Finding Strength in Oppression: Black Women’s Herstories and Their Journeys to Autonomy

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 2
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... 3
Dedications ..................................................................................................................... 4
Prologue ......................................................................................................................... 5
Chapter 1: Black Women’s Narratives: Proclamations of Sexuality and Resistance .......................................................... 17
   Introduction
      African Communities during TransAtlantic Slave Trade
      The Era of Jim Crow (1877-1960s)
Chapter 2: Ruth Ellis Breaking Boundaries and Joining the Lesbians ..................... 54
   Introduction
      Race, Riots, and Resistance
      Lesbi-Gay Together
      Joining the Lesbians
Chapter 3: A New Telling of Herstories: Audre Lorde, the Erotic, and Zami ............ 97
   Introduction
   Biography
   Personal as the Political
   Journey to a Place Called Home
   Imprinted Love and the Erotic
Epilogue ......................................................................................................................... 149
Works Cited .................................................................................................................. 153
Abstract

This thesis examines the how confounding identities of Black, woman and lesbian are obstacles that hinder Black women from finding spaces of comfort and acceptance. The first chapter explores how African women during the transatlantic slave trade and Black women during slavery and the era of Jim Crow navigated social negotiations and multiple layers of oppression to survive. Chapter two and chapter three focuses extensively on two prominent lesbian figures, Ruth Ellis and Audre Lorde, that paved the way for the generations following theirs to assert their own definitions of woman, love, and self-identity through relationships with other women as well as developing one within themselves. Essentially this thesis reveals the importance of history through the stories and experiences of foremothers.
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Dedications

To my mom and dad for teaching me that love is not always understood and for giving me strength and will to venture this treacherous world while staying true to myself.

To Black women who have shown resilience in the face of trials, strength when they could have been rendered weak, and beauty when confronted with pure ugliness. This essay is for young women, like myself, who are looking to the past to collect parts of themselves to create a better future.
PROLOGUE

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.”

Audre Lorde

*The Litany for Survival*, 1978

Growing up I did not encounter the word lesbian, only gay for both male and female homosexuality, or “faggot” if someone really wanted to crush your soul. Neither word had positive connotations and both were used as weapons of destruction. Being called “gay” or “a faggot” was the most isolating label a kid in my neighborhood could receive. It was worse than having the dreaded cooties. I was a tomboy since before I was potty-trained. I liked to dress comfortably in loose clothing, play any sport that allowed me to act rambunctiously, as my mother often reminded me, and dresses were always my enemy. My mother, however, did not see my behavior as alarming because at home, I still exhibited the girly characteristics that counterbalanced my tomboy traits. I avidly played with both Barbie dolls and life size baby dolls, with a preference for the baby dolls. I remember walking around the house pretending that I was going to work and using any circular object as a steering wheel to drive my imaginary car to my mom’s location from her to babysit. She happily complied, knowing that someday I would become a good and caring mother. My young mind believed that baby dolls were my children and as such, they travelled everywhere with me. I carefully secured them in car seats when I would go to the supermarket with my mom and give them baths in
the bathtub regularly. Looking back, I assume that my mother believed that these materialistic attributes were signs of heterosexuality, and my pleasure in playing sports were simply competitive hobbies.

My father’s expectations of me were different in comparison to my mother’s. I did not live with both parents because they divorced when I was young, but I saw him frequently including most weekends, summer breaks, holidays, and birthdays. Like most dads, mine initially desired a son, but gladly settled for a tomboy that loved to play sports. Since age four basketball was my favorite sport to play. My oldest brother taught me the ins and outs of basketball, but my dad attended every single game. He would encourage me to be more aggressive on the court beginning as young as age six. When I began to want to play football around the age of eight or nine he gladly entertained that idea. We shared moments of excitement when the Dallas Diamonds, a women’s professional football team, began their first season in 2002. He knew that I dreamed of joining those women one day to dominate the football field and take the sports world by storm. My father seemed absolutely thrilled that I was into “boy” things because he also indulged in my desire to dress in boy clothes. For my eighth birthday he bought me a pocket bike, also known as a miniature motorcycle, and we rode in the Juneteenth parade together that year. All of my tomboyish ways and interests were major bonding points for us while I was growing up. Our bond was unbreakable. The only “feminine” thing that he would ask of me every time we spent time together was that I wear earrings. I did not necessarily enjoy wearing earrings but I complied since it seemed trivial, plus I did not really have a choice. Naturally, though, I often rebelled
and only wore them when he requested and purposely forgot to put them back on before we reunited.

