

Feminism” by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

(Introduction: Part II)

Queer Intergenerationality

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

-Audre Lorde, from “Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter” (1989 emphasis added)¹

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

-Audre Lorde *Introduction to Pat Parker’s Movement in Black*, (1989)²

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

-Audre Lorde, from “Prologue” (1971)³

If queer theory is meant to challenge the “reproductive narrative” as it emerges in social institutions, then queer theorists must disrupt the reproduction of a racist narrative that criminalizes the birth and mothering of Black life. The seeming contradiction between mothering and queer intervention overlooks the fact that, as Cathy Cohen argues in “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Black mothers are queer threats to the social order.⁴ This dissertation argues that Black mothering queerly disrupts a reproductive narrative about what (whose) life is worth, a narrative that says that Black life is worth less and that life itself

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

² Audre Lorde. “Introduction: Pat Parker: Movement in Black” in Rudolph Byrd, Jhonna B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall eds. *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 158.

³ Audre Lorde. “Prologue” in *From a Land Where Other People Live*. Chicago: Broadside Press, 1973, 45.

⁴ Cathy Cohen. “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson eds. *Black Queer Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 21-50.

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can be valued and used differentially based on race, economic status, gender etc. When queer theory argues against the child, and criminalizes mothering as an inevitable consent to the reproduction of the status quo, queer theory PARTICIPATES in a reproductive narrative that denies the agencies of mother, particularly poor and racialized mothers, in order to reproduce the differential use values of marked bodies in a capitalist system that turns difference into profit through violence.

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

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

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queer of color critique illuminates and *queers the reproductive narrative through which queer theory has constructed its own genealogy*.⁵

As Michael Warner makes clear in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, a definitive text for the queer theory's project of critiquing the subsumption of gay and lesbian subjects into a normative paradigm, feminist social theory and the critiques of the family found within socialist feminism are the precedent through which he articulates queer theory's intervention into gay and lesbian studies.⁶

At the beginning of his introduction Warner points out that most forms of social theory have made sexuality a peripheral concern, while "feminism has made gender a primary category of the social in a way that makes queer theory newly imaginable." (viii)⁷ And after his analysis of the intergalactic cartoon, made to communicate to possible life forms in another star system, the anecdote from which he gains the title of the collection of essays, we find the genealogical moment:

Much of the work of feminist social theory has consisted of showing that basic conceptualizations—ways of opposing home and economy, the political and the personal or system and lifeworld—presuppose and reinforce a paradigmatically male position. Queer theory is beginning to be in a position to make similar critiques.⁸

The maturation of queer theory, due to the convergences of other forms of social theory, the concern with gender and the need to complicate an increasingly centrist mode within gay and lesbian studies allows it to follow in the footsteps of what almost becomes a parental precedent: feminist social theory.

⁵ Roderick Ferguson. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Jose Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Evelyn, Hammonds. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2-3 (1994):126-145. Reprinted in African American Literary Theory, ed. Winston Napier, (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

⁶ Michael Warner. "Introduction" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

⁷ Ibid, viii.

⁸ Ibid.

Focusing on *The Anti-Social Family*, a key text in the analysis of the political function of the family form on/in contradiction with the contemporary left we will get a sense of the teleological trajectory within queer theory that would allow us to arrive, through the space made by *Fear of a Queer Planet* to a polemic like Edelman’s *No Future* and at the common sense understanding within the dominant (read white-centered) mode within queer theory that any talk of mothering, or intergenerationality must automatically be a non-queer act of consent to the normative narrative of reproductive futurity.⁹

Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh’s *The Anti-social Family* (1982) critiques the “familialism” of both the right wing and the left, arguing that because feminist socialists, and socialists at large have not come to a consensus about the function of the family, especially in regards to the unpaid labor of women, the left in both the United States and Britain have succumbed to trying to fit their demands into a family values rhetorical frame. (14)¹⁰ Early in the preface, the authors admit that their argument is about the implications of the function of the family for a white audience. While they suggest that the analysis they develop could probably be extrapolated to the diverse ethnic populations in Britain, they shy away from actually applying their analysis to the experiences of ethnic “minorities” because as white feminists it is not their place to do so. Interestingly, the other absence that the authors apologize for is the absence of any discussion of sexual preference. Their critique is of the function of the heterosexual white family in relation to heterosexual white citizens. Queer theory will later take up their wholesale critique of the function of the family to develop a critical stance that also decenters the specifics of gay or lesbian identity, but will also be influenced by the tentative grounding of this theory in a whiteness that self-effacingly claims possible

⁹ Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

¹⁰ Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh. *The Anti-social Family*. London: NLB, 1982, 14.

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universality without staking a claim, inheriting (and I use that word intentionally) a not so queer relationship to racial difference.

While the authors try to avoid race and the possibility of their own racism in their analysis, it is clear that the political value of the unit of the family is already about race. Opening the first chapter by citing the sensational proclamations of the European Parliament, which decries that "the falling birthrate, which is now approaching or even falling below the rate required for the (European) population to renew itself" cannot be separated from the fact that this cry to revive the family and to reproduce, comes at a moment during which the racialized people of the British colonial world have been steadily immigrating to the UK, and a time during which the former colonies continue to have high birthrates. The call for the revival of the family is already a racialized call, fueled by anxiety about the fate of the white British population in addition to the concerns about gender roles that the authors center. The authors go on to distinguish their argument about the reproductive function of the family from aberrations where populations are "reproduced by recruitment," most notably in the case of the transatlantic slave trade.¹¹ The reproduction of a family is a privilege, the authors points out, and not all groups have equal access to it. But nonetheless, despite these exceptions, their argument continues, the reproduction of the family serves to reproduce class divisions and the society that requires them. There is no further examination of the potentially different function of reproduction in these liminal groups.

