she, too, expressed and utilized an erotic form of power in her specific cultural, social, and political situation.

From the Hottentot Venus to The Black Arts Movement and Harlem Renaissance: A more Subtle, Nuanced Analysis of Gender, Racial, and Class Inequality in 20th Century America

The year of 1920 marks not only the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance but it is marks the one-hundred year anniversary of Sarah Baartman’s death. From the 1920’s through the mid 1960’s, Black women’s bodies were not being showcased as “the other,” “La Venus Hottentote” freak; nevertheless, hegemongic structures like patriachy still abused Black women’s bodies, dictating how Black women should perform their gender. Additionally, patriachy limited a Black woman’s ability to climb up the social ladder and therefore, achieve the “American Dream” of landing a higher class identity or rather, subject position in American society. As Madhu Dubey notes in Black women Novelists and the National Aesthetic, Black feminist studies was in direct response to the masculinist bias of the civil ights and especially the Black Power and Black Arts movements. During these movements, Black men often situated a Black woman as an object rather than a subject; Black women primarily
functioned to serve Black men, helping them uplift the black community. As Black women aided in this racial uplifting, it was assumed and often expected that they ignore any gender biases and prejudice in light of further advancing the welfare of all black Americans.

The Black Arts Movement started in 1965, breaking apart around 1975. It was actually during this time, 1970 specifically, that Toni Cade Bambara published one of the foundational texts of Black feminist studies: *The Black woman: An Anthology*. The volume included contemporary poetry, short stories, essays, and critical analysis by an emerging generation of Black women. Bambara and her contributors saw the anthology as a space for Black women writers to demonstrate their erotic power through the written word, thereby un-silencing their repressed stories. As Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses, Bambara’s anthology is not a feminist document; rather, it expresses diverse opinions about the status and place of Black women in the black freedom and women’s rights movement. vii

Barbara Christian was one of the foremost Black feminist theorists to date. In “The Race for Theory” (1990), Christian argues against critics with a misogynistic bent like Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, developing another section in African American literary studies: Black feminist criticism and theory. Christian’s *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (1980) was the first book-length scholarly study that analyzed Black women writers and, additionally, established a tradition of Black women writing in the United States. For Christian, critics like Baker and Gates value European poststructuralist theory; by doing so, they dismiss the potential diversity of thought in Black thinkers, narrowing notions of what constitutes theory. Baker’s “move toward esoteric theorizing was a blatant move away from politics” (Griffin, 168). “Politics” implies not only issues of race and class, but also how gender intersects or plays into identity politics surrounding race and class.
1970 marks only the beginning of how Black female writers and critics explored intersectionality: a feminist methodology that studies “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations” (McCall). VIII Black female writers and critics have employed intersectionality in their writing to examine how social constructions like gender, race, class, and disability interact and intersect on multiple and often simultaneous levels, thereby contributing to social injustices and inequalities imposed upon Black women and women of color at large. Readers see intersectionality at play in 1969 and 1970 with Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black woman: An Anthology* (1970). Literary geniuses like Alice Walker turned to the “lost works,” or what many Black feminist scholars deem as foremother to Black feminist studies: Zora Neale Hurston. In 1972, Mary Helen Washington published “The Black woman’s Search for Identity: Zora Neale Hurston’s Work” in *Black World*, a publication primarily devoted to analyzing Hurston’s works. Writers like Walker turned to Hurston as an important literary foremother not only because her work focused on Black women but also because of the way that her work had been treated by Richard Wright and the critical establishment that followed him. Critics like Washington and Walker sought to analyze Hurston’s work with a keener eye; Walker, for example, admired how Hurston used black folk culture and depictions of the black South.

Inspired by Hurston’s work, Walker first publishes “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” (1973). Nearly a decade after, she publishes an essential collection of essays in Black feminist studies, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), in which she coins one of the key terms to describe the experiences and perspectives of women of color:
womanist/womanist theology. Walker derives the term from the African American folk term *womanish*, often used to describe a young girl who is bold, precocious, and curious. A womanist is a Black feminist who loves women sexually and asexually. Womanists fight for the rights of both Black women and men. Unlike second-wave feminists who ignored and silenced Black women and all women of color, womanists voice the stories of Black women and underrepresented minorities at large. As Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor note, “Feminist theory, aided by French feminist theories born out of post-structuralism, became a useful tool in literary analyses that sought to understand the role of gender as the roles of patriarchy and sexism in American society and culture; *race*, however, was not an integral part of these particular interrogations” (emphasis added, 3).ix Mitchell and Taylor discuss how writers like Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington interrogate how race and gender, and I would add, class, permeates and influences the writings and lives of Black women writers.

Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* explores “the nexus of race, gender, and power in African-American lives as depicted by African-American women writers” (Mitchell and Taylor, 3). It helped shape the direction of Black feminist criticism in three ways: firstly, critics had to uncover, teach, and write about the “lost” works by African-American women that led to contemporary writers like Morrison and Walker; secondly, critics needed to create a critical vocabulary and framework for discussing works by Black female writers; lastly, critics theorized the literature, employing the critical practices of Black feminist studies.x Mary Helen Washington is one of the many scholars who uncovers these “lost” works, publishing essential anthologies for Black feminist scholars, namely: *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black women* (1975), *Midnight Birds: Stories by*
Contemporary Black women Writers (1980), and Invented Lives: Narratives of Black women, 1860–1960 (1987). Washington’s anthologies reintroduced Black women writers to literary circles and, additionally, analyzed the literary themes, narrative structures, and concerns that held them together, thereby theorizing the practice of the womanist tradition.

Anthologies like Washington’s created a space for Black female writers to showcase their nonlinear, rich, complicated narratives. Often, novels by writers like Morrison and Jones include unconventional Black women characters like the amoralistic Sula. As Patterson notes,

Unlike the civil rights and Black Power movements, which privileged Black men’s empowerment over Black women (and often contributed to their oppression), and the white women’s liberation movement, which attempted to gain rights for white middle-class women, black feminism used black and their experiences of disenfranchisement as the basis for constructing a model by which to eradicate oppression.\textsuperscript{xi}

By introducing readers to characters like Sula or Larsen’s Clare, these writers create literature that responded to and critiqued, as Patterson claims, the misogynistic bent of the Black Power and civil rights movements in addition to the “white women’s liberation movement” which tended to normalize all female experiences as racially white/classed as middle to upper. But more importantly, these writes critiqued canonical Black male writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, as well as the male-centered politics of the Black Power and Black Arts movements out of which most of what is considered, Black feminist writing and theory, emerged. Hence, the Black feminist movement, in contrast to the white women’s liberation movement, sought to obliterate their subject position at the bottom of the “social ladder” (i.e. as gendered female and raced as black) in order to eradicate not only their oppression but “ameliorate oppression for everyone” (Patterson, 90).
Chapter I: Masculine versus Feminine Eros: Sisterly Communities or Divisions?

Bridging and Connecting: Examining the Feminine Erotic in Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton

In their poetry, Clifton and Lorde employ an eros that is traditionally deemed as feminine by having their speakers expose their deepest vulnerabilities and insecurities as well as having them 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 to discuss how their differing subject positions informs 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. In short, they discover the power of the feminine erotic: a power that bridges gaps of difference, thereby situating people on the same playing field so one person’s thoughts, values, and overall subject position is not perceived as superior to another.

Lorde explores how to access the feminine erotic via poetry in her seminal 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 true, divine spirit, full of creativity, vitality. Though, 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,” Cixous also defines a feminine practice, an écriture feminine, in her notable essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). Like Lorde, Cixous asserts that feminine writing is impossible since “it will
always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system.” In “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power,” Lorde also discusses these “phallocentric systems,” describing them 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. By freeing the self through creative writing, women not only liberate themselves from that Lordian silence, but they also deconstruct the very social constructions (i.e. race, gender, sexual orientation, class) that limit their erotic potential.

Lorde taps into Cixous’s écriture feminine with her poem, “Coal.” The tone of “Coal” embodies the erotic as the speaker asserts her ability to express, to voice, and ultimately, to claim ownership over one’s 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,” reaffirming Lorde’s theory that poems or more specifically, language, shapes one’s reality: the way one experiences life.

“Coal” discusses how to conceptualize 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.” 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. The speaker in “Coal” explores the varying sentiments one sign evokes as she alters the interpretant signs she uses to decode that 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 still analyzes words that are simultaneously intermediary and fixed. By doing so, the speaker shows how language can never fully capture or decode sign
into 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 . . ./ Some words/ bedevil me,” the speaker structures the interpretant signs like “bedevil,” “breeding,” and “adders” in such a way that 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” or rather, 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 signifies a total absence of color and absorption from any source of light, suggesting that the speaker’s womb, the place where life and voice can come into being, is silenced. The speaker further 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, though, 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; it is 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, though, in order to create and foster a community of female readers that will discover the speaker’s as well as their own voice of “coal”: that which is buried deep down in the strata of earth. For Lorde, the political is not separate from the personal but rather, they are intertwined. Political issues like race, class, and sexual orientation become personal as the language of power (i.e. law) enacts if not determines how these social constructs shape the nature of one’s way of life. The poem’s tone of repression, then, shows how the speaker is fully awake to the world, “bridging” the gaps between the political and personal. The speaker employs the extended metaphor of “coal” not only to express her anger towards racist attitudes and sexual harassment, but to also elucidate how the use of anger can be erotic. Anger helps invoke as well as inspire expression instead of repression. Readers of “Coal” learn how to manage the anger that they have towards themselves and others in their readerly community, transforming 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” also shows how the erotic is accessible through poetry; that is, the act of uttering the signs/signers which intrinsically relate to the bodily, visceral sensations. Fighting breast cancer for over fourteen years, Lorde describes
how poetry helped to strengthen her voice. Towards the end of her life, she expresses how her voice had weakened; nevertheless, she resiliently kept writing, hearing, uttering, and embodying the very words that made up her poems. For Lorde, poetry is connected to its oral quality. Like “Coal” with its diverse patterns of interpretant signs and imagery, “A Woman Speaks” also provokes readers to discuss the identity politics surrounding race, gender, sexual identity, and class.

Despite the fact that society designates the speaker of “A Woman Speaks” at the bottom of the social pole (i.e. raced as black, sexed as lesbian, and gendered as female), she asserts her right to voice throughout the entire poem, most explicitly in the concluding lines: “I am /woman/ and not white.” Contrary to the phrasing of the title, “A Woman Speaks,” these lines specify how the speaker identifies as a woman of color and more importantly, how a woman of color becomes the status quo or norm instead of the always already differed, “othered” group (emphasis added). The title of the poem coupled with these concluding lines relates to what Lorde describes as different types of discourse that are based upon race and gender. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” she 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” represents the creative erotic force that is willing to be and feel vulnerable; it is a voice outside of Eurocentric rationalism.