Me at age ten in my favorite sports jacket with my cousins at a family gathering. (2004)

Unlike my parents, beginning around the age of seven, I knew that my tomboy attributes were part of a deeper reason. The most distinct memory I have of the early signs of my desire for females is of my oldest brother’s girlfriend. She lived one block over from us and was therefore only a quick bicycle ride away. Since I was her boyfriend’s adorable little sister, she immediately took interest in me and I in her. After school, I would often jump onto my bike and eagerly pedal as quick as possible to her house for some alone time with her. I thought she was professing her love for me when
she gave me a Capri Sun and chips, so I genuinely thought she was somehow my girlfriend too. I vividly recall the way my heart jumped when she smiled or how excited I became when she was alone with me. I soon found out that I was not “the one” and my brother was the lover she desired. Unbeknownst to her, she was my first heartbreak and I was only nine years old.

As I grew older my attraction to females increased and became more apparent to myself. I had my first girlfriend when I was in the eighth grade, but I publicly dated guys to keep my heterosexual image. That was the year I truly developed the skill of effectively hiding a huge part of myself from the world. My life only grew more complicated when I transitioned into a private boarding high school in Massachusetts over a thousand miles away from home. I suddenly found myself immersed in two completely different worlds. My high school environment allowed me to explore and express myself as I desired. Contrarily, when I traveled all the way back home to Oklahoma, the facade returned and I continued to pretend. I dated guys that I did not have interest in and wore clothes that accentuated my newly developed curves and desirable figure. I giggled at the male attraction although I secretly curled inside myself at every intimate male interaction. I wanted desperately to break free from the “closet,” but every time I thought I was ready to make the first step out, a slur or insult voiced by my mother about homosexuals shoved me back in. I could not face myself or endure the pain of disgrace.

Despite the many “signs” that alluded to my homosexuality, no one in my family knew for sure that I liked females until I was a freshman in high school. My older sister was the first to find out, accidentally of course, when she came across a
series of texts between myself and my partner at the time. I remember that moment like it was yesterday. She handed me the phone awkwardly and asked me if there was something that I needed to tell her. We both knew that I sensed that she discovered my secret, but I insisted that there was nothing to confess. She hesitated to move on from the topic and eventually did but only after she gave me “the look” that meant “I know, so do not lie to me.” At that time coming out felt like a confession because being a lesbian is considered the equivalent of committing a crime and I did not want to be a culprit. I did not doubt that my sister would accept me, however I feared that she would reveal my identity to my mother. My sister, as my mother used to say, could not hold water to save her life. I suspect she gave my mother hints about my sexuality because my mother’s verbal disapproval of other lesbian and gay couples increased. As a woman of Christian faith, she believed that homosexuality was a disgrace and an abomination. I was afraid to reveal my identity because I was terrified that she was going to think the same of me. However, a secret can only remain so for so long.

My senior year of high school during winter break in 2011, I told my dad the truth about my sexuality. I suppose my wardrobe change from tight form fitting clothing to loose, boyish wear and my lack of boyfriends in my high school career led to suspicions. During a family gathering at my paternal grandparents’ house, he pulled me aside into my room and asked me a series of questions:

My father: Why do you always wear hats?
Me: Because I like to. . . as do you.
Father: Do you have a boyfriend?
Me: Umm, nope.

Father: Do you want a boyfriend?