The feminism of this argument hinges on the tyranny of motherhood. Motherhood, is the hyper-exploited labor of women, compelled not only by the assumed naturalness of the gendered division of labor, but also because of an anti-social political form, exemplified by Thatcherism and Reaganism, within which the rhetoric of

¹¹ Ibid, 44.

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individualism and the emphasis of family networks justifies the state defunding of social services, and undercuts any thought that food, housing, education and other basic needs might be community concerns, and not merely individual choices. The labor that the state refuses and projects onto the family necessarily falls onto women because of this gendered division of labor.¹² This leads the authors to argue for the funding of social services, to protest the decrease of welfare, positions that that Black feminists, especially self-identified Black socialist feminists would agree with across the board.

However, the concept of the tyranny of motherhood, when motherhood is deracialized, does not address the complexity of the labor or potential of mothering for racialized mothers. As Hortense Spillers clarifies in her essay "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe," motherhood (the tyrannical force imposed on white mothers) and *mothering* are not the same thing. Motherhood denotes a certain privileged relationship of authority (though limited) through which a mother relates to her "own" child. In the situation of American Slavery however, Spillers points out that *motherhood* is not imposed on enslaved women. Instead mothering, the labor of nurturing they are compelled to perform is directed towards children they cannot "own," both in the cases of their biological offspring, or kin they would choose by affinity or in the case of the master's children who they "mother" as well.¹³ In the situation of slavery, the situation which is exceptional to the argument of the Anti-Social family, the labor of the mother does not only function within a nuclear normative family, it also functions to reproduce slave status, while severing biological and social bonds. This different function of the labor of mothering through which slavery was reproduced and through which racial difference and the exploited labor of racialized mothers both in the homes, kitchens,

¹² Ibid, 61.

¹³ See Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in Winson Napier ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

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hotel laundry rooms of the privileged and in the social narrative that reproduces race, leads to a different analytical function for the term mother.

During the early 1980's, at the same time that Barrett and McIntosh wrote and published *The Anti-Social Family*, Black feminist theorists including June Jordan and Audre Lorde drew on the split between motherhood as a subject position and the flexible labor of mothering to arrive at queer definitions of mothering that were not linked to the reproduction of a heteropatriarchal family unit. Lorde as a lesbian mother raising her children in an interracial lesbian partnership, and Jordan as a divorced bisexual Black mother to a biracial child challenged the link between the work of mothering and the reproduction of patriarchal family, the idea of race purity or the social values of a capitalist society. In fact Lorde's queer proposition that "We can learn to mother ourselves," wrenches the labor of mothering away from the reproductive narrative within which Barrett and McIntosh use it to the extent that mothering itself, the labor of mothering directed differently can be the most dangerous disruptive force the reproductive narrative has ever seen.¹⁴

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

However, the Anti-Social family and the tendency of white social feminists to assume the coherence of the category of motherhood, pass on a tyrannical motherhood to queer theorists via Warner in which the term mother must be the anti-queer. In

¹⁴ Audre Lorde. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 173.

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Warner's introduction, queerness is most importantly a critique of the family structure, as a response to the gay and lesbian's movements move towards desired inclusion in the narrative of reproductive family. Warner insists that queer culture is different from other cultures in that it is not rooted in a place, nor is it diasporic, offering a position that reminds us of the way Barrett and McIntosh shy away from race in their analysis of the family.¹⁵ Warner's insistence that queer culture cannot be described using the same metaphors that racial and ethnic cultures describe themselves, allows him to continue with his argument as if those practicing queer culture are not raced or at best as if race is an exception. After defining "queer culture" in opposition to other cultural forms, and in opposition to the "emphasis on reproductive continuity" in African American culture in particular, Warner explains that the use of the language of family, in particular the word "mother" to describe the role of the leader of an African American "house" in ball culture, must be ironic.¹⁶ It is outside of Warner's understanding of queerness that the word "mother" might actually be descriptive of the intergenerational role that a particular queen performs in the structure of the house. The term "mother" can only function in the way Warner's polemic functions: to critique the family. The rest of this foundational collection of essays follows suit. Even in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's article "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" parents are oddly obscured by the primary relationship between the normative psychoanalyst (who is trying to 'cure' queer youth) and the patient/child. The possibility of a queer parent or any parent who parents

¹⁵ The theorists and organizers at Southerners on New Ground would also disagree with Warner's statement that queerness is not diasporic. Even if one ignores the experiences of people who are both queer and displaced because of racial or ethnic factors, SONG argues that because so many queer southern and rural people (and working class people and people of color) are forced to leave home or kicked out of their homes due to their sexuality, this displacement, during which people are often compelled to move to relative queer-friendly cities, constitutes a queer diaspora. Even though queer people are obviously not from one central location, the majority of queer people are working-class and they are often forced to leave every place. See www.southernersonnewground.org accessed January, 25th 2010.