“A Woman Speaks” moves beyond Eurocentric ideals and white and black patriarchy by interweaving West African religious tradition with the speaker’s life experiences. The speaker taps into the spiritual power of the West African religion when she 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. Lorde inserts MawuLisa into the poem to perhaps counter traditional gender divisions (i.e. men as the rational, logical and woman as the irrational, emotional.) By doing so, 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). She has the power to speak and define instead of being defined by socially limiting labels like black, female, and lesbian. As the definer, the speaker repositions these marginal categories. She is Lorde’s “Black Mother” poet who whispers her “magic” into readers’ ears via poetry.

MawuLisa is not the only powerful erotic figure that the speaker draws from West African religion. She declares that “no favor/untouched by blood,” perhaps referring to the “blood” shed by the Dahomean Amazon warriors. Asking for “no favor” and full of “pride,” this mythic/contemporary speaker is proud but vulnerable to making 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; she 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. That is, a vision that is not solely for “white…women” but for women of all colors (Lines 31-3, 4). The speaker reclaims Black women’s agency, showing how mediums like poetry help cultivate erotic power. As a Black woman taps into her erotic power, she gradually will discover her identity devoid of
external, hegemonic impositions (i.e. patriarchy, 1st wave feminists that ignore issues of race and class, etc.)

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). Though, 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. Amitai Avi-ram 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 add to Avi-ram’s concept of “apo koinou,” Lorde inserts signifiers like “still” to not merely cause a temporal shift in time and space but to depict the speaker’s erotic emotions. In other words, the speaker elucidates how confusion and chaos are associated with the erotic or that which stems from “Eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and
personifying creative power and harmony” (emphasis added, Lorde, 55). The lyrical “I” appears to be “still seeking her sisters, the witches of Dahomey”; however, the same line also suggests that “her sisters” are “still seeking” the speaker herself. The speaker and the witches are simultaneously “seeking” each other, attempting to symbolically trace and retrace their spirits from past to present and vice-a-versa in order to further discover their own identities.

In the concluding stanza, the speaker again returns to the past, referring to herself as “treacherous with old magic” (Line 27, 4). This “old magic” is the erotic power: the unacknowledged power 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 that “magic[al]unwritten” level. Similar to the prior stanza, this “old magic” permeates the potential magic of the present by transforming into “the noon's new fury” (Lines 27-8, 4). This transformation implies that Black women will no longer remain silent. They will utilize the “old magic” of their “sisters” to 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,” discussing how these words relate to “power, strength, what is old and what is new being very much the same” (Morris, 180). Morris notes how readers do not know the addressee to these specific lines. She argues that this is 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 the speaker is raced as white and gendered as male, given the fact that she openly expresses her thoughts.
Morris concludes that the speaker is a “magic, erotic woman” since she does not wait for anyone to authorize, validate, and/or give her consent to speak (181). Rather, the “speaker embodies authorization not despite but because of being a woman” (181). I would add, though, that the speaker is able to tap into her erotic power because she deconstructs gender binaries of the rational male versus the emotional female; the speaker is a culmination of both genders, embodying the ancient MawuLisa figure. But more importantly, the speaker 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 delves deep inside not only herself, but also into the ancient history that informs and influences the nature of her subject position today. “A Woman Speaks,” then, creates Lorde’s ideal female readership. That is, an intergenerational, bi-racial community of female readers. The poem invites readers from a diverse demographic to gather and uncover the power that lies within them by fighting against patriarchal forces as well as acknowledging the impact of those ancient histories that have shaped the nature of Black female subjectivity today.

Published in Lorde’s 1978 collection, *The Black Unicorn* which includes both “Coal” and “A Woman Speaks,” explores 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. But more importantly, both poems demonstrate how to counter these hegemonic forces by voicing, writing, and literally uttering the poetic word: the repressed, unrecognized erotic knowledge.

In conversation with Lorde and Cixous, Clifton too explores an écriture feminine via
poetry. In the early 1980’s, Clifton was asked “Why do you write?” (Johnson, 70). She answered with, “I write to celebrate life” (Johnson, 70). Like Lorde, Clifton’s speakers are erotic since they express the bitterness and pain that stem from brutal histories which some do not like to remember and/or record: the history African-American enslavement, particularly the role of the “breeder” that was imposed upon Black women. Her poems positively reshape and redefine Black people, elucidating their vitality and beauty in generally succinct, subtle, and insightful verses. 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 experiential 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).

Though not directly hearkening to the “mascon” image, Clifton definitely invokes a collective experience in her autobiographical poem, “i was born with twelve fingers” (Two-Headed Woman, 1980). Clifton was born with twelve fingers, six on one hand and six on the other, as were her mother and her daughter. 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 and/or Egyptian traditions. Rather, I would argue that the poem describes this inherited difference, these bodily images, in order to render the Black female body as an allegory. By doing so, the poem elucidates the tension between disfigured/disabled and figured/able-bodied individuals. More importantly, though, the speaker celebrates what society continually stigmatizes her and the other female members in her family for: polydactyl. As she celebrates what society deems to be a disabling feature, the speaker challenges the Anglo-European paradigm of what Rosemarie
Garland-Thompson describes as “the canonical body”: that which adheres to the social paradigm of being white and able-bodied (Extraordinary Bodies, 105). Thompson discusses how various 20th 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.

She asserts that these authors create characters that offer an African-American female self grounded in the singular body that bears the etchings of history and whose validation, power, and identity derive from physical difference and resistance to cultural norms…enabling a particularized self who both embodies and transcends cultural subjugation, claiming physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior. (105).

As Thompson notes, Clifton offers this depiction of an “African-American female self grounded” in an “identity” that resists “cultural norms.” The speaker celebrates her congenital difference of polydactyl as a source of power rather than something to be shunned, ashamed about.

Though, 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, polydactyl, invisibly connects her to female family members. The speaker reflects:

And we connect

My dead mother my live daughter and me

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

In this passage, there are two medial gaps: one between “my dead mother” and “my live daughter” and another between “my live daughter” and “and me.” The medial gaps are a symbol for 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”: the intrinsic power that lies within her body. The speaker experiences Lorde’s erotic power; the disfigured “terrible shadowy hands” become a source of empowerment, celebration, and ultimately, a thread that connects mother to daughter, daughter to mother, and most importantly, affirms a woman’s sense of self (Line 15, 166).

In “i was born with twelve fingers,” Clifton unsettles the Black female body, showing how fragments of the self can represent the voice of women not only in her own family, but also to her readership. As the speaker exposes each of her twelve fingers, she becomes vulnerable to herself as well as to readers; the speaker fragments her body to facilitate a deep, erotic connection with other women. Severing the eleventh and twelfth fingers, 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, of white male forefathers, by rejecting the sonnet form which concludes on a happily ever after, concluding sestet. Similar to Lorde, Clifton too sees how female erotic power originates in embracing the weaknesses that stem from inside and out the spiritual and physical self; but more importantly, though, these are insecurities that the self 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.) Clifton’s fingers disconcert readers while also establishing the potential for erotic power: a relationship through fragmentation.
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, ancestors. Clifton pays “homage” to what she once was ashamed to claim ownership over, her large hips. Subtle but still apparent, though, is how the speaker pays tribute to her forgotten ancestors: enslaved African-American women. But most importantly, the title word “homage” represents the reverence one is granted when sacrificing the self or rather, exposing the écriture feminine that various systems of self-abnegation forcefully attempt to repress. In other words, the “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, moving 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,” implying that a small waistline is neither desirable nor more beautiful (Line 1, 168).

“Homage to My Hips” shows how women have been oppressed by the societal paradigm of slenderness through a) the mass media and, b) the limitations in public and private spheres (e.g. work and personal relationships.) The speaker expresses how the “space” of her hips “don’t fit into” small “places” which suggests that her hips are larger; hence, they do not represent the paradigm that society endorses (Lines 2, 4-5, 168). The alliterating p-sound in “little/ petty places” emphasizes how the speaker refuses to be tiny literally, in terms of her physicality, and 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
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.” The speaker embodies Lorde’s erotic as she vehemently negates pettiness or rather, to be defined as grotesquely abject, “othered,” and essentially, to be defined as an object. The speaker is the subject, the definer, actively redefining her large hips, the signified feature of social stigma and ugliness, as beauty and more importantly, as a source of “magic” empowerment. Similar to Lorde, Clifton redefines social categories of, in this context, beauty through a poem of self-affirmation. Moreover, the speaker asserts that hips have empowering qualities as she uses the alliterating m-sound in “mighty” and “magic.” These adjectives provide a stark point of contrast for connotations of the adjective “petty” (Lines 11-12, 168). By using adjectives like “mighty” and “magic,” the speaker attributes a sense of mysticism to her body, or more specifically, to her hips.

That same magical quality also embodies Clifton’s alive, dancing, “nappy” hair in “homage to my hair.” Similar to “homage to my hips,” the speaker in this poem sees outside of herself, envisioning her body parts as living independent of her volition. The speaker encounters her hair as another being. This particular poem echoes to one Clifton’s earlier poems entitled “the way it was” in which she writes of straightening her hair and “trying to be white” (Johnson, 74). As Johnson rightfully notes, Clifton pays “homage” to a part of her of which she was once ashamed. To add to Johnson’s point, though, she also claims ownership over her body, asserting her right to define it how she will through simple, succinct, 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 woman raced as black, holds numerous connotations. “Good” and “bad” adjectives are attributed to female hair in terms of its texture, length, and/or color. But more importantly, these adjectives supposedly gauge the beauty and self-worth of a woman. Though “nappy” is traditionally deemed as a pejorative term, Clifton reinterprets it, celebrating the “nappy” aliveness of her black hair. Verbs like “jump” and “dance” elucidate this very celebration. 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, hearkening back to mascon imagery by reinforcing her recognition of and pride in her blackness.

The Masculine Erotic: Examining the Disconnected Sisterly Erotic in Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton

In the “homage” poems, Clifton’s speakers’ appear to be empowering figures. The speaker of “homage to hips” celebrates Black women’s bodies as she refuses to hold her hips “back” and keep them “enslaved.” The tone of the poem 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 traditionally restricted 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 (i.e. the speaker) to cultivate agency. Her hips possess magical powers, controlling a man’s mind and spinning him 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, does not embody Lorde’s erotic since she utilizes her “free” hips to exercise power over another. That is, she utilizes her body as a tool to manipulate a man, producing the semblance of the erotic. This speaker demonstrates Lorde’s “abuse of feeling” since she, along with her female community of readers/listeners, gains pleasure through manipulating another (59). Manipulating others by exploiting the female body falls contrary to a Lordian erotic; that is, an erotic based on community, egalitarianism, and connection. Clifton’s speaker does not acknowledge the power that lies in her hips; she views them only as a means to gain sexual authority over men rather than recognizing the potential that her hips hold for herself and more importantly, what they can do for her out in the world. Consequently, the speaker is unable to share any newfound knowledge, or what Lorde argues as that creative erotic which lies deep in the female body, to women who can learn from her rediscovered erotic powers as well share their own discoveries.

Clifton’s speaker succumbs to the traditional erotic: the “pornographic,” the “abuse of feeling” (Lorde, 59). For Clifton, the woman utilizes her hips, to put a “spell on a man,” manipulating him through the sensual pleasures that her body invokes. Hence, Clifton represents an erotic that embodies a more masculine gender performance since she uses her body to manipulate the “other”: a man. She transgresses Lorde’s theory of eros which argues for a female erotic community.