Me: Not particularly, no.

Father: Do you like girls?

Me: ... Yes.

Father: Mmhmm... Have you kissed a girl?

Me: (slight giggle) I have.

Father: Do you see yourself with a girl in the future?

Me: Yea, I do.

Father: Okay, cool. Good to know.

The moment I answered yes a I felt the weight of my secret escape my lips and I instantly gained a new level of confidence. My father finally knew and he did not give me a disapproval speech or make snarky comments. The day continued like normal. We laughed, joked, and captured a beautiful family photo. It was the opposite of how I imagined this moment would be and everything I hoped it would. Little did I know that my sense of relief would spiral downward quickly.

The next thing I knew, it was here. Senior spring. A time of happiness, transition, graduation, and of course, senior prom, which was only a couple of months away. All of my female friends were joyous as they picked out the perfect dress and shoes to make the night as magical as the movies we grew up watching on Disney Channel. Except me. I wanted to look for a sexy tux and the nicest shoes to perfect the charming look I knew I could execute flawlessly, but I was torn between pleasing myself and

Walker 10
fulfilling my mother’s image of my prom night. A few months after I told my dad I was attracted to girls, I struggled with keeping it a secret from my mother. I figured that even if she disapproved I had support from my dad. My mother and I silently argued throughout the course of my Spring break. Words never escaped our lips, and I can still fill the deafening silence hovering over, suffocating me. I expressed my desire to wear something other than a dress and she refused adamantly and I pushed persistently. My confidence in expressing my sexuality and preferred gender was mistaken for disrespect. I was hurt and confused. I did not understand how my actions were disrespectful yet simultaneously I knew they would be perceived that way. The day I was to leave to return to school I wrote my mother a really long letter outing myself as lesbian and explaining that my sexuality was not a reflection of my respect for my family nor was it something that should uproot our close relationship. I argued every possible angle I could think of at the time as to why I should wear what I wanted to wear for my prom. I slipped it into her purse as I left the car to enter the airport to board yet another plane that would separate us for several more months. She did not discover it for a few days, but when she did I received a call and her very verbal disapproval. I cried throughout the call and hung up feeling more upset than anticipated. About a week later, I finally gathered the confidence to continue to express myself in the ways that made me happy but another blow to my being crippled any progress. I received an email from my dad three months after our initial conversation that revealed his true opinion of me and of my sexuality. As I read it tears streamed down my face and blurred the screen. Suddenly everything seemed so unclear. Again, I was accused of being disrespectful, told that I “need[ed] to get a grip on that attitude” and scolded for the
way I dressed (Walker, 2012). My dad told me that I “need[ed] to begin to make better decisions on how you are going to carry yourself and conduct yourself in public” because my display of “being a thug or boy” is going to keep me from succeeding. I was astonished (Ibid.). Aside from the pain from my father attacking my identity I was confused because throughout my entire childhood he condoned and cultivated an environment that allowed me to express myself differently. All I could think in that moment was “how could this be?” The email ended with “but I love you” after a preceding paragraph that continued to bash my gender expression and insult my intelligence. Those words “I love you” were not comforting and felt misplaced. At the time all I could think was that my parents loved who they envisioned I would become, not for who I was.

I cried more times that I want to admit the last months of my senior year. My parents and I argued every time we spoke and they forced me to submit to their convictions. I agreed to wear a dress but as an act of defiance, since they insisted I was selfish, I wore a tight and promiscuous dress that I knew my mother would disapprove. Since it was a dress and not a tux, her comments were limited. I felt extremely uncomfortable and out of place in my own body. I eventually changed on the bus to the prom venue into an all-white tux that I secretly bought because it was impossible for me to spend an entire night in a dress. All of my peers and classmates expressed their support and were relieved as well when they saw me transform into the Alexis they knew and grew to love. In that moment, I simultaneously felt free from the dreaded role I was playing and caged in disapproval and contempt from the two people who created my very existence.
Although my high school was a lot more accepting of queer individuals, most of them were white gay boys and lesbian girls. There were not a large number of Black lesbians, let alone Black lesbians who were gender nonconforming. I struggled immensely with trying to find a space where I could freely be myself while also being accepted racially. The more I transitioned into a more masculine appearance, my feminine actions and attributes were seen as unacceptable. I was often criticized for my sensitivity and emotions, especially in romantic relationships. Gender roles remained dichotomous in the heterosexual framework. I was going through an identity crisis while searching for ways to cope with my parents’ disapprobation. My journey to self-acceptance was often times self-destructive, but it gave me the courage to be honest with my family.