¹⁶ Michael Warner. "Introduction" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

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queerly is outside of the imaginary of the essay.¹⁷ Cathy Griggers talks about lesbian maternity in her chapter "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)mechanical Reproduction" but only to suggest that the fact that lesbians bodies can be maternal bodies prove that lesbians not only challenge but also participate in the status quo. Griggers also briefly mentions Audre Lorde's *Zami* in order to make a point about states of hybridity, or the instability of minority bodies but unlike the texts that she mentions alongside *Zami* she provides no example from the text, and it remains unclear what use the mention serves, besides the tokenistic diversification of Griggers's archive.¹⁸ Phillip Brian Harper does mention intergenerational queerness, but only as an aside when he contrasts openly gay singer Sylvester's obituary with the obituary of newscaster Max Robinson. Sylvester happens to mention that he enjoyed sex with an adult evangelist as a child. Harper mentions that Sylvester's quotation about childhood intergenerational sex, which appears in his obituary raises issues about "sex between adults and children" as he passes on to discuss the portrayal of Robinson in the media and the Black nationalist homophobia that frames this reception which is the real point of his essay. (250) This however is the most attention a queer intergenerational relationship gets in this text. Predictably, the essays fall in line with the parameters Warner sets in the introduction.

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

¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" in Michael Warner ed. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 69-81.

¹⁸ Cathy Grieger. "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)mechanical Reproduction" in Michael Warner ed. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 186.

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point a more complicated relationship to the patriarchal institution of the family and because it can offer more queer, less linear relationship to the connection between history, futurity and presence.

Roderick Ferguson is widely credited for offering an alternative trajectory for queer theory called a “queer of color critique” that takes the work of Barbara Smith and other radical lesbian feminists of color as a starting point in his 2004 work of sociological and literary critique *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. Later, in his essay “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality,” he extends his assertion of “women of color feminism as inspiration for intersectional analyses of nonheteronormative racial formations” to add that “women of color feminism also invites us to consider how we might reconsider the issue of sexuality’s deployment in an effort to assess queer studies’ management of that category and to usher queer studies into its full critical potential.”¹⁹

At the same time Ferguson problematizes the reproductive narrative through which theory grows out of disciplines in a linear matter. Unlike Warner’s queer theory, which imagines itself as a descendent of other forms of social theory, Ferguson emphasizes the fact that the “women of color feminism” that he cites as a source for a queer of color critique was located “in the interstices” of different academic fields and social movements. Instead of a “an object that belongs to one field or inquiry” Ferguson reframes sexuality within the context of women of color feminism as “a network of relations that constitute knowledge and sociality.”²⁰ In contrast to Warner’s assertion that queer culture is different than other “cultures” because sexuality cannot be understood through the same terms as race or nationality, Ferguson clarifies that

¹⁹ Roderick Ferguson. “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality.” *Social Text* 2005 23(3-4 84-85):85-100

²⁰ *Ibid*, 86..

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"Sexuality is not extraneous to other modes of difference. Sexuality is intersectional. It is constitutive of and constituted by racialized gender and class formations."²¹ Starting here, at the intersection of women of color feminism's critical concerns and accountabilities, sexuality as an engine of critique does not have to make (or colonize) a new space in order to exist. Despite Warner, this planet is already a rather queer planet without appropriating the language of the hip-hop group NWA.

The queer critique that I want to mobilize in this project draws on this trajectory, where neither queerness nor the family operate in a universal realm outside of racial difference, but rather offer a queer intervention into the engendering of racism through the recontextualizing of the term "mother" which is a sexualized, gendered and racialized term in its social function. In *Aberrations* Ferguson explains that term "lesbian," as deployed by Barbara Smith and other self-identified "third world lesbians" functions not as a descriptive identity but as a "negation of identity," a way to interrupt the reproduction of identity. "Lesbian" as a critical form of reading in Smith's proto-queer essay "Towards a Black Feminist Critique" troubled the process of identification itself. Over and over again Smith responded to charges that she was identifying Toni Morrison as a lesbian, with clarifications that she was instead offering a lesbian reading of Morrison's novel *Sula*, and that the practice of a lesbian reading was not about identifying anyone, not the characters, not the author, not even the readers as "lesbians," but rather to point to the ways that a particular critical practice could disrupt the reproductive narrative of patriarchal family providing, in Morrison's words, adopted by Ferguson "something else to be."²²

My argument is that an equally intersectional understanding of the term "mother" can provide us with not only "something else to be," but another **way** to be

²¹ Ibid. 88.

²² Ferguson, *Aberrations*, 110-137.

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where “mother” points to and critiques a mode of reproduction and generates alternative possibilities. I argue that instead of reincorporating modes of literary, historical and activist production into a patriarchal narrative, the use of the term “mother” and the languages of domestic space and the labor of nurturing invoked by lesbian and bisexual feminists of color spotlights and negates that reproduction, queering it for the production of alternative and criminalized social forms.

Focusing on the queer potential of the term “mother” also foregrounds the question of temporality because it invokes and then questions the process or transmission of property (capital) or properties (the racialization of enslavement) across generations. By implying more than one generation, the queering of the term mother raises the question of futurity. In direct opposition to the presentist temporality of Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future*, Jose Esteban Munoz engages the Marxist theories of Ernst Bloch to talk about temporalities of hope towards a revised queer historiography (the no-longer-conscious) and futurity (the not-yet-conscious). Pointing out that “The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes and “rational” expectations.”²³ Instead of settling for the present and foreclosing the future, Munoz argues that queerness, unlike the contemporary invocations of gay and lesbian, but much like Barbara Smith’s project of lesbian reading is “not an identarian formulation but, instead, the invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence.”²⁴

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

²³ Jose Muñoz. “Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism” in *Crusing Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2010, 17.