Published at the same as “homage to my hips,” “homage to my hair” elucidates Clifton’s masculinized erotic performance. Similar to “homage to my hips,” the speaker sees outside of herself, envisioning her body parts as living independent of her volition. The speaker encounters her hair as another being. As discussed earlier, critics like Johnson and I myself 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 sees her hair as outside of herself. As a result, 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 “I” or speaker meets the other: her “nappy hair” (Lines 1 and 3, 167). Kriner argues that the speaker’s displacement of identity, fragmentation of bodily features, results in self-empowerment. Though, Kriner does not discuss how the speaker explores racial tension by inserting the socially pejorative and debilitating image of “nappy hair”: hair that is sexually deviant 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. That is, the self remains dis-unified. For Lorde, the speaker’s hair would not represent power since it reiterates the stereotype associated with “nappy hair.” The hair is used to seduce a man like “tasty…good greens,” providing him with sexual, kinky pleasure and, additionally, providing the speaker with the semblance of what Kriner discusses as Black women’s empowerment. In lines one through four, the speaker introduces her nappy hair, opening up the possibility for redefining and countering the stereotype. However, lines four through eleven reinforce the traditional role of nappy hair as that which fulfills the desires of the “black man” as well as controlling the man through the sensuality of nappy hair: its “electric fingers” (Line 9, 167).

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 parts and features. Nevertheless, the speaker in “homage to my hips” takes charge of her sexuality only to
put a show on for a man, spinning 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 celebrate the Black female body, situating the Black
female as the seductress who tantalizes the subordinate figure, the man; the speaker cultivates a
sense of agency but only by having a man present in the scene and more importantly, gaining
self-satisfaction at seeing the man enjoy her bodily features. The homage poems are not an
authentic representation of Lorde’s erotic or a manifestation 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 allow for men to be present as well as rely on
manipulating men to gain erotic power.

Clifton’s “homage” poems depict an eros that transgresses Lorde’s; though, Lorde herself
contradicts her erotic theory in “Love Poem.” The speaker in “Love Poem” celebrates lesbian
intimacy, likening vast archetypal landscapes, like mountains, valleys, and forests, to particular
parts of the female body. “Earth” denotes the nature and quality of soil: a piece of land that one
conquers or, in this case, penetrates. The speaker genders “Earth” female as she asserts, “And I
[the speaker] knew when I entered her” (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*. The
speaker/butch describes, “howling into her entrances through lungs of pain,” emphasizing the
speaker’s role as the butch 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, never expressing the feelings and/or 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). “Love Poem” is one-sided since readers only hear one side: the speaker/butch’s side.

At the same time though, the speaker can also represent a “soft butch”; that is, she initiates sexual acts without embodying the masculine stereotypes associated with being butch. Halberstam describes, “The soft butch is [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 is androgynous, shifting gender identities instead of adhering strictly to gender norms. If the speaker is a soft butch, then she would embody Lorde’s erotic more so than the traditional butch because she initiates sexual acts without aggression, lust, greed — qualities that define the stereotypical butch. In the beginning of “Love Poem,” the speaker appears to be a soft butch, describing 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,” asking “earth” to “speak” and bless the speaker with “what is richest”: to be filled with “honey” or rather, to exchange sexual fluids. By using metaphors like “mountains” and “valley[s],” the speaker describes the woman’s “carved” or curvaceous figure (Lines 3-5, 617). The naturalistic imagery emanates a romantic tone of the soft butch (i.e. the speaker) who acts sweetly like “honey” and flows from the “tongues…and…breath” (Lines 10, 12-3, 617).

“Love Poem” seems to illustrate Lorde’s concept of the erotic, depicting a pleasurable encounter between two lovers who picnic on earth’s glorious “mountains” and “valleys” (Lines 10, 12-3, 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, emphasizing how she is an object through which the speaker can “howl” through, thereby satisfying the speaker’s sexual appetite 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 see 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. Though, these lines also indicate that the speaker forcefully “howls” or thrusts into the other woman, which, in effect, causes “her” discomfort.

The tone of “Love Poem” is neither erotic nor romantic since it creates a power dynamic between the speaker, Audre Lorde, who dominates and consumes, and the “her,” the other woman, who is being acted upon, objectified. The poem does not bridge the speaker’s 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. This disconnects the speaker from the other woman and more importantly, disconnects readers from the speaker; like “her,” readers never receive an opportunity to engage in the experience of the “Love Poem.”

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 from poem to poem. 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, bodily, sexual pleasures. By doing so, this speaker suppresses the other voice that “bridges” the gaps of Lordian “difference”; the joy is not shared (“Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” 57). If the reader reviews the poems discussed in this chapter, comparing and juxtaposing one to another, he or she sees how the erotic is conveyed contradictorily. Each poem expresses the erotic in a dissimilar manner. 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, emphasizing how 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 tone, it too 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, consuming her as she howls into her entrances. Though, 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” (“Poetry is Not a Luxury,”
23). Lorde breaks free from Cixous’s marked language of patriarchy, *reclaiming* and *asserting her right* to voice the écriture feminine. By doing so, poets like Lorde and Clifton actually tap into an erotic power — one that counters Lorde’s 1978 theory but still a vital form of eros that shows female readers how they too can tap into their own “Black mother” voice which whispers thoughts and ideas that they have suppressed both in misogynistic and traditionally deemed feminist circles.
Chapter II: Contextualizing and Re-contextualizing the Erotic in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

Negation, Attraction, and Sexual Fluidity: Re-Contextualizing the Erotic in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

Nella Larsen was one of the most influential black writers of the 1920’s, or what is now known as the “New Negro Movement.” Larsen is commonly paired with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Fauset, and many of the other Harlem Renaissance writers. As a Harlem Renaissance writer, many read Larsen’s work in terms of African American modernism, signifying how the aesthetic and political dimensions of art are interlinked as well as designating literary techniques ranging from the experimentalism of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, to the romantic racialism of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*. As a Black female writer, Larsen’s work greatly impacted and shaped the nature of Black feminist thought not only for her 1920 readerly audience, but for future audiences as well. *Passing* (1928) and *Quicksand* (1928) are staples in the American literary cannon, frequently taught in universities. Though her novels were published in the late 1920’s, contemporary female audiences can still relate to the women in Larsen’s works — women who, in the words of Mary Helen Washington, “are driven to emotional psychological extremes in their attempts to handle ambivalence, marginality, racism, and sexism. She has shown us that behind the carefully manicured exterior, behind the appearance of security is a woman who hears the beating of her wings against a walled prison” (viii, Shange).

Focusing on Larsen’s *Passing*, this section analyzes those “ambivalent” women who unveil their “manicured exterior,” thereby exposing their deepest “emotions and psychological extremes.” Though published in 1929, *Passing* continues to spark debate among contemporary
scholars. Claudia Tate, Cheryl Wall, and Deborah McDowell argue that Larsen deploys a cover story based on race to conceal a more nuanced narrative. Tate argues that “racial issues…are, at best, peripheral to the story” (146). Wall claims that Larsen uses race to “mask her…subversive concerns…about gender questions” (138). McDowell reads the novel as Larsen’s exploration of lesbian sexuality, where “underneath of that surface is the more dangerous story…of Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Clare” (xxx). Alternatively, Jennifer Brody and Ann duCille suggest that Larsen analyzes the ambiguity imbued in race, class, gender, and sexuality to produce a text that invokes multi-voiced meanings. I am interested in exploring how Passing is a text of an erotic of negation: the reader sees Irene simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Clare’s aura. This section analyzes the homoerotic bond between Clare and Irene, showing specifically how characters like Clare transgress heteronormative gender roles in order to tap into their interpretation of erotic power. Similar to what we saw earlier in Lorde’s “Love Poem” and Clifton’s “homage” poems, this power is anti-Lordian or rather, not contingent upon cultivating female community.

To help explain this erotic of negation, I draw upon Lisa Diamond’s concept of sexual fluidity. Diamond asserts that a woman’s sexual desires depend greatly upon the circumstances of the social context. In other words, her social interactions inform her sexual desires. In Passing, sexual fluidity permeates not just at the plot-level, but also stylistically. Readers yearn for closure, but Larsen negates it, leaving open an ending of readerly fluidity where readers confront their frustration towards an open-ended ending. The novel’s unclear ending coupled with the ambiguities imbued in Irene and Clare’s sexualities is actually empowering; readers see how a woman’s undefined sexual desires allow her to exercise more female agency.

Irene Redfield, The Unreliable Narrator: Reliability Negated — Disrupted via Sexual Fluidity
*Passing* commences with the epigraph from Countee Cullen's poem, “Heritage”:

One three centuries removed,

From the scenes his fathers loved,

Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,

What is Africa to me?

Published just four years before *Passing*, many African-American writers quote this quatrain (which Cullen repeats twice in “Heritage”) as way to interrogate race issues in the Americas. Many bi-ethnic and bi-racial writers, like Kwame Dawes and Danzy Senna, have shared how one must balance the act of embodying a liminal identity in terms of race, nationality, and class. In *Passing*, these couplets represent the unconscious refrain of the main characters in the text. Though, similar to the ambiguous ending of the narrative, none of Larsen’s characters ever explicitly answer the question, “What is Africa to me?” Jennifer Brody claims that this ambiguity invites readers to closely examine the meaning of these “privileged” lines (1054). She writes:

If “Heritage” is the narrative of one who tries to define his relationship to some white, ontological being and finds that a Black impulse ceaselessly draws him back…it would seem to describe Clare Kendry rather than Irene Redfield, although it could refer to both. Any interpretation would depend upon one’s definition of a “Black” impulse. (1054).

To add to Brody’s reading, Cullen’s quatrain not only invokes questions of racial identity and the “black” impulse, but also notions of sexual desires. Though more subtly apparent than the issue of race, the epigraph and the novel’s refusal to answer the question of “What is Africa to me?”, suggests that the text will also negate answering the question of sexual orientation for both Clare
and Irene (i.e. the labels of heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual.) Readers must speculate the underlying meaning of this well-known quatrain by recognizing that their interpretation of how Irene and Clare define their racial and sexual identities is based upon how the reader defines “blackness” or more specifically, race, as well as heterosexuality and homosexuality. But more importantly, readers see how their shifting interpretations (e.g. black versus white, heterosexual versus homosexual) lead to clarity rather than ambiguity.

In her critical foreword to *Passing*, Mae Henderson deconstructs this binary between readerly clarity and ambiguity as a “crisis of representation.” She asserts,

> Clare is framed by the act of reading and being read. And just as Clare becomes the text that Irene must learn to decipher, so Irene, in turn, becomes the text to be deciphered by the reader…the narrative retrospective is punctuated by gaps and ambiguities that ultimately function to expose…this “writerly text”…[leaving] it to the reader, finally, to “fill in” the gaps and lacunae, thereby reconstituting the miscegenous [sic] text/body. (xlix).