College gave me an opportunity to look within myself and begin the transformation of becoming the woman I always wanted to be. The journey continues to this day, and it is a liberating and exhilarating experience, but when I cannot share such moments with my parents it can become disheartening. Throughout my college career, I have struggled immensely with rebuilding my relationship with my parents. My father and I were on terrible terms and were not speaking to one another for a couple of years after my senior year of high school. Whenever we were together happiness, smiles, and any positive feelings were forced. We refused to address the elephant in the room, but no matter how hard we tried, the tension was obvious to us and to those in our presence. Eventually, I attempted to begin the steps necessary to have a healthy and engaging conversation that would lead to some kind of resolution, however, my efforts were cut short when I was told that our relationship was broken.
because of my actions and my sexual identity. The second rejection from my father hurt ten times more than the first because I genuinely missed the close relationship we had. It was hard for me to accept his disapproval but more so come to terms with our severed relationship. Two years after the initial incident, I had to realize that he would accept me on his own terms and on his own time. I gave up and stopped trying.

My mother acclimated to the idea a little faster than my father. I noticed around my sophomore year of college that she no longer made prejudice or hurtful comments about homosexuality, although she still insisted that I was going through a lesbian phase. Four years later, now in my senior year of college and we are finally making true progress. Both my mom and dad actively ask about my romantic relationship and take interest in getting to know more about the women I date. It is still hard for me to open up and discuss personal matters, but with time I am hopeful that high levels of comfort will return and hesitation to talk about romance and intimacy will subside.

Before beginning the long process to complete this essay I contemplated heavily on the topic in which I wanted to pursue. It was imperative that I involved a part of my identities but I could not choose just one. Identifying as Black, lesbian, and woman, I wanted to explore all aspects of myself, yet unsure through what avenue. After reading works by prominent feminists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Adrienne Rich, among many others, my topic became clear. Deep down I always knew I wanted to write about my experiences as a black lesbian, but I was cautious to tell my story. This thesis is a way for me to truly grapple with my blackness and lesbian existence by identifying with the beautiful strength, voice, and resistance of prolific black women and lesbians that paved the way for Black women to powerfully and unapologetically
proclaim their existence. Writing is a powerful tool that allows for the artist to be completely honest and open, thus vulnerable. In writing this paper I hope to share with you my vulnerabilities but also shed light on a controversial and increasingly popular discourse.

Unfortunately, my experience as a Black Lesbian is not unique to myself. Many black lesbian women struggle with coming out to their families and communities, gaining acceptance, and remaining confident about the strength of their kinships. I was always curious as to why revealing my homosexual identity was difficult, but the atmosphere of Wesleyan University’s college campus led me to further explore why I was so terrified to come out and the implications of such feelings. The psychology and African American courses that I enrolled in over the course of four years coupled with my social experience as Black, lesbian, and woman on Wesleyan’s campus, taught me to critically engage with the burning questions that circulated my thoughts since I was a young girl that formulated into coherent thought as I progressed through higher education: How do Black women navigate social circles that reject their identities? How have Black women asserted their sexuality when confined inside a heterosexual society? What factor does racism play in the deep discrimination against homosexuality? Is white male patriarchy to blame? What personal effects arise when safe spaces are nonexistence? And, why is sexuality so central to our lives yet so complex and restricted?