²⁴ Ibid, 12-13.

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

Queer Intergenerationality Defined:

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

The queer temporality of production without reproduction and relationality without the production of normativity is what I want to call queer intergenerationality. The reading practice of this dissertation is *intergenerative* in that it opens itself to the ghosts of desires too queer to survive in a literary time circumscribed by market values. This queer use of "intergenerationality" describes what Audre Lorde would call "the creative power of difference" and what Hortense Spillers calls the "intervening narrative."²⁵ The basic premise of this deployment of a queer form of intergenerationality outside of the narrative of familial reproduction is that there is something present between us that exceeds the time and space within which we (don't)

²⁵ See Audre Lorde. "Age, Race, Sex and Class: Women Redefining Difference" in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 114-123. Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in Winson Napier ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

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encounter each other. There is something produced that cannot be narrated and that does not survive except that it does. There is something between us that persists because of and despite the fact that we want it.

The normative use of the adjective "intergenerational" refers to something that occurs "between generations" as they are normatively conceived. For example when a young girl speaks with her grandmother they are having an *intergenerational* conversation. But for the purpose of this project, I will be engaging in a radical redefinition of both "between" and "generation." The prefix "inter," meaning "between" usually acts as a boundary, suggesting through its presence the existence of difference and an agreed upon barrier demarcating categories. For example, a conversation between the girl and the grandmother is intergenerational because they are assumed to belong to different generations. However the gap that "inter" invokes can be more complicated than a mere line or hinge. My use of what I will call an intergenerative reading practice reveals the queerness in intergenerationality invoking the term "interstice" as used by Spillers to mark a void in articulability. Spillers, drawing on Julia Kristeva's use of the figure of female genitalia to "decenter and deconstruct the text,"²⁶ uses the term "interstices" to reveal the existence of a "Black hole" as a symbolic rupture (that which has no sign...only hype and hysteria) in the feminist and African-Americanist discourse about Black women's sexuality.²⁷ Evelyn Hammonds builds on this figure of the Black (w)hole to suggest that queer Black female sexuality is a generative site for the expression of Black female desire (and Black feminist discourse). For Hammonds, Lorde's work on the erotic is an example of the way that Black lesbian sexuality "reclaims

²⁶ Hortense Spillers. "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 133, 156.

²⁷ Ibid.

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the despised Black female body.”²⁸ And this impossible desire, because it comes from the Black hole of a foreclosed sexuality, has an impact. It reframes the Black female body as an object and subject of Black female desire. This relationship is not reproductive, but rather reveals the *production* of silence around Black women’s sexuality. Likewise the practice of Black maternity as name for the desire for and fear of criminalized Black sociality reveals the silencing function of the narratives that demonize it. Rather than perpetuate the ideological link between Black female sexuality and reproductivity (i.e. the reproduction of slave status, the reproduction of a culture of poverty), I intend for “inter” and “generation” to coproduce a possibility that Black women can actually “generate” desire, speech, narrative, critique and social relationships, a production silenced by the reproduction of these desires as pathologies in the dominant narratives.

This brings us to my recontextualization of the term “generation” which is fueled by my intention to make visible an intersubjective Black feminist theory of production or *generation* in the sense of the active verb “to generate.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “the action of generating” is actually the primary definition of the term “generation,” but “generating” in this case directly reflects the heteronormativity latent in the root “genre” which signifies gender as naturalized difference in type and appropriates “generation” into the reproduction of that difference through a primary association with human procreation and classification, the ideological engines for both “gender” and “race.” The second definition of “generation” is synonymous with “production” as in John Clarke’s passage in Rohault’s *Natural Philosophy* (1729) “The Production of Something which before was not, we call Generation.” The evocations of “generation” that I want to focus on occur as subsets to this second definition of the word describing the production of electricity, or the generator as an energy source and the linguistic use

²⁸ Hammonds, 126.

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

My use of the term generation highlights these valences of the term which invoke production, energy and action at the base of the speakable, while pushing on that very basis, the root "genr" to activate a *different* theory of difference, where difference is not reproductive of capital and inequity, but rather dialogically productive of ethical accountability between Black feminists and the political figures they reached back and forwards towards across death. I am using the term "intergenerational" primarily to mark co-production between people of different chronological ages, but also to activate

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the radical productivity of difference that emerges in the spaces of collaborative making. It takes an intergenerative reading practice to queer the function of intergenerationality.

For example, in "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Hortense Spillers makes an "intergenerational" statement in all of the senses in which I am deploying the term. This essay, which opens with an excerpt from Audre Lorde's poem "A Song for Many Movements," is the practical debut of the vocabulary "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe" made a space for (in fact in 2006 Spillers mentioned that she wrote the earlier essay because she knew she had to give a talk at Barnard College for the Scholar and the Feminist Conference and she didn't have a way of saying what she needed to say).²⁹ In "Interstices," Spillers refers back to and summarizes the project of "Mama's Baby" in a language enabled by the possibility of that reference. By drawing on this passage I am hoping to exemplify (through this action and through the example itself) "intergenerational" critique by investigating the productive space between Spiller's different instances of articulation.