For Henderson, Larsen’s narrative gaps represent the textual unconscious. *Passing* exemplifies Barthes’s “writerly text” where readers produce the text’s conscious and/or meaning as they “reconstitute the meaning of the miscegenous text/body” (*li*, Henderson). Though, *Passing* cannot merely be analyzed through a Barthian lens. Rather, I would suggest that readerly clarity stems from an oscillation of interpretations — a readerly fluidity of not being able to pinpoint the character’s racial and sexual desires/identities. The novel’s textual ellipses, narrative gaps, and its refusal to answer “What is Africa to me?,” represent the erotic of negation: the undefined, visceral power that empowers women in the novel as well as its female readership.

As one who despises those narrative ellipses, Irene Redfield strives to embody Du Bois’s
“Talented Tenth.” She takes pride in her middle-class subject position as evidenced in her participation in organizations like the Negro Welfare League. Yearning to model the paradigm wife and mother of the nuclear American family, in terms of race and class, Irene prefers to forget the horrific past of African-American enslavement. When her husband, Brian Redfield, speaks openly to his children about a lynching, Irene immediately raises her eyebrows, explaining that she wants her sons to be “happy.” “Happy” implies that Irene wants her sons to be ignorant of the true dangers of Negro life both in the past and present. She desperately pines to uphold Mary Helen Washington’s “manicured exterior.” Readers, then, categorize Irene as the “race woman”: the woman who is orderly, obedient, always participating in “race uplift” discourses.

At the same time though, readers cannot strictly label Irene as a member of the Du Boisian “Talented Tenth.” As the main focalizer of Passing, Irene’s conscious, her sense of sanity, is disrupted once Clare Kendry renters her life. Clare challenges Irene’s view of a singularly defined racial and gender identity; her presence invokes potent bodily and emotional sensations that simultaneously lead Irene to be sexually and/or asexually attracted to as well as repulsed by Clare. For instance, in “Re-encounter,” Irene mulls over a note she had received from Clare roughly two years prior: “a letter that was, to her taste, a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression” (emphasis added, 74). As Beverley Skeggs notes, “taste” implies notions of social class that are inevitably intertwined with how a woman performs her gender identity. For Skeggs, a woman’s “value” is determined by how “pure” her mental “form” is or rather, how she maintains self-control. Self-discipline reaffirms Puritanical philosophy that largely influenced and shaped the nature of U.S. class identity formation (100-2). Excess is intertwined with self-control. Hence, women must limit their “excess” to increase the
“class” of their “signifier”: their physical and mental self. In the context of *Passing*, Irene characterizes Clare as a low class female. The repetition of “too” substantiates Clare’s marker of feminine excess. For Irene, Clare’s “manner of expression” is “too…lavish…wordy”; as a woman, and particularly as a Black woman who passes for white, Clare takes “too” many liberties in how she expresses herself to the world. Clare fails to exemplify Washington’s “manicured exterior” of that proper “race woman” which Irene idealizes. Irene characterizes Clare’s lavishness as a theatrical performance: “It roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but, none the less acting” (75). Irene further describes Clare’s “acting” in her dress, “which deliberately courted…attention”; in her language, characterized by all those “superlatives”; in her smile, which is “a shade too provocation”; and in her appearance, which makes her “just a shade too good-looking” (76).

Ann duCille figures Irene’s “[dis-]taste” for Clare as “something more than…another doubling or dividing” (105). For duCille, Clare functions as Irene’s “alter libido, the buried, long-denied sexual self” (105). Clare disrupts Irene’s sense of identity by exposing Irene’s long-repressed self-differences along racial and gender lines. This disruption leads Irene to be an unreliable narrator. Where Clare is associated with lavishness and excessiveness, Irene is associated with a sense of lacking in terms of sexual and textual repression. Readers should be wary of how Irene records events, paying particular attention to her characterization of Clare Kendry and her suspicions regarding the affair between Clare and Brian as well as the questionable concluding scene of Clare’s suicide/murder.

duCille’s claim that Irene Refield is an unreliable narrator is unquestionable. Though, the more important question that readers should explore is what leads her to be unreliable? Where in
the text do readers see Irene’s biases slipping in? How do these narrative slips relate to her sexual desires at that specific moment? From the beginning of the novel, readers see how Irene is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Clare, thereby embodying the erotic of negation. Yet, readers also notice how Irene represses her sexual fluid desires. By doing so, Irene negates the power of her own erotic because she fails to acknowledge the ambiguity of her fluid sexual identity. As Irene represses her sexual fluid feelings towards Clare, the reader discerns how her judgment becomes clouded; that is, Irene is unable to narrate reliably. Honing in on Clare’s posture, Irene describes,

She [Clare] sat with an air of indifferent assurance, as if arranged for, desired. About her clung that dim suggestion of polite insolence with which a few women are born and which some acquire with the coming of riches or importance. Clare, it gave Irene a little prick of satisfaction to recall, hadn’t got that by passing herself off as white. She herself had always had it. (37).

For Irene, Clare emanates this “polite insolence” that appears to derive from racial and class status (i.e. raced as “white” and classed as middle to upper class.) Though, as Irene too notes with her “prick of satisfaction,” Clare always embodied this sense of “importance” regardless of “passing herself off as white.” Clare’s “assurance” does not originate from the elitist skin of white nor the “riches” she has acquired by passing off as white and marrying a rich, Anglo-European man. Rather, Clare “always had it” (emphasis added, 37). “It” signifies the erotic of “indifferen[ce]” or what I term as negation—a power devoid from hegemony. The erotic of negation is an intangible power which lies innately in Clare’s body. Irene lacks “it,” envying Clare for her “air of…assurance.” Irene senses that she lacks “it,” and, in effect, is resentful towards Clare. Consequently, readers question her ability to record the events objectively. That
is, the narrative is subjective, subject to how Irene decides to characterize Clare based upon her own sexual desires which continually contradict one another and more importantly, remain eclipsed from the text.

As Irene bids Clare farewell in “Encounter,” readers not only see how she is drawn to Clare both sexually and asexually, but they also discern how she utterly negates any trace of attraction and/or admiration for Clare. Diamond terms this oscillation between attraction and repulsion as sexual fluidity where a woman’s social interactions inform her sexual desires. Irene’s sexual fluidity seeps into her narration, thereby causing the reader to question Irene’s recounting. For instance, she depicts a romantic portrait of Clare’s face, noting how Clare’s physical features relate to her personal characteristics — characteristics which Clare embodies in excess but which Irene herself lacks.

Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre…Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them. (emphasis added, 38).

Mae Henderson claims that Irene uses images like “ivory” and “lustre” to attribute a sense of “theatricality or performativity” to Clare’s persona which, in effect, leads to Skeggs’s excessive feminine aura (lii, Henderson). While Irene’s characterization of Clare supports Henderson’s claim that Clare performs her race and gender identities as she puts on her “painted…brilliant germanium-red’ lips, the passage also suggests that Irene sees something deeper imbued underneath Clare’s “ivory skin.” Irene personifies Clare’s lips, emphasizing how they are “sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate.” By personifying Clare’s lips, Irene shows how Clare is a gentle and sweet woman. At the same time though, she also points out that Clare is slightly
“obstinate,” standing firmly by the words that come out of those beautiful “germanium-red’ lips. Clare’s “red… tempting” lips, then, signify more than just Henderson’s “ivory” masquerade of beauty (liii, Henderson). They exemplify a quality of “warmth” mixed with mysteriousness; a mysteriousness that is “withdrawn and secret” and, therefore, subject to cause social disruption. In this passage, Clare’s lips disrupt social norms as Irene experiences sensations which bring her to question her heterosexual identity. Clare’s “arresting…mesmeric eyes” subconsciously mesmerize Irene’s mental state to such an extent that momentarily “arrest” or, put a halt to Irene’s orderly life: a Black wife and mother.

Irene quickly dismisses Clare’s mysterious, “mesmeric” spell, negating the thought of ever being attracted to her let alone respecting Clare as an individual. Immediately following their “re-encounter,” Irene describes “Crossing the avenue in the heat, far from the coolness of the Drayton’s roof, away from the seduction of Clare Kendry’s smile” (emphasis added, 38-9). “Seduction” holds numerous negative connotations, namely that of inducing a woman to surrender her chastity, to tempt a female to leave her marriage, and in the most general sense, to cause an error—to disrupt order. Irene escapes the seductive “heat” of Clare’s “smile,” indicating that she represses her sexual fluid feelings that Clare’s smile invokes. “Into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed” (38). The verbs “petted” and “caressed” imply a “sense” of a child/adult relationship; that is, Clare as the rich, passed off white woman who has power over and dominates Irene, the middle-class, “othered” Black woman. Irene reflects how she becomes victim to Clare’s seductive, “exotic” beauty as Clare’s eyes “pet” her like she is a helpless animal that continually needs to be “caressed” (Larsen, 38). Clare’s “smile” tantalizes Irene but it is a tantalization which she represses. Irene eclipses her sexual fluid desires under the veneer of a supposed dominator/dominated, child
versus parent relation. By refusing to acknowledge her sexual fluid identity, Irene limits her opportunities. That is, she does not allow herself to ponder the power that lies in the erotic of negation—that elusive, shifting, circumstantial erotic force.

Irene attempts to repress her sexual fluid desires but fails. She spends an entire afternoon, listening to Clare’s racist husband, John Bellow, chatter relentlessly about how there are “No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (56). Irene describes her “mortification, [and] shame” towards Mr. Bellow, expressing how she “repress[ed]” all of her “rage and rebellion” towards this man for the welfare and safety of Clare who just never “consider[ed] anyone else’s feelings” (60-3). Though she is angered by Clare’s “taking a chance…[and never] considering [the] feelings” of others, Irene subconsciously shifts back to admiring Clare sexually (63). She reflects,

And all the while, on the rushing ride out to her father’s house, Irene Redfield was trying to understand the look on Clare’s face as she had said good-bye. Partly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing. And something else for which she could find no name. For an instant a recrudescence of that sensation of fear which she had while looking into Clare’s eyes that afternoon touched her. A slight shiver ran over her. (emphasis added, 64).

As Thadious Davis discusses in Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled (1996), the line “And something else for which she could find no name” is evocative of Oscar Wilde’s notable declaration, “the love that dare not speak its name” (Davis, 11). As Davis notes, Wilde uttered these words during The Crown vs. Wilde hearing where he was arrested for “gross indecency” under Section 11 of the United Kingdom’s Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. “Gross indecency” was a term applied to those who engaged in
homosexual acts (Davis, 11-2). Larsen intentionally refers to this hearing as evidenced by her letter to Carl Van Vechten in November 12, 1930 where she writes that upon meeting a haughty Englishman, she jokingly asked, “Pardon me, but are you the Lord Douglas who slept with Oscar Wilde?” (Davis, 11). She incorporates this intertextual bit to suggest how Irene has “no name” for that “recrudescence of that sensation”: her homoerotic feelings for Clare. “Recrudescence” signifies how Irene breaks afresh from her undesirable state as a married woman to become a woman who rediscovers those “sensations” that “touch her” soul. In other words, Irene subconsciously breaks free from heteronormative sexuality to experience, as Eve Sedgwick describes, a “spectrum of sexualities” (1). Nevertheless, Irene “fears” this particular “recrudescence,” and, in effect, negates her sexual fluidity.