It is vital to analyze the ways in which black lesbians navigate through both society and their families. Although some would like to believe that all lesbian experiences are similar, each individual’s circumstance is unique, though, systematic
oppressions and cultural differences play a major role in the identifying ways in which some experiences, specifically black lesbians, are similar.

In this essay, I explore Black women’s assertions of autonomy through the ways in which they navigated social negotiations, provided spaces for themselves and oppressed others, and coped with external and internal forms of disorder. I argue that the complexities of the confounding identities of Black, woman and lesbian pose as an obstacle to find spaces of comfort and acceptance. Despite not having solace within certain communities because of conflicting identities--such as lesbians in Black spaces, or women in male dominant spaces-- history has shown that Black women and Black lesbians find various ways to capitalize on their multilayered levels of oppression in order to thrive in societies that try to limit their accomplishments, destroy self-love and constrain self-advancement. Black women have depended on themselves for acceptance and woman loving relationships for empowerment to redefine their identities on their own terms. This thesis will give evidence to support my argument that while oppression in America has significantly hindered and abused black women over centuries, it also forced Black women to recreate definitions of woman, love, and self-identity through relationships with other women as well as developing one within themselves.
CHAPTER I
BLACK WOMEN’S NARRATIVES: PROCLAMATIONS OF SEXUALITY AND RESISTANCE

When I dare to be powerful - to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.
Audre Lorde
The Cancer Journals, 1997

We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.
Marian Wright Edelman

Introduction
African life before the Transatlantic slave trade exhibited a myriad of practiced cultures, languages, and traditions. Many historians have dedicated their research to uncovering West African life prior to the Transatlantic Slave trade that have too often been erased by European perspectives. Toby Green is one of the many historians who have done so. Green suggests that focusing on the quantitative data regarding the Transatlantic Slave Trade, such as the number of Africans transported, the amount of ships that were modes of transportation, and the like, distracts from the cultural, political, and social consequences that this phenomenon created (31). Historian Robin Law also focuses on the impact that the Transatlantic Slave Trade had on African politics and economy but concentrates on the volume and value of the slave trade as well. He argues that the African societies were drastically impacted with increases in the demand for local produce and goods but were also hit with mass depopulation (Law,
1991). The depopulation is attributed less to the slave trade itself and more to the warfare and disorder that cultivated it. It is vital, however, to critically analyze both quantitative and cultural to truly understand the impact that the transatlantic slave trade had on Africa and the people who inhabited the land. The numbers give insight to the magnitude of the disorder that was created. The two actually have to coexist to truly understand the significance of either.

In this chapter I will explore and give brief insights into the dire impact that slave trading had on African women before and during the transatlantic slave trade as well as the lives of African descendent women post slave trade in the New World. It is impossible to deeply examine women’s lives in Africa and adequately express the immeasurable impact that the slave trade had African women and their descendants in the New World within the confinements of this chapter. Instead of giving a complex and in depth analysis of African life and enslaved women’s lives in America, this chapter will showcase the strengths of African women when confronted with systems and institutions of oppression created to profit from their labor and their biological bodies. In addition, this chapter will provide multiple examples of Black women that convey the various ways in which they interacted with social negotiations, provided spaces for themselves to properly flourish in oppressive and often dangerous situations, navigated through social, political, or personal disorder, and ultimately gained autonomy through these processes.

I am aware that it is impractical to deduce rich African countries to road generalizations as a continent, however, I am starting with African women’s lives to reimagine how women’s roles and relationships in different African communities
interact with female sexuality and resistance. I will then shift to black women’s experiences of sexuality and resistance in America under the institution of slavery and Jim Crow laws. This chapter deconstructs the ways in which African and Black women defined and asserted their own definitions of woman. The unfortunate reality is that Black women’s strengths have been diluted and hidden from future generations to erase their existence, but also to limit aspirations of future generations of Black women. Uncovering voices that have been systematically muted by patriarchy is empowering to those who share similar oppressions. For Black women, knowing how foremothers outwitted systems and navigated the dangerous terrains gives insight into their own situations and can serve as a blueprint for modes of resistance and methods to gain autonomy in a society that aims to control and micromanage women’s lives from self-perception to owning their bodies, whether physically as with slavery or mentally through subjugation. The past allows for people to understand who they are and where they come from. When Black women’s histories are clouded with enslavement, passivity, and lack of autonomy, it gives the false sense of weakness when in actuality Black women displayed pure strength. Beginning with African women’s lives, this essay will show how Black women have paved the way for future generations by leaving important messages about survival that translates into strength, resilience, and celebration.