In "Interstices" Spillers explains the predicament of Black women thusly: "Their enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome."³⁰ This is the main argument of "Mama's Baby" in a nutshell, but this contemporaneous invocation is an intergenerational statement on a number of levels. First, this sentence is more expansive than the present. By referring to enslavement as "the marketplace of the flesh," Spillers sonically invokes the "marketplace of ideas" represented by the Barnard

²⁹ Hortense Spillers, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Saidiya Hartman, Shelley Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan. "Whatcha Gonna Do?": Revisiting 'Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book.' *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol. 35 No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer, 2007) 299-309.

³⁰ Spillers, *Interstices* 155

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College³¹ lectern from which she speaks “even now.” She is presencing enslavement, reminding us that slavery is present. This is an intergenerative move. More obviously, Spillers invokes the intergenerational by referring to “daughters,” but this statement is queerly intergenerational in the critical sense because Spillers does not naturalize the link between enslaved women and “the daughters” by using the phrase “their daughters.” “The daughters” have no explicit link to any mothers in this passage (indeed there are no “mothers” here), and even if they did have a biological link, the mothers would remain bereft of any proprietary claim to the daughters. Their relationship to the earlier women is produced entirely by Spillers’s association of daughters with the commodification that continues to be used to commodify Black women. It is this racist reproduction of Black women as abject objects that insists that the “condition of the mother” continue through “the daughters,” not the biological or social reproduction of affinity. The interchangeability of the mother and the daughter is a result of the social reproduction of slave status, “even now.” Whereas in “Mama’s Baby” Spillers describes the grammar through which Black bodies become flesh narrated into the reproduction of abjection, in “Interstices” she is able to delink or create space between Black women’s bodies and the reproductive narrative that automatically implies. Presencing the history, and describing the narrative does not necessarily reproduce the limits in this instance. Spillers’ intergenerative move here is not merely the production of a “daughter” subjectivity; she invokes intergenerationality to denaturalize the work of the reproductive work of the marketplace(s) to dehumanize Black women. Likewise, my use of an intergenerative reading practice in this project is not towards a lineage of Black feminist foremothers (though I am presencing earlier actors) it is rather an exercise in faith. I believe that the space in between these earlier Black feminist actors and this

³¹ Barnard College would be (a generation later) the place where the author of this chapter would begin to labor in the marketplace of ideas/flesh.

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moment of Black feminist articulation enables a collaboration through which the reproduction of objectification can be made visible *and* the dangerous possibilities that this objectification covers over can be activated.

On Generators and Survival

1989 was an apocalyptic year too. In St. Croix, Audre Lorde survived the severity of hurricane Hugo, a storm so severe she says, "the land almost gave up her name."³² This description is poignant, because it is not only the violence and wind of rain that threatened St. Croix's existence, but also the colonial relationship of the United States and the militaristic and belated response to the storm that turned a natural storm into a social disaster for Black residents of St. Croix. Lorde warns:

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

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

Jacqui Alexander uses the idea of palimpsestic time to point us to the echoes of colonialism and other forms of oppression in the contemporary moment, and also to

³² Audre Lorde. "Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter." *Callaloo*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1991, 72.

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argue that spiritual, cultural and political forms of response and creation echo across time as well.³³ I place Audre Lorde’s “Hugo Letter” in this context. The social responses to Hurricane Hugo and Hurricane Katrina are not the same, they occurred in different places and at different political moments, however Lorde’s pedagogical prophecy stands. There is something to learn here. Lorde’s text, “Of Generators and Survival-Hugo Letter” is actually what the generation that would (fail in the) face (of) the predictable U.S. Government response to Katrina and Rita would have needed to know.

Generators are not completely reliable sources of energy and are even more limited since they depend on gasoline. They are fragile. They don’t last long. But in this case when everything we need has been washed away, when there is nothing to inherit, we need some energy source. Maybe this (reading practice) is the best we have. Lorde makes her argument for this intergenerational pedagogical engagement where wind is a teacher and there are key structural and symbolic lessons to be learned in the form of both a letter and a diary, private forms of communication made public through an autonomous publishing initiative called Winds of Change Press. The fact that Lorde and her partner Gloria Joseph had to create their own publishing company³⁴ in order to make these lessons publicly available is a sign of their intentionality. Though this form of anti-capitalist critique of a neocolonial common sense was, from the view of the dominant narrative of the hurricane and the empire, never meant to survive, Joseph and Lorde clearly meant for these words to survive.

At the same time that Lorde and Josephs documented their individual and communal experience of Hugo, Lorde also began a process of critical revision of her

³³ M. Jacqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

³⁴ Winds of Change Press, founded in St. Croix in the aftermath of Hugo in order to produce *Hell Under God’s Orders: Hurricane Hugo in St. Croix—Disaster and Survival*, an anthology that Gloria Josephs created to document community experiences and responses to the storm and the social aftermath, is still in existence. Joseph’s plans to reprint the anthology (and of course I plan to teach it.)