Scared “to come out of the closet,” Irene represses Sedgwick’s “spectrum of sexualities,” and, in effect, denies her sexual fluid identity; more importantly, though, she closes off the possibilities that an erotic of negation can open (i.e. embracing the ambiguity in seemingly fixed social constructs like race and sexuality). By repressing her desires, Irene delves into unreliable narration. She not only omits various textual threats, but also depicts a particularized portrait of Clare: the person she is subconsciously affectionate towards. Irene advises Clare “…not to run the risk of knowing Negros” since it is “not just the right thing…it’s not safe. Not safe at all” (97-9). Clare facetiously responds with “Oh Rene!….you’re priceless!...The right thing!...You don’t, you really can’t mean exactly that! Nobody could. It’s simply unbelievable” (98). Irene critiques Clare’s response, framing it in such way as to construe that Clare views Irene as a prude woman. Irene plays life the “safe way,” forgoing the spontaneous adventure of possibilities that her erotic of negation can invoke. As Clare yells out “Safe!,” Irene reflects

It seemed to Irene that Clare had snapped her teeth down on the word and then flung it
from her…she had the suspicion of Clare’s ability for a quality of feeling that was to her strange, and even repugnant…It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her, for whom safety, security, were all-important: “Safe! Damn being safe!” and meant it. (emphasis added, 99).

It “seemed…as if” Clare mocks Irene’s “safe” lifestyle which indicates that Clare did not ridicule Irene for her “all-important” belief of “security.” As the primary focalizer, Irene cues the reader to her unreliable narration, inserting phrases like “seemed,” “as if,” and “meant it; this commentary shows how Clare does not literally act in this manner. Rather, it is Irene’s “suspicion” that Clare embodies a “repugnant” quality. This very “suspicion” leads Irene to her paranoia as she overanalyzes each of Clare’s responses. She relies on these paranoid fictions to repress her sexual fluid desires for Clare. As long as Irene imagines that Clare thinks the worst of her (i.e. a prude), she is able to deny the reality of her feelings. Irene embraces her fictions of Clare since they allow her to choose the “safe” option: her already chosen life of heterosexuality.

Later in this scene, Irene emphasizes how Clare ridicules her for valuing safety: “You’re [Irene] free. You’re happy. And…, with a faint derision, safe” (emphasis added, 100). Once again, readers should be wary as they interpret the subtle but yet seemingly unimportant aside of “faint derision”; though it is “faint,” Irene construes Clare’s utterance of “safe” to be of utter “derision,” mockery. Refraining from “weeping,” Irene confesses to Clare that “no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe,” suggesting that her heteronormative and therefore, “safe” decisions in terms of gender, racial, and sexual identities, still render her as an “[un]happy” Black woman (101). Clare argues how taking risks, then, wouldn’t “make all the difference in the world” since no one is ever “safe” (101). Irene cautions Clare, though, to think about her little girl before taking such “big” risks (101). Irene describes,
Clare’s face took on a startled look, as though she were totally unprepared for this new weapon with which Irene had assailed her. Seconds passed, during which she sat with stricken eyes and compressed lips. “I think,” she said at last, “that being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world….Yes,” Irene softly agreed. For a moment she was unable to say more, so accurately had Clare put into words that which, not so definitely defined, was so often in her own heart of late. (emphasis added, 101-2).

For Irene, Clare’s response that “being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world” evokes a “not so definitely defined” feeling. This feeling is deeply buried in Irene’s “own heart,” symbolizing her affection for Clare and more importantly, her repressed sexual fluid identity. Irene “softly” agrees to Clare’s declarations because to wholly agree would mean that Irene would transgress heteronormative gender norms such as “being a mother.” Recognizing this “risk,” Irene quickly shifts back to “safety,” reflecting

At the same time she was conscious that here, to her hand, was a reason which could not be lightly brushed aside. “Yes,” she repeated, “and the most responsible Clare. We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children…You may be used to risks, but this is one you mustn’t take, Clare. It’s a selfish whim, an unnecessary and”— (emphasis added, 102).

According to Irene, motherhood demands selflessness. Mothers must live solely to cultivate “security and happiness” for the welfare of their “children.” Clare cannot pass back into black society. If she were to do so, she would run the “risk” of sacrificing her daughter’s “happiness.” Mothers are not supposed to act on “whim,” impulse. For Irene, erotic power cannot come from acting upon impulse because to do so would mean to act “selfishly” and therefore, be deemed as a less of a mother.
Though Irene voices her concerns, Clare still acts upon “a selfish whim,” mingling in black society and therefore, running the “risk” of losing her husband, daughter, and ultimately, sense of “security” (102). As Clare spends more and more time in Harlem, Irene becomes increasingly anxious. Her anxiety leads her farther into her paranoia which, in effect, makes her an unreliable narrator. She believes that Clare had a “trick” in her “sliding down ivory lid” eyes — her eyes” trick” or trap men, like Irene’s husband, into loving her (144). Irene reflects, “She lay there awake, thinking of the past. Of her courtship and marriage and Junior’s birth…Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life. And now Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence” (emphasis added, 159). Irene suspects that Clare and Brian are having an affair; hence, Clare poses a “menace” to Irene’s “undisturbed…pleasant routine of…life.” Yet, the real “menace” that Clare poses to Irene is her “impermanent[t]” aura since she continually passes into and out of differing racial circles. “Impermanence” also alludes to Irene’s ephemeral homoerotic feelings. Clare’s very presence “disturbs” Irene’s “pleasant routine” of heterosexuality and motherhood, causing Irene to subconsciously question all that “she had wanted, had striven” for in life: safety and security via marriage. Irene convinces herself that she must eradicate Clare out of her life to keep her marriage together; though, there also lies the more repressed, nuanced fear that Irene herself will fall for those “sliding ivory lid” eyes.

Towards the end of the novel, Irene admits that her thoughts are fictions of her paranoid imagination gone wild. She reflects “Surely, she was going mad with fear and suspicion. She must not work herself up. She must not! Where [was] all the self-control, the common sense, that she was so proud of? Now, if ever, was the time for it” (164). Narrated in third person throughout, Irene is the primary focalizer of Passing. Though, in this passage, Larsen inserts the
meta-critique of “Surely, she was going mad with fear and suspicion” to elucidate how Irene is an unreliable narrator. Convincing herself of the alleged affair, Irene is desperate to “keep her life to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain” (emphasis added, 170). Unlike Clare, Irene cannot free herself from shedding off that “outer shell of her marriage” since marriage is a social contract that promises heterosexuality: a form of sexual expression that Irene is familiar with. In stark contrast, is Irene’s erotic of negation which would not promise her “a life fixed”; contrarily, it would lead to an uncertain, unpaved life journey. Irene expresses how “If Clare was freed, anything might happen” (170). This line suggests that Clare could pursue Brian (i.e. if there is in fact an affair taking place) and/or be a tantalizing entity in Irene’s life, further disturbing that “shell” of certainty that Irene strives to keep on “at all costs” (170). In either case, Irene hopes for Clare to disappear. After Clare’s ominous death, Irene reflects

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry.

That beauty that had torn at Irene’s placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. Irene wasn’t sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost. (emphasis added, 177).

The tone of this passage is enthusiastic as evidenced by the repetition of “Gone!” coupled with the “!” This cheerful tone conveys how Irene is relieved that Clare is in fact “Gone!” Clare is no longer a “beauty” tearing at “Irene’s placid life.” Clare’s beauty was “loveliness” but a “torturing” one since it transgressed heteronormative gender norms; her mere presence invoked that spectrum of sexualities instead of Irene’s “fixed,” heterosexual identity. Clare provoked Irene to participate in her erotic of negation where Irene’s choices would not be limited exclusively to motherhood and domesticity.
Scholars like Mae Henderson argue that Clare’s final death scene embodies Roland Barthes’s concept of the writerly text. Henderson claims: “I am inclined to believe that the ending makes a difference…as a writerly text—in the sense that French critic Roland Barthes defines as “writerly” an open-ended text that requires the reader to collaborate in producing its meaning” (204). As Henderson asserts, Passing does not explicitly state whether or not Irene pushed Clare out the window. The novel concludes on a mysterious note: “Centuries after, she [Irene] heard the strange man saying: ‘Death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look” (182). Though, Irene did in fact push Clare out the window or least subconsciously acted as a co-conspirator with Jack by not giving Clare a hand, thereby preventing her from flying out the window. Contrary to Henderson’s reading, I am inclined to believe that Irene contributed to Clare’s death in order to maintain her “outer shell” of fixity. Clare threatens to break this shell since she stimulates Irene’s homoerotic desires. Desperate to only feel heterosexual feelings, Irene represses and negates her sexual fluid desires; by doing so, she maintains a semblance of erotic power. As I discussed earlier, Irene enthusiastically repeats “Gone!” which reveals her relief at Clare’s death. Upon realizing that Clare is dead, Irene does not convey the least bit of grief. The narrator records that “Irene wasn’t sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost”; Irene disbelieves the “she wasn’t” in fact “sorry.” Irene is “amazed” that she does not harbor any regret for murdering that which “tore” at her “placid life”: her married life as a mother and wife. Though Clare is gone, Irene still cannot return to her safe life (170). She was utterly weary, and she was violently staggered. But her thoughts reeled on. If only she could be as free of mental as she was of bodily vigour [sic]; could only put from her memory the vision of her hand on Clare’s arm! “It was an accident,” she muttered fiercely. It was.” (emphasis original, 177).
Irene’s “bodily vigour” is physically free of Clare, indicating that Clare can no longer rekindle Irene’s sexual fluidity. Though, Irene is not “mentally” free since her thoughts “reel on” and on, elucidating how she can never erase Clare’s “vision” from her “memory.” Clare’s “vision” will always remain imprinted on Irene’s mind. Irene attempts to convince herself that “It was [just] an accident as noted by the italicization on “was.” Nevertheless, none of Irene’s “fierce” mutters eradicate her sexual fluid identity or more specifically, her erotic of negation for Clare. For Irene, her erotic of negation encompasses both “body” and mind — a love and hate relationship that she feels towards her spiritual and physical connection to Clare. Irene’s affection for Clare, then, is an intimate attachment; though, it is an erotic bond that she fails to acknowledge. Consequently, Irene eclipses the possibilities that the erotic of negation can bring forth not only for her, but also for the text and its readership.

Clare Kendry: Negating Normalized Social Constructions via the Progressive Erotic

Unlike Irene, Clare wants to disturb “fixed” social constructions like class, race, and gender identity (i.e. in terms of heteronormative gender roles.) Clare is not a member of the rising Black bourgeoisie nor was she ever a member of the aspiring middle-classes like Irene. Detested by her two elderly white aunts who make her work as if she was an enslaved servant, Clare decides to “pass” for white. She quickly rises up the social ladder of hierarchy, and, in effect, surpasses Irene in terms of class status. Clare’s decision to “pass” can be interpreted as an erotic act for the particular social and cultural moment in which she was living in; Clare empowers herself because she decides to “pass” into the dominant white culture. In other words, her decision to “pass” is erotic since she still maintains a clear sense of her prior identity (i.e. as a Black woman) while “passing” into different racial circles.