**African Communities During Atlantic Slave Trade**

Forced removal and captivity, violent race relations, and stringent gender roles are among the most common first thoughts related to the institution of slavery.
However, long before Black bodies were enslaved in America, they had a developed culture and way of life that was uprooted when they were kidnapped and sold. West Africa was a central site for slave trading to the Americas and elsewhere from 1501 to 1867 (West, page 10). The major areas where captives were transported during the transatlantic slave trade spanned across a geographic region of approximately 3,500 miles along the West African Coast and 5,000 miles inland (Ibid., 10). During the slave trade Europeans divided this stretch of land into five coastal regions:

1. Upper Guinea Coast: The area delineated by the Senegal and Gambia Rivers
2. Ivory (or Kwa Kwa or Windward) Coast: Central Liberia
3. Lower Guinea Coast: Divided into the Gold Coast on the west (Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana), the Slave Coast (Togo, Benin, and western Nigeria), and the Bight of Benin (Nigeria and Cameroon)
4. Gabon
5. Angola

(citation: Digital History, web)

The accurate amount of Africans transported through the Atlantic slave trade over the course of almost two hundred years from 1619 to 1808, the year international slave trade ended, is unknown. Historians and scholars argue that the figure lingers around ten to twelve million (Blassingame, 1972, Lovejoy, 1982 & Fage, 1969) while others suggest that such an estimate is too low and that it does not account for all the lives lost.
during the long journey (Owen, 1864, Dunbar, 1862, & Inikori 1978 in Lovejoy, 1982). The graph generated by Eltis and Richardson shows a rough estimation of the transatlantic slave exports by region. The figures calculated from historian Hugh Thomas reveal striking disparities between the number of Africans exported to the number of Africans that are reported to have been imported to countries all over the world. The lack of consensus on how many Africans were displaced is telling of many things, least of which is the harsh journey that they underwent while traveling across the Atlantic Ocean. While slavery in West African societies was already prevalent, even in its various forms, it did not exist in the same ways as in North America. Slavery in West Africa was not grounded on the subjugation of an entire people rooted in the belief that they were inferior. Many of those enslaved had room for social mobility in the sense that slaves could live their lives as both slave and free during different periods in their life, in comparison to a lifelong sentence of servitude in America. In addition, the condition of enslavement was not passed down to offspring in West Africa as the cruel institution requires in North America (Fage, 1969, & Blassingame, 1972). As Historian Emily West explains, most African slaves were women and some were enslaved by marriage contracts, still, it was more common for societies to acquire large groups of slaves through warfare. Across precolonial Africa, people instead of land and money tended to dictate wealth, power, and prestige (Sweet 255), which is why patriarchs had high interest in “expanding the number of dependents in their households through polygynous marriages, childbirth, adoption, pawning, and enslavement of outsiders” (Ibid. 255). The conditions of slavery that African peoples would encounter
was different than what they were accustomed, and it altered both their personal lives and African societies. The lack of written evidence of early African women’s lives makes it difficult for historians to extensively comment on women’s role in their societies. It is well-known, though, that African women were not foreign to arduous physical labor, indeed it was often a significant factor in their local economy. The vastness of the land of West Africa allowed for various different tribes or communities to exist, all of which varied in the responsibilities of the women. Mandinka women