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entire poetic body of work after salvaging copies of her own poetry books out of the hurricane wreckage. In the introduction to *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised* Lorde explains that this process of intervention into the lives of her poems was a survival experience, directly impacted by seeing her "whole way of life" transformed by the hurricane and the violent government (non)response.³⁵ In this very last publication of her lifetime, Lorde expresses her concern with the "lasting power of a poem."³⁶ However instead of going back and correcting all of her youthful poetic mistakes from the perspective of her older wiser self, she seeks to create a loving intergenerational relationship with herself, similar to her relationship to the students she mentored. Speaking of "the girl and young woman I was when these poems were written" she says she "marveled at what she knew as well as what she did not know and how she learned to put both together into a working poem."³⁷ Wind is the teacher. Reminding Lorde about the impermanence of manmade structures and the transformational survival of the human spirit, Lorde was inspired to engage her own poetry and her former selves through a loving intergenerational practice, preparing her poems for another generation of readers.

The intentions, in action and language, that compelled Josephs and Lorde to create a new publishing apparatus and to revise old poems calls for an intergenerative reading practice from those of us living here in the predictable future of unlearned lessons repeated. Lorde's Hugo Letter to exemplifies queer intergenerationality as a crucial relationship to Black feminist literary production in the period under review. Queer intergenerationality, is revealed by the intergenerative practice of being present to what can be generated and then shared between moments in times and encounters, that

³⁵ Audre Lorde. "Introduction" in *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, xiv.

³⁷ *Ibid*, xv.

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is not necessarily linked to generations in the patriarchal familial sense. However in this dissertation references to mothering and daughterhood are important markers for the fraught work of writing relationships that do not reproduce social death across time through bodies inscribed for exactly that purpose. In this case, while comparing the military response to Hugo to the 1983 US invasion of Grenada (Lorde's complicated mother/land) Lorde draws on a familiar image in the lexicon of literature by and about Black women, the image of a mother and child being torn apart by an uncaring set of oppressive forces. A rare dramatized moment in Lorde's "Hugo Letter" set off by an introductory sentence fragment, this scene points to the reproduction of oppression over time, enacted on the bodies of Black women.

Drawn guns in the hospital lot. A U.S. military M-16 shoved into her face *stops* my friend as she *tried* to go to her aged and disoriented mother, who *is* crying out for one scrap of familiarity, dignity, or help as she *is being* abruptly rushed into a military ambulance for evacuation to who *knew* where. She calls to her daughter, who cannot run to comfort her because of the M-16 barring her way.³⁸

I have added emphasis to some of the verbs in this passage to draw attention to the tension between the tenses in this dramatization. Lorde is writing about the recent past, but the present tense continues to emerge in the passage. Almost alternating between the present indicative and the simple past tense, this passage resists temporalization. Why does the present tense insist on recurring while the use of the simple past (friend tried, who knew where) reveals an intention to place the event in a chronological narrative of events in Lorde's diary of the event? *M-16 stops, mother is being rushed, she calls*. Like the discussion of a literary event, this scene takes place in the present, and the presence of the scene *is* tense and exceeds the narrative linearity that grammatical tenses would imply. This scene, in which mother and child are torn

³⁸ *ibid*, 79.

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apart not only flashes forward to the post-Katrina moments when family members were sorted onto trucks for relocation based on arbitrary categories, like age, which resulted in the separation of biological and chosen family members who had survived the floods together, but it also refers back to the countless scenes in literature of and about enslaved Black women in which a mother and child are violently separated through sale in slavery. The temporality of the scene Lorde recounts is traumatic and one of the symptoms of trauma is an inability to apply linearity to memory.³⁹ The narrative says, this is what happening. The poetics of trauma says, this is still happening. The temporality of trauma, enacted through tense here, is a critique. It says that this has happened before, and look, it is happening again. The event neither starts nor ends during the scene itself. The reproductive labor of caring for the aged mother, the possibility of chosen continuity, affinity and relationship is trumped the by the reproduction of a social narrative in which the bodies of Black women are expendable, and can be placed anywhere without consent, to serve the needs of an ordering narrative of violence.

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

³⁹ Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

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

In 1990 towards the end of a long battle with breast cancer, Audre Lorde compares the arrogance of a neocolonial capitalist relationship to St. Croix to tumors, "some fantasy of bloodless immortality," and offers a rival pedagogy, wind teaching the future she describes in her poem "Prologue"⁴⁰ where the children are grass, singing past mourning. Audre Lorde, never meant to survive, and refusing to impose a bloodless immortality, calls us to imagine a different relationship across time.

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

⁴⁰ I discuss this in detail in chapter 1 "Survival: An Intervention into Meaning"

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

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

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

Always, Always

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

*filled to the very living
full*

-June Jordan "1977: Poem for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer:"⁴¹

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

-June Jordan "For Audre" February 1993⁴²

It means you are terrified of love. This is what June Jordan said about living with her 40% prognosis of survival with breast cancer. This, in an essay written almost twenty years after her mentor Fannie Lou Hamer died of breast cancer at age 69, almost four years after her peer Audre Lorde died from breast cancer that spread at age 58. *It means you are terrified of love. It means all references to future time leave you feeling/ignored or irrelevant or both. It means death is always always/blurring your vision with tears.* Only six years after June Jordan died from breast cancer at age 65, I

⁴¹ June Jordan. "1977: Poem for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 276-277.