By being sentient of her decision to pass into and out of white and black societies, Clare
elucidates the fluidity of these supposed static constructions like race and class. Thus, she surpasses Irene not only in terms of “material” wealth but also on a deeper, more nuanced level; Clare gains agency as she openly expresses her desires for material status, takes action to acquire it, and most importantly, admits to feeling unsatisfied when having obtained it. Clare’s letters or rather, confessions of unhappiness to Irene further expose her deepest vulnerabilities, her unfilled desires at wanting to find some sense of home in a society that seems to not have just one for her. Left dissatisfied as a “passed” upper-class white woman, Clare again takes action by “passing” back into black culture.

As Clare passes into and out of different societies, she challenges the notions of fixed identities across racial, gender, and class lines. Her act to “pass” deconstructs these social constructions; depending on how Clare chooses to display her corporeal signifiers at any given moment, other characters as well as her readers continually face the challenge of signifying and re-signifying Clare’s “self.” As she acts out her identity, Irene warns her of the risks: “As far as I can see, you’ll just have to endure some things and give up others. As we’ve said before, everything must be paid for. Do, please, be reasonable” (107). Though trying to be the “reasonable” one, Irene can only see, as she says so herself, so “far.” Her perception is limited since her voice is censored, controlled by a non-erotic language: a heteronormative, patriarchal language where she remains passive, her subject position defined for her.

Clare, on the other hand, refuses to “endure some things,” passing in and out of racial and class identities; by doing so, she embodies the erotic, acting as the definer rather than the defined. On the surface, Irene disapproves that Clare willingly puts her life, her child’s, and/or her marriage at risk. Though, as we saw in the previous section, Irene’s feelings shift due to her sexual fluid desires. She is actually attracted to Clare’s very risk-taking mentality, secretly
desiring to not only act in a similar manner but to also form an erotic bond with Clare. This bond is devoid of those responsibilities that the “outer shell of fixity” requires; it is the erotic of negation which invites ambiguity, exploration, and essentially, a life of fluid possibilities. Irene, then, is the less erotically empowering figure of Passing since she refuses to acknowledge her sexual fluid desires and therefore, ponder an unpaved life rather than always, already-made social script. But more importantly, Irene, unlike Clare, negates her chance at delving inside her own spirit, discovering a creative potential that lies outside society’s fixed parameters. Irene relies on society to define her female erotic power rather than taking the risk, like Clare does by defining it for herself as she passes in and out of different social identities.

In contrast to Irene, Clare wholly chooses a life of erotic negation, embracing the fears that are accompanied by embodying liminal sexual, racial, and class identities. She puts her life and the feelings of others at risk in hopes of leading a more self-satisfying life. Clare seeks to improve the circumstances of her subject position as a Black woman living in the 1920’s by not yearning to achieve the “American Dream” of happiness (i.e. white, upper-middle class bourgeoisie mother.) Alternatively, Clare redefines the “American Dream” of happiness for her own self; that is, she does not make it a priority to consider how her actions will affect the feelings and/or circumstances of other women in her community. In this sense, Clare exemplifies the erotic of negation since her self-discovery is not contingent upon forming the sisterly Lordian community. She pushes the boundaries of the already transgressive concept of the erotic. Irene, on the other hand, partially embodies the erotic of negation since she never openly identifies her homoerotic desires nor her paranoia regarding how she perceives various relationships like Clare and Brian’s. Irene settles for the scripted life of certainty while Clare vehemently negates to settle for safety; Clare confronts the fears and risks that come with
embodying a fluid sexual, racial, and class identity.

Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: Self-Agency, Gender Identity, and the Non-Sisterly Erotic

Published just a year before Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power,” is Barbara Smith’s foundational essay in Black feminist studies, “Toward a Black feminist Criticism.” She outlines the stereotypical racist and misogynist representations of Black women, asserting how scholars must adopt a distinct, “recognizable,” Black feminist critique. Smith defines this critique as: “a Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity” (27–8). Smith claims that Black women share similar life experiences in the political, social, and economic realms. Because of their shared experiences, Black women writers employ similar thematic, stylistic, and aesthetic conceptions and approaches in their literature. She provides, at the time, an extremely provocative reading of *Sula*, classifying it as a “lesbian novel.” *Sula* works as a lesbian novel since Sula the character is skeptical towards heterosexual relationships (i.e. marriage and family), and Sula and Nel form a Lordian erotic-like bond which helps them discover their sense of self.

Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Hélène Cixous view the erotic as a means to create a voice for silenced women; Lorde and Smith elucidate how women of color, particularly African-American lesbian women, have been oppressed by this silence. The erotic un-silences the voice by building a female community and bridging gaps of differences amongst heterosexual and homosexual women, as well as women from different racial and class identities. Though, one wonders if this female erotically empowered community is still useful in light of the institutionalization of feminist studies since 1978. Are contemporary Black female writers, writing in a supposedly “post-racial, post-modern” society still facing silence within their writing,
relying on the erotic to uncover their repressed voices?

This section deconstructs the erotic from the late 1970’s, using Morrison’s *Sula* as a model text. In Sula’s world, both men and women are included in the erotic community, thereby countering Lorde and Smith’s exclusively female erotic space. Additionally, *Sula* shows female characters (i.e. like Sula) who use/mis-use their bodies to manipulate men in order to gain agency. Similar to *Passing*, this section draws upon my reinterpretation of the erotic, the erotic of negation, where female characters (i.e. like Sula) refuse to participate and/or engage in a unified, exclusively female community. Like in *Passing*, readers of *Sula* experience the erotic negation where they simultaneously love and hate Sula. As Hortense Spillers notes: “Sula is both loved and hated by the reader, embraced and rejected simultaneously because her audience is forced to accept the corruption of absolutes and what has been left in their place—the complex, alienated, transitory gestures of a personality who has no framework outside of moral reference beyond or other than herself” (295). The audience confronts their own conflicting desires regarding how a woman chooses to utilize her erotic power to attain agency. Often, readers are reluctant to wholly love or despise Sula.

Readers will see how Sula transgresses heteronormative gender roles, challenging the very parameters that construct the Lordian erotic community and, in effect, understand how eros is not a dualistic philosophy. Focusing on *Sula*, my close-readings ask readers to question: which erotic expression is right and wrong? In terms of Black female subjectivity, which expression of eros is ideal and more importantly, how do literary and cultural studies critics’ judge which expression is more desired? In what ways does *Sula* show how class and racial identities influence and determine how a woman chooses to express and use her erotic power?

The Wright Household versus The Peace Household: Social Class and Erotic Power
Striving to be the opposite of her unconventional, former prostitute mother, Rochelle, Helene Wright raises Nel under strict, religious orthodoxy. In stark contrast to the rigidity of the Wright’s are the Peace’s. Sula lives with her disabled grandmother, Eva, and her mother, Hannah; the community perceives both of these women to be peculiar and “loose” in terms of how Hannah exercises her sexuality and, additionally, how Eva reconstructs her presumed disabled body into an able-bodied, empowering force. “It [Eva’s lone leg] was stockinged [sic] and shod at all times and in all weather” (31). As a Black disabled woman, Eva embodies the erotic of negation since she never conceals her disability nor is ashamed of the societal labels that society imposes on her (i.e. “Black” “woman,” etc). Rather, she acts as the definer of her fate, erotizing her supposed weaknesses like her lone leg. By doing so, Eva gains agency both in the community and at home; she becomes the matriarch of the household. While Nel lives only with her immediate family, Sula’s house serves as a home for three informally adopted boys and a steady stream of borders. As we will soon see, their upbringing greatly influences if not determine how Sula and Nel choose to express their erotic power.

Despite their familial differences, Sula and Nel form an intimate bond. Both “wishbone thin and easy-assed…their friendship was as intense as it was sudden”; the tone of this line is similar to a description of that first love (emphasis added, 52-3). That is, both girls experience an “intense” feeling which, like passion, creeps into one’s conscious thereby blurring the line between admiration and attraction, friendship versus an intimate, erotic relationship between two women. In the beginning, they were able to bridge their differences in upbringing. These bridges, in effect, led them to find “…relief in each other’s personality” (53). Though, the narrator hints that this bond will break as she claims: “Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes”
“Seemed” suggests that Nel embodies an illusory form of strength, most commonly a strength associated with traditional heteronormative gender roles due to her orthodox upbringing; contrarily, Sula’s strength she expresses herself through an undefined language, lying outside of those Lordian systems of “self-abnegation” (Lorde, 58). Sula can sustain a steady mood for weeks only if it was “in defense of Nel” (53). In other words, she acts with cautiousness, particularly if she knows that her actions will protect her best friend and perhaps, partner who she harbors sexual fluid desires for. For instance, when the four white Irish boys attack Nel, Sula becomes the guardian:

Sula squatted in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground...holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed as the wound...Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. “If I can do that to myself, then what do you suppose I’ll do to you?” (54-5).

Sula takes a subordinate position to the four boys by “squatt[ing]” down. Yet, she is actually in full control of this scene as the boys stare “open-mouthed” at her “wound.” The boys are simultaneously amazed at and fearful of since Sula disfigures her own body; in the defense of Nel, she slices her finger off. Ironically, though, Sula does gain neither Nel’s respect nor gratitude for this act. Sula reflects,

Nel was the best. When Sula imitated her, or tried to, those long years ago, it always ended up in some action noteworthy not for its coolness but mostly for its being bizarre. The one time she tried to protect Nel, she had cut off her own finger tip and earned not Nel’s gratitude but her disgust. From then on she had let
her emotions dictate her behavior. (141)

Sula yearns to be the “best” like Nel because she believes that she will gain Nel’s as well as society’s stamp of approval. Sula tries to “imitate” Nel’s actions in ways that she views as empowering, like the slicing her fingertip. While Sula views this act as gaining agency in a situation where there seems there is none for one who is raced black and gendered female, society (i.e. including Nel) perceives Sula’s action as “bizarre.” Sula is “bizarre” since her actions are not based on, as Hortense Spillers notes, any “Manichean analysis” (296). By disfiguring her own body, Sula adds an element of “disgust” to her femininity. However she chooses to act or “…whatever Sula is, is a matter of her own choices, often ill-formed and ill-informed” (Spillers, 296). To extend upon Spiller’s reading, I would add that by slicing her finger, Sula does not simply act upon on impulse; rather, she attempts to win Nel’s approval. When she realizes that Nel is left with “disgust,” Sula lets her “emotions dictate her behavior,” thereby embodying the erotic of negation where she refuses Irene’s “outer shell of fixity”; that is, Sula negates living a life for others. Like Clare, Sula explores life “at whim” (Larsen, 102). Readers either love or hate Sula for her spontaneous “emotions.” Though, readers sometimes enter the erotic of negation where they harbor undefined thoughts and feelings for such an “amoral” character (Spillers, 296).