Map of Major Coastal Regions from Which Captives Left Africa, All Years

Source: David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlantis of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 15
from the Upper Guinea coast transported food and necessities to trade and barter with distant areas by waterway while women off the Western Gold Coast stayed in their communities to barter and sell food and textiles at popular bi-weekly markets (West 13). For these reasons, European travelers often misunderstood Western African societies as matriarchal, when in fact they tended to be equal, as witnessed with the Fon people, while others such as Yoruba women were more communal in their relations often times dwelling with extended family and clans (West 14). There is no one way to define the Black family pre-Transatlantic Slave Trade except to say that it was multifarious. Some clans practiced polygyny, which was more economically sensible among wealthier men, while others honored the practice of monogamy. The slave trade, however, created higher ratios of women to men in African societies thereby leading to increased practices of polygyny (Sweet 254).
The integrated roles of West African women were crucial for economic and familial growth, which did not change as they made the devastating and life threatening journey to North America. The Transatlantic Slave Trade uprooted ways of African life. The obvious destruction of removing a group of people from all that they knew--their homes, land, culture, language, families and communities--is impossible to ignore. On a deeper level, though, the Transatlantic Slave Trade altered the economic and social flow of African societies. During the period of the slave trade, African men were sold at inflated prices and were in higher demand for their skills and strength as workers, therefore traders often disproportionately kidnapped men at higher rates than women (Desrochers 636). Polygyny therefore became more practiced like in Angola where the ratio of women to men was two to one (West 14). Other areas suffered economically, causing women to bear more responsibilities while other communities lacked the care of women captured in the slave trade. Young children and the elderly who were less desired and more dependent were left behind with no one to care for them. The unnatural and imbalanced populations drastically disrupted their way of life and caused unwanted chaos. Historian James Sweet comments that the unbalanced sex ratios along with the impossible task of sustaining kinship ties led varying communities and often times strangers to unite together to build new communities from the sociocultural background that they potentially had in common. For example, in the early seventeenth century, mixed groups of Kimbundu- and Kikingo- speaking refugees in Central Africa settled together in the “forbidden terrain of southern Kongo” to avoid warfare and slave trading (Sweet 257). As a result, under the leadership of
soldiers known as *ndembu*, a new people were formed that maintained strong ties to the “primacy of the group over the individual” (Ibid. 257).

The disorder that the slave trade caused was not unique to just already existing families or communities, but developing interracial families as well. As the trading of Africans became more lucrative, Europeans flocked to West Africa to capitalize on the profitable business. Foreign to the land, African women were European men’s gateway into African culture as well as their bridge to the African people. The town of Osu, located in the Gold Coast now known as Ghana, was one of many areas in Western Africa that attracted Danish settlers and proved to be a location that would induce sustainable revenue and the establishment of Fort Christiansborg in the late seventeenth century. The relationship between Ga women and Danish men was crucial in the trading community, but it was also advantageous for Ga women and their families. Many Africans in varying communities fled their towns to avoid the slave trade, contrarily, Ga women in Osu exploited Danish men’s ignorance to their culture and language and entered marriages to have better opportunities in life. “Mulatrese Lene”—also referred to as Lene Kühberg in Danish sources—was one of the most studied women that grew up in a society built from the Atlantic Slave trade and thrived in the same environment (Ipsen, 2013). While countless West African people were displaced and sold into bondage as a result of Ga-Danish relationships, it is important to note the climate in which women like Kühberg were living to understand why they married Danish slave traders and how it benefitted them. Pernille Ipsen, historian and gender and women’s studies scholar, has done foundational work on Ga women and interracial relationships. She explains in depth the climate that Ga women experience during the
period of the slave trade. To briefly summarize a small portion of Ipsen’s extensive work, the slave trade could not happen without war. Ga women were trapped in a social climate that thrived on turmoil, violence, conflict, and instability. More turmoil and inland warfare led to more prisoners and Africans to sell, and since the slave trade continuously increased in demand through to the 19th century, peace was not a part of the equation. Ga women in Euro-African families may have helped to create the impenetrable cycle of the slave trade, but relationships with Danish men was “useful for Africans to signal privilege and their distinction from enslavable Africans” (Ipsen 377) and could lead to the emergence of “a dependable trading connection, imported European goods, and