⁴² June Jordan. "For Audre. February 1993. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 101, Folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

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looked at June Jordan's original handwritten drafts of this speech, the Keynote for the Mayor's Summit on Breast Cancer in San Francisco in November 1996.⁴³ I wanted to see if she had revised it, if maybe she had described it that way on second thought. I was hoping that maybe she didn't really feel that way, not on the top of her head, not in the memory of her hand. I sat in the archive hoping that "always always" was a revision, a performative poetic effect for the audience, if not a typo. But there it was, and this time my vision was blurred. In somewhat shaky cursive, in blue ink on legal paper and then again in both typewritten versions. *It means death is always always blurring your vision with tears.*

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

A Poetics of Repetition

How do we approach death and systematic, repetitive threats to survival, poetically? What relationship can we afford to consent to in our reading practices across and against death? The repetitive incidence of cancer in the lives of middle aged Black feminist theorists calls for both a social and a theoretical response. In order to be accountable to the cultural workers that this dissertation features, this project must deal with the question of whether and how death and disease shift textual meanings and what reading practice is appropriate in the face of the seemingly shortened life span of Black

⁴³ June Jordan. "Besting a Worst Case Scenario," in *Affirmative Acts*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, 157-169.

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feminist theorists and the struggle so many have had, and are having with cancer. The first section of this introduction lists but a few of the contemporary Black feminist thinkers who are dead due to cancer at this very moment. It would take pages to list all of the Black feminist theorists who are struggling with cancerous growth, fibroids and pre-cancerous masses right now. Almost every queer Black feminist I know who is over the age of 35 has already begun to confront these health issues. As I write this, I myself, at the age of 26, am recovering from a minor surgical procedure related to a growth in my left breast. It would be irresponsible to assert that these health problems are either mere coincidence, or immaterial to the process of literary and theoretical production. We must find a way to read historical repetition poetically, so that we can create a transformed relationship to the patterns inscribed upon our bodies, and the embodied connections that link the meanings of our lives together.

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

I think she meant for me to see her scarification, which was like a written text. She meant for me to know that the scar from my own surgery a year before—and the multiple fibroid tumors I was now free of—bound me to a history of “texts” written upon women’s bodies.⁴⁴

In some ways, the work of this dissertation is in conversation with the history of these “texts,” the urgency written upon the bodies of so many queer Black feminists marking spaces where a rejection of stable employment, lack of access to healthcare, the stress of exclusion from multiple communities of support and the dance of constant, teaching, writing and thinking about and against violence intersect and manifest. If the

⁴⁴ Alexis De Veaux. “Searching for Audre Lorde” *Callaloo* 23.1, 2000, 64-65.

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work of queer Black feminist mothering produces rival significations of the Black body, that work and its unlikely survival also exists in the scars and missing places in the bodies of the workers, and the missing members of this intergenerational movement. The meaning of my body is dialogical, produced both by and in spite of the imagining and intention I am engaged in along with ancestor mothers, elder mothers, the youngest among us and the unborn. If we are working to assert that our bodies are sites for the manifestation of spirit remembrance, we must also take seriously the dismemberment that capitalism writes on us, both as motivation and punishment for our dangerous creativity.

And this circulation of scars, disease and healing works in multiple directions. In a letter across death to her mentor Toni Cade Bambara a Black feminist artist and thinker who also died of breast cancer, Black lesbian filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons writes of her own experience with painful fibroid tumors and references *The Salt Eaters* a novel by Toni Cade Bambara as the text that she needed to read in order to become proactive about her own healing.⁴⁵ Toni Cade Bambara herself, at age 42, wrote a letter to June Jordan commiserating with her struggle to quit smoking, admitting that the only period of her adult life when she had been able to abstain from cigarette use was when she had also abstained from writing. Ultimately she chose to keep writing, and continued smoking, but she lit a candle and said prayers towards June Jordan's clean lungs in a letter exchange where the two writers also mourned the early death (at age 57) of their mutual friend, the scholar Hoyt Fuller.⁴⁶ Ultimately, while biographical research into the lives of Black feminists, and queer Black feminists in particular confronts us with specters of disease, this literary project cannot and would not create an

⁴⁵ Aishah Shadidah Simmons. "For Toni" in *Letters to Black Feminist Ancestors* ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Make/Shift Magazine*, issue 5, Spring/Summer 2009.

⁴⁶ Toni Cade Bambara. Letter to June Jordan (undated) 1981, in June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 28 Folder 12, Schlsinger Library, Harvard University.

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epidemiology of Black feminism or a theory on the impact that Black feminist literary production has on physical health. Instead, taking into account the urgency that my research subjects, my intimate audience and I face due to the prevalence of these health problems, I seek to activate queer intergenerationality as an ethical temporality through which to practice our reading of queer Black feminist texts (or our queer reading of Black feminist texts).

Audre Lorde's influential work in the *Cancer Journals* to articulate a theory of life and death evocative of a politics of radical expression and embodied feminism is among Lorde's most studied contributions to feminist theory. However Jordan's writing on and in response to breast cancer is rarely featured or highlighted. In the paragraphs that follow, I will pay close attention to the imagistic repetition in Jordan's poetic tributes to Hamer and Lorde, and in order to elaborate her expression of "death always always blurring (y)our vision with tears" into a temporality of reading.