Sula’s amoral spirit leaves her ambitionless with “no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego. For that reason, she felt no compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself” (Spillers, 317). Contrary to Nel, Sula lives her young and adult life with a complete disregard for social conventions. After high school, Nel marries, settling into the conventional role of wife and mother. Sula leaves the Bottom for a period of ten years, immersing herself in city and college life. Upon returning to the Bottom, Sula engages in
numerous affairs, including an affair with Nel’s husband, Jude. When Nel learns of the affair, she reflects

That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk about it because it was Sula that he had her for...For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and *the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away.* (emphasis added, 110-1).

Brought up under orthodox traditions, Nel’s understanding of the world is limited. Societal conventions censor how she voices, expresses herself to not only her community but also towards herself; that is, Nel’s decisions are always already censored, determined for her. She relies on social constructs, like motherhood and wifehood, to fill her “thighs” and “heart” with “life.” By having an affair with Jude, Sula leaves Nel with “no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” which implies that Nel, like Irene, cannot live an uncensored, undefined life. Due to her conventional upbringing, Nel is unable to define her life, which, in effect, leads her to be the controller of her own journey. Similar to Irene, she is a passive subject who is always already defined. She views Jude’s infidelity as “leaving her empty,” indicating that she perceives herself as devoid of all vitality. Nel acts like Irene’s “reasonable,” never taking a risk to explore her sexual fluid desires for Sula. But more importantly, she does not entertain the options that such an exploration would open for her life—her subject position. Fearful of living a life outside of the familiar (i.e. motherhood and domesticity), Nel represses the ambiguity imbued in the erotic of negation.

Recognizing Nel’s shortcomings in terms of her screened, heteronormative perceptions, Sula describes how marriage complicates their friendship. “Nel was the one person who had wanted
nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her…the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits” (120). Set in the past tense, the tone of this passage is nostalgic; Sula is nostalgic for the Nel she knew prior to adulthood, marriage, motherhood, and all the other rites of passage. The tone is also, though, nostalgically romantic. The repetition of “first” emphasizes how Nel was Sula’s “first” crush: her first love. Nel was able to view the world at the same “slant” Sula did, indicating that they shared a similar desire to “stretch” or live life beyond prescribed limits.” Returning back to the present, Sula realizes how “marriage, apparently, had changed all that” (119). “That” denotes how the girls no longer perceive the world in similar ways. Sula reflects: “Now Nel was one of them…Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them” (120). Sula refers to all of the folks in the town as “them” since they think in an essentialist manner. The townspeople, particularly the women, fail to see the “slant…stretch” of possibility in life. In their lives, there are no detours for an exploration of the unfamiliar or rather, the erotic of negation; society disrespects, and as evidenced by the judgments they pass on Sula, condemned. Following society’s always already life-map, women like Nel only look straight ahead at motherhood and marriage.

Similar to Sula, Nel also harbors homoerotic feelings but feels threatened by Sula’s peculiar nature. Nel expresses how Sula’s return was like “getting the use of the eye back, having a cataract removed,” indicating how Sula broadens Nel’s vision or rather, her way of seeing, moving, and living her life (95). She reflects “Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle, and a little raunchy…Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (95). This passage reveals Nel’s sexual fluid desires for Sula as she expresses how Sula invokes certain qualities in
Nel that are akin to that which a romantic partner would kindle: gentleness, cleverness, raunchiness or challenging one to be adventurous and take risks, and most importantly, Sula is Nel’s “old friend,” her ear to “converse” with. Nevertheless, Nel quickly dismisses all the joy that Sula brings her as she retreats back to heteronormative, conventional thinking. “Sula, like always, was incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions. When it came to matters of grave importance, she behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out…Like that time with her finger…But Sula was so sacred she mutilated herself, to protect herself” (101). Nel now sees Sula as utterly irrational and impulsive, failing to consider how impulsiveness might actually be an erotically charged quality to embody. Furthermore, Nel does not see how Sula’s seemingly impulsive action of “mutilating herself” was actually a way to not only protect herself, but as we saw earlier, Nel too.

Sula is deprived and nostalgic of her childhood Nel as she expresses how “It had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have” (120). Sula is disappointed that Nel becomes the traditional “them,” especially since she returns back to Medallion and all the supposed glamorous, big cities like Nashville, New Orleans, and New York, for Nel (120). Sula returns to Medallion to reunite with her best friend and, on a more subtle note, her true love.

The men who took her to one or another of those places had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they hooded their eyes. They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. (120-1).

Sula’s sexual fluid desires become evident as she emphasizes what men lack, thereby implying
what that the other sex (i.e. female) possess. For Sula, men can only show their interpretation of love through monetary value like “money.” More importantly, though, is the repetition of “same” which suggests how men cannot challenge Sula to learn and grow in new, mysterious ways. Furthermore, men are unable to hear Sula’s “private thoughts”; they “hood,” shy away from bearing the responsibility of embracing another’s vulnerabilities. Yearning to find one who can be there for her in times of intimacy and vulnerability, Sula concludes: “She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she thought” (122). A man and a woman can never simply be “comrades” since the institution of marriage always already anticipates the next step of the relationship, scripting a couple’s future into that very “same[ness]” that Sula describes earlier. While some read Sula as McDowell’s lesbian aesthetic, I read Sula’s sexuality as sexual fluidity where Sula’s sexual desires change “at her own whim” (121). Nel disapproves of Sula’s lifestyle, thereby closing off the erotic of negation between them; that is, she closes off the possibility of her and Sula ever reuniting and strengthening that intimate bond they once had.

Left alone, Sula acts at “whim,” seeking to find a partner that is both her lover and comrade. Acknowledging the impossibility of this desire, Sula manipulates men for sex to satisfy her bodily pleasures—pleasures that are not contingent upon a man’s role during sex and, more importantly, reminiscent of the experience she would gain through erotic, female camaraderie. Sexual acts, foreplay, and “Sexual aesthetics [in general] bored” Sula (Morrison, 122). The narrator records: When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed could break” (122-3). Sex allows Sula to discover
her “magnetic center”: the erotic of negation. In this space, she reaches a climactic, self-empowering high to only hit the inevitable low that comes with embarking on an unfamiliar, erotic experience. That is, through sex, Sula gains agency as she “asserts” her right to form that “tight cluster.” This cluster symbolizes Sula’s “strength”; yet, this “tight cluster” “seemed” as if it could never break, indicating that it will eventually collapse as will Sula’s agency in the sexual act. Immediately following this passage, the cluster does in fact break.

And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power. But the cluster did break, fall apart, and in her panic to hold it together she leaped from the edge into the soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things: an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy. There in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. (123).

The tone of this passage is erotic as Sula exposes her “rage” at attempting to maintain the tightness of the cluster while also expressing the pleasure that arrives when one finally releases that tight grip of “abiding strength.” Sula ironically gains agency as she relinquishes her logic mind, letting go of all thoughts surrounding space and time. Sula immerses herself in the present, howling into that “stinging” joy of utter “silence”; but more importantly, she dives into “a” singular “loneliness.” This “loneliness is so profound” because it exists “in the death of time”; that is, outside of space and time. Her “loneliness” resides in the erotic of negation: an undefined space that invokes sensations which have “no meaning.” “Meaning” alludes to logos or the logical mind. Logic falls contrary to the erotic of negation which enraptures Sula’s body. As Sula celebrates her joy, she reflects: “When her partner disengaged himself, she looked up at
him in wonder trying to recall his name” (123). Unlike women like Nel who cultivate their erotic power through an orgasm that is collaboratively achieved for both the man and woman, Sula’s orgasm has nothing to do with the man. Sula points out how she could not even “recall his name”; similar to Clifton’s speakers’ in the “homage” poems, she uses men as tools in order to attain that “silent” space that the erotic of negation encompasses. Like her mother, Sula values “maleness” over male-service. As Spillers discusses, “Hanna Peace is self-indulgent, full of disregard for the traditional repertoire of women’s vanity-related gestures” (313). The Peace women, unlike Nel and Helene Wright, do not commit to any long-term relationships with men where serving and tending to the man’s needs is of utmost importance. Rather, a woman like Sula embodies bell hook’s “radical subjectivity”; she refuses to be a body without prerogatives.

In stark contrast to Sula is Nel. Nel is a body without prerogative; she restrains her body from experiencing sensations outside of heteronormative scripts. As Sula lies on her death bed, Nel asserts that Sula “can’t have it all” (142). Nel claims: “You a woman and a colored woman at that” (142). Sula questions Nel: “Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?” (142). As a woman and as “a colored woman at that,” Nel believes the only way Black women can survive in life is if they accept that they cannot “have it all.” According to Nel, Black women cannot choose to act as the definers of their own fate. Due to their racial and gender identities, Nel argues that Black women cannot live to their fullest potential nor should they even dream of that possibility. For Nel, a rational Black woman accepts patriarchal, heteronormative scripts; more importantly, though, is how Nel sees this acceptance as erotically empowering the Black female self. Deviating away from the script of motherhood and domesticity goes against Nel’s orthodox upbringing as well as her interpretation of erotic power for Black women. Nel’s class identity
influences if not determines how she expresses her erotic, thereby explaining why she is frustrated at Sula for acting like a “man…walking around all independent-like” (142).

Nel argues that Sula can’t “act like a man” but Sula claims that she in fact can be “all independent-like” and “do everything” (143). She states:

You think I don’t know what your life is like just because I ain’t living it? I know what every colored woman is doing….Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those red-woods. I sure did live in this world. Really? What have you got to show for it? Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on it. Which is to say, I got me. Lonely, ain’t it? Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely. (emphasis original, 143).

Sula is content with being lonely since she creates her own loneliness. Her loneliness and, in effect, life, is not an always already “secondhand lonely.” Sula resides in a loneliness that is of her own volition. The italics on “mine” elucidate Sula’s radical subjectivity: a body and “mind” that refuses to be without prerogatives. Sula can die knowing that her life, as lived in the external world and also internally in her “mind,” is of her own unique creation. Sula “sure did live in this world.” Contrary to Nel who solely lives to “keep a man,” Sula lives for herself (143). As she expresses being content with loneliness, Sula gains agency because she embraces the strengths and vulnerabilities that accompany a life of erotic negation.

Nonetheless, readers do not know how to judge Sula’s actions even if they stem from a more independent, “male” form of eros. After all, Sula had sex with her best friend’s husband. When Nel asks her why she took Jude away, Sula responds: “What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over
it?” (154). For Sula, having sex with Jude was simply that: a fuck. She does not view her actions as good or bad. Sula feels that since they were “such good friends,” Nel should have prioritized their friendship over her marriage; their homoerotic bond should have taken precedence over a relationship with a man.