“Sara Malm, also known as Tim-Tam, who was cassaret to Joseph Wulff until his death in 1842, painted by her husband in a letter to his family back in Denmark. In a letter accompanying the watercolor, Wulff described Malm’s dress in detail: “The part drawn in ink shows gold [ornaments] or doubloons; marks on the face are painted on with chalk or white colouring. . . . I have seen Mulatinder [Mulatresses] wearing gold to a value of 100 lod [c.15 grams]. Bare feet. They often go without shirts, thus, fully exposed, they usually paint their [upper] bodies with white colouring, drawing all manner of figures on their necks, shoulders, arms, breasts and backs.” (Ipsen, 389)
an ally in the constantly changing political constellations among the various European and African groups on the coast” (ibid 378). Marriage, therefore, was a means to survival, political assurance, and social and economic independence in the trading industry. Obviously the decisions and consequences of Ga women who entered interracial unions was complex, but what were other alternatives? Co-existing meant safety for themselves and their families, the other benefits are a bonus.

Lene Kühberg is an exceptional example of a Euro-African woman who rose to power and prominence. Her family negotiated heavily in the slave trade and elicited important connections. Kühberg, the daughter of a Ga women and Danish man, was afforded opportunities that many African women did not have. Having grown up in a multiracial family and mixed community, Kühberg adapted her mother’s survival tactic and married a Danish interim governor and slave trader Frantz Joachim Kühberg in 1760 (Ipsen 371). Kühberg was both culturally and racially Euro-African, having mixed blood made her so but her obvious light skin also marked her as European while her style of dress revealed her African ties. Her relationship to European traders allotted her the privilege of dwelling in one of only eight prestigious stone houses in Osu, in which she lived even after her husband’s death. As is custom of African women, Kühberg was an avid trader, however her elevated status allowed for her to have intermediate traders go to open markets in her place to buy and sell goods (Ipsen, 2013). The social leverage that Ga women gained from marrying European men extended far beyond trading. Wives and their children also had access to church school at the Danish fort, Fort Christiansborg, which introduced Euro-Africans to Danish language, education, and culture resulting in more promising social flexibility and possibilities
(ibid, 373). Education in European schools meant adopting many of their practices such as Christianity, but it also meant reimagining hierarchies on racial and economic terms. Ga women navigated these worlds skillfully but also cautiously. Ipsen reminds that

Euro-African women claimed a particularly powerful position in the racialized social hierarchy of the Atlantic slave trade, and as they claimed these intermediary positions they helped reproduce this same racial hierarchy, which would limit the freedom of so many other people in the Atlantic world. Yet Euro-African families were not just taking advantage of their intermediary position to widen their opportunities; they were also reacting to life in a violent and stressful slave-trading environment. 373

Their mixed blood and fairer skin protected Ga women from the looming threat of being sold in the slave trade but it also shielded them from being directly connected to the subordinate status of darker skinned Africans, which reiterated the “racialized hierarchy”. Ga women, though, also found opportunity in an impossible situation and used their status as woman to successfully cohabitate with Danish men to secure a safer future for themselves and their families in the “violent and stressful slave trading environment.” Blackness during the slave trade was an immediate identifier for sexual exploitation for women and subjugation for all Africans, but Ga women used that same Blackness as a deliberate tool to attract European men partaking in the slave trade. It would seem contradictory to marry men who were selling their people and making a
profit, but Ga women found a way to use their sexuality to secure their continued freedom. Ga women are a part of a history that is complex and hard to grapple with, while at the same time creating different modes of resistance. The resistance to oppression that Ga women made during the Transatlantic Slave Trade could easily be mistaken for compliance, but to do so would be to strip Ga women of their intellectual prowess