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

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

*fulled to the very living
full*

A decade and a half later in "For Audre" she writes

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

This repetition of the transformed imagery of fullness and trembling has something to teach us about a possible mode of response to loss and a form of mourning that is not specifically "Black feminist mourning" but is however informed by, and infused in the practice Black feminist literary production as a survival intervention. In

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Jordan’s tribute to Hamer, she maternalizes her mentor. Early in the poem she quotes Hamer insisting that when Jordan comes to Mississippi she must stay at “home” with Hamer. This home is a space that has fed Jordan, not only with a theory of the significance of land rights in Black communities and food sustainability, and literarily with the seeds of a novel on Mississippi and land reform that she never wrote, but also literally in the form of turnips and okra. Mothering for Jordan, as this dissertation will argue and elaborate on is work that fulfills “a hungering for” within people, for food in one sense, but in another sense a hungering for connection and home spaces despite the violence of the racist capitalist sexist context in which life takes place. Hamer speaks to this conflated hunger for food and sustainable community under dire circumstances when Jordan quotes her in the poem yelling

BULLETS OR NO BULLETS!

THE FOOD IS COOKED

AN’ GETTING COLD!

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

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

You used to say, "June?"

Honey....

Interpreted after the fact by Jordan:

Meaning home

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

*against the beer the shotguns and the
point of view of whitemen don'
never see Black anybodies without
some violent itch start up.*

*The ones who
said, "No Niggas's Votin in This town..."*

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

*filled to the very living
full*

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

*one solid gospel
(sanctified)
one gospel
(peace)*

and continues the dialogue with the parenthetical elaborations on the meaning of the gospels, which are themselves offerings towards the meaning of life. Ultimately Jordan honors Hamer for the work of mothering which is able to fill Jordan with faith in a loving

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meaning of Black life despite the violent evacuation of those loving meanings in the actions of racists. Though in this poem Jordan does not mention Hamer's experience of forced sterilization early in life, but she was well aware of this fact and it is clear that this knowledge impacts her depiction of Hamer's mothering labor. The attacks against Black mothering, especially in the South were pervasive, but the queer thing is that in collaboration with Hamer, Jordan illuminates a definition of mothering that does not depend on biological reproduction, because it is about the production of a context of chosen and meaningful relationships. In the poem, Jordan both emphasizes Hamer's miraculous way of asserting these meanings in forms of mothering (laundry, dinner, hosting June during her visits) and Jordan asserts this meaning in a dialogic poetic form that acknowledges her coproduction of a "field of love" through which she can engage Fannie Lou Hamer past her death.

In 1977 days after Fannie Lou Hamer's death, June Jordan introduces Lorde as the first Black poet to be honored with a reading at the Donnell Library, and explicitly links Lorde's work to the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer. Lorde's daughter Elizabeth saved a signed copy of Jordan's introductory remarks, and after rereading it, Lorde wrote a draft of a thank you letter in her journal, detailing how much it meant to her to be recognized by Jordan, "isn't that what we all long for, a sister who says, yes I see you sister."⁴⁷

In early 1993, Jordan is moved to create a tribute past death for Audre Lorde, a peer, the imagery of fullness and trembling takes on a different feeling. Jordan faces Lorde's death with a "full and trembling heart" knowing that she too is facing the cancerous enemy that is responsible for Lorde's untimely demise. Jordan's heart may be full of love in this instance, as in the Hamer example, but it is also filled with fear at what

⁴⁷ Audre Lorde, Journal 15, Spelman College Archives.

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it means to look at an age-mate across the chasm of death. It is again the queer and crucial labor of mothering that connects Jordan to Lorde across death. In this tribute, written in the form of a prose letter which breaks into poetic form immediately after Jordan's description of her "full and trembling heart," Jordan describes her first link to Lorde as their teaching labor of protesting students during the uprisings at City College, and explains the success of that labor, which they undertook in partnership with the students, as a result of mothering as the context of their own lives. Against the assumption that the needs of Black students would require a lowered set of academic standards she explains, conspiratorially with Lorde across death "We knew better. We had been Black children. And each of us had given birth to a Black child here, in America. So we knew the precious, imaginably deep music and the precious unimaginably complicated mathematics that our forbidden Black bodies enveloped." We will discuss mothering and queer intergenerationality in the classroom more thoroughly in Chapter 3: Teaching Us Questions, but once again Jordan's connection to Lorde leads her to describe mothering as access to an alternate meaning for Black life as infinitely precious and complex. This process of mothering is intergenerational as her further bond to Lorde before the details of their shared oppressions is their shared activity to make their own lives meaningful in the context of "the mystery of our own mother's face." This possessive "mother's" is singular to indicate each mother, but also results in the possible meaning that Lorde and Jordan share a possessive mother, or are/were inhabited by a spiritual mother in the context outlined above through which they made their own labor of mothering themselves and others legible.

Jordan's survival, and Lorde's is caught up in the ability to create mothering as a practice that changes the meaning of life and creates a temporality that outlives the threatened bodies and the unfair means of literary production that each confronted.

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And their survival depends on our ability to read this theoretical practice of radical mothering in their work. There is birth somewhere here, in all this death. There is mothering happening as the meaning of your life shifts in these words. There is queer survival in our opening towards each other. As June Jordan writes to Audre Lorde, I say to them both and the other ancestors that live here:

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

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

*again
face-to-face.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally in Chapter 5: “On Publishing and Survival: The Meanings of Production” I explore the unpublished and unpublishable angry Black feminist letter of protest as a genre that reveals and exceeds the limits of the publishing market within and against which black feminist literary production articulated itself and tracks the efforts black feminists made to create publishing initiatives in the NorthEastern United States including: Kizzy Enterprises, a phantom publishing initiative that June Jordan and others envisioned but were never able to create; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press

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