As Nel and Sula part ways, Sula asks her why she thinks she was the “good” one; that is, the woman who did the “right” thing (146). Sula’s question challenges readers to explore their preconceived notions of what constructs binaries like good and bad (i.e. a proper versus improper use of female eroticism). Spillers argues that Morrison creates a character that invokes great perplexity for readers in terms of how they come to judge the heroine, (or anti-heroine depending upon one’s reading), of a character whose actions cannot be measured by any type of moral system or ideology. She writes:

The audience does not have an easy time in responding to the agent, because the usual sentiments about Black women have been excised, and what we confront instead is the entanglement of our own…contradictory motivations concerning issues of individual woman-freedom. Sula is both loved and hated by the reader, embraced and rejected simultaneously…she reverses the customary trend of “moral growth” and embodies, contrarily, a figure of genuine moral ambiguity about whom few comforting conclusions may be drawn. (295).

As readers judge Sula’s actions, they experience a similar reaction to how Irene feels towards Clare: the erotic negation. Readers are simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to Sula’s character. They are caught in their “contradictory motivations concerning issues of individual woman-freedom,” or what I would more specifically describe as how a woman should express her erotic power (Spillers, 295). Jennifer Brody discusses *Sula* in relation to *Passing* as she pairs
Irene to Nel and Clare to Sula. Brody discusses how Irene and Nel focus on climbing up that “next rung on the pre-defined ladder of success…terrified of “falling” -of losing [their] secure status” (1061). Nel strives to “keep her man” while Sula could care less to keep a man, let alone deem that a reason worth living for at all (Morrison, 143). Brody argues how “Clare…resembles Sula not only in her attraction to her friend's husband, but more importantly, in her ability to invent herself and to surrender to an oxymoronic downward flight” (1061). Clare and Sula refuse a “secondhand lonely” life. They seek to be the decision-makers, narrating a life that does not strive to achieve what Brody describes as that “pre-defined ladder of success.”

In Sula and Passing, readers experience conflicting desires regarding how Sula and Clare express the erotic; nevertheless, our opposing readings of these characters leads to an empowering readerly experience. Female readers see how older generations of women influence how the later generations utilize their erotic power. Readers can appreciate each other’s differing views as to how Nel and Sula express the erotic. By doing so, they bridge gaps of difference across racial, class, and intergenerational lines, thereby understanding how these differences define their preconceived notions of erotic power. More importantly, readers may even ponder the possibility of exploring another expression of eros; that is, one that differs from their own.
Conclusion: Is the Erotic still Useful? Deconstructing the Twentieth Century Erotic Voice

Moving from the Harlem Renaissance with *Passing* to second and third wave feminism with *Sula*, and finally to the age of “power feminism” in the 1980’s with *Good Times: Poems and a Memoir*, Black women writers reveal to readers the varying and sometimes opposing expressions of erotic power. They illustrated the social and political factors that shape the erotic for a specific generation of women, living at a particular moment in American history and culture. Additionally, these writers show readers how men in positions of power, predominately Anglo-European men, abused Black women. In their poetry, Clifton and Lorde employed an eros that is traditionally deemed as feminine by having their speakers expose their deepest vulnerabilities. In fiction, Larsen and Morrison depicted characters like Irene Redfield and Nel Wright who adhere to conventional gender roles since they believe that such obedience leads to societal acceptance, which, in effect, allows them to be part of a female collective. As readers discuss these works, they see what constitutes and reinforces the differences that divide women and men along racial, sexual orientation, and class lines. In short, they discover the power of the feminine erotic: a power that bridges gaps of difference among readers.

At the same time though, we also saw how Clifton, Lorde, Larsen, and Morrison created female characters’/speakers’ that embodied a masculine eros where the female manipulated a man in order to tap into her erotic powers. Often times, these characters broke the bond of sisterhood, as is the case with Sula and Nel, to discover their independent selves. While Clare’s progressive actions to “pass” and Sula’s provocative act to sleep with her best friend’s husband create friction in female communities, readers see how such division actually empowers women, inviting them to not only explore an eros that differs from their own, but to also recognize how the erotic is intergenerational. That is, previous expressions of the erotic always
already influence and shape the contemporary American female voice.

While my theory of embracing multiple expressions of erotic power, what I discussed earlier as an erotic of negation, seems easy to follow, it is quite difficult to employ living in our supposedly “post-racial,” post-modern world. A close examination of the 2004 Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake incident, now sometimes referred to in popular media as the “nipplegate” episode,” emphasizes how the erotic. The 2004 Super Bowl, televised live on CBS, became the site of great controversy for the American public because thousands of viewers, ranging from all age groups, saw Jackson’s exposed breast. Timberlake exposed Jackson’s breast at an inappropriate time since the Super Bowl is a sacred, cultural tradition intrinsic to American culture, and, for this reason, a “G” rated program. Jackson’s exposed breast threatened the American tradition, disrupting the norm of what constituted an appropriate “American” family activity.

More importantly, though, is to consider how Jackson refused to apologize to the public; as she discussed in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, she did not feel any regret and/or need to apologize since it was an accident. By refusing to apologize, Jackson exercises the erotic of negation where she acknowledges the public’s anger, but never attempts to accept it by adhering to conventional, feminine gender roles; in other words, she refuses to simply “take the blame” for an action that was clearly an accident, and, more importantly, instigated by Timberlake. In fact, in the interview, Jackson subtly hinted that she did not expose her breast; Timberlake undid her garment. Yet, as a Black woman, Jackson was the one under close scrutiny—not the white, blue-eyed ex-band member of NSYNC. In other words, there was a double-standard at play. As a white male, Timberlake intentionally/unintentionally (in this case, unintentional as Jackson reported in the interview) exposed the Black female body and was free from the
public’s eye. Though, as a Black woman, Jackson was not free from scrutiny; she was repeatedly punished as numerous electronic and hardcopy mediums made her made out to be a public disgrace, a humiliation, and ultimately, the “bad girl.” The public neglected to ask how the incident affected Janet; that is, how she felt after Timberlake exposed her breast on a live televised show. Rather, TV networks and pop media assumed that it was a set-up, and, as Kimerbelé Crenshaw rightfully claims in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” Black women’s bodies are always already deemed as promiscuous. For this reason, as Crenshaw explains, they are not afforded fair trials or hearings in cases such as rape. In Jackson’s context, the media assumed that she set-up the “accident”; they did not even consider asking for her side of the story.

Alternatively, news reporters replayed the halftime show, offering biased interpretations that characterized Jackson as the “bad girl”; by continually replaying the scene, the American public, in effect, repeatedly violated and exposed Jackson’s body and sense of privacy. Consequently, Jackson’s voice was silenced, replaced by slanderous, trashy headlines that portrayed her as the “jezebel” figure. In this sense, the media made Jackson out to be the “jezebel,” seducing that which holds class and racial power in the history and, to a certain extent, present-day American society: the white male.

As Black feminist and cultural studies scholars, we must reread these incidents in pop culture and American history, utilizing the erotic of negation. By doing so, we un-silence the voice of Jackson, unpacking what mainstream discourse conveniently silenced: the story of the Black female (i.e. Janet Jackson.) But more importantly, scholars recognize how Jackson’s refusal to apologize, and, consequently, cultivate more fragmentation in the collective rather than unity,
was actually an expression of her erotic agency. In other words, she acknowledged the public’s response but negated the blame that they imposed upon her. By doing so, Jackson became the definer; she defined the half-time show incident as well as the role she played in it, rather than succumbing to the passive, or what Lorde discussed in “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” the defined subject. Using the erotic of negation as a tool, Jackson’s “nipplegate” episode is one of the many bits and fragments that scholars must, to borrow Morrison’s words, “re-memory.” As my analysis has shown, the erotic of negation “re-memories” these silenced voices and/or dismissed expressions of erotic power by embracing intergenerational female perspectives as well as contextualizing how a woman uses the erotic with the resources accessible to her (i.e. the social and political circumstances of her particular time.) The erotic of negation, then, is a theory that scholars can use when examining literary and pop cultural representations of Black women as it illuminates our understanding of how the Black female self discovers her voice and, therefore, constructs her identity.
Endnotes

i See bell hooks’s *Bone Black*.

ii To learn about the concept of rememory in relation to the politics surrounding enslaved African-American narratives, see Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory” in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non-Fiction* (65-83).

iii Lorde’s essay calls for a female audience since the erotic is a power that innately lies in the female body only. For Lorde, the erotic is a power that patriarchal ideologies and structures deny the female, thereby forcing her to adhere to heteronormative gender roles. Females must reclaim the erotic that lies within their bodies in order to reclaim their power and agency.

iv See Smith’s “Toward a Black feminist Criticism” in *Within the Circle, Renaissance to the Present*, (412). This is an excellent anthology that includes foundational, key essays for anyone interested in learning more about the history of African-American and Black feminist studies.

v See Sara Warner’s “Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment: A Transnational Exploration of “Venus” in *Theatre Journal* (181-199). Warner offers a transnational exploration of Suzan-Lori Parks's dis(re)memberment of Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman’s story. Warner disagrees with the universal notion that historical trauma is a wound that must be healed in the name of unity or rather, nation building. She disagrees with the idea that a cultural group’s reconciliation with trauma leads to that specific group’s discovering and establishing an objective truth/cultural identity. Using Baartman’s story as her primary textual/historical example, Warner challenges the assumption that the restoration of a people/nation’s dignity is the goal of the recovery process.
See Nadja Durbach’s Sara Baartman and the “Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography” in *Biography* (858-60). She does an excellent job summarizing Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully’s recent discoveries regarding Baartman’s story. She discusses the value that scholars studying Baartman’s story can gain when pursuing a historical, biographical approach.

See Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black feminist Literary Criticism” for a comprehensive, keen examination that considers diasporic approaches to Black feminist literary criticism in the twenty-first century.

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.”

See Angelyn Mitchell’s and Danille K. Taylor’s Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature*.

Often, critics would theorize the Black feminist writing and scholarship by including introductions to reissued works like *Their Eyes were Watching God* and Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bum*. Beacon Press’s Black women Writers Series was devoted to reissuing these “lost” works, including prefaces and introductions by leading Black feminist scholars such as Frances Smith Foster, Hazel Carby, and Deborah McDowell. McDowell introduces the preface to several Harlem Renaissance novels, namely: Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*, and Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun*. McDowell analyzes these novels from a critical history that dismissed them or that read them only through the lens of race. As Mitchell and Taylor discuss in the Introduction *The
alternative feminist readings; she examines the intersectionality of gender (i.e. gender roles and performance) and racial and class identity. These critical introductions helped make these “lost works” relevant and more accessible to contemporary readers and students.

For an excellent overview and examination of the relationship between Black feminist literary criticism and Black feminist political theory, see Patterson’s “African American Feminist Theories and Literary Criticism” in *The Cambridge Companion to African American’s Women Literature* (87-105).

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

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

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).

For fiction, see Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, centered on a young girl, Birdie, who grows up in a biracial family in 1970’s Boston. Birdie learns to cope with the disintegration of her family due to the increasing racial tensions of the historical and cultural moment of the 1970’s. For non-fiction, see Kwame Dawes’s *A Far Cry From Plymouth Rock*. Growing up under his father’s Marxist Caribbean nationalist bent, Dawes recalls the places that have shaped his
identity, taking readers to Ghana and Jamaica and to Canada and America; by doing so, he
explores the nearly universal conditions of migrants, immigrants, and those hyphenated
individuals.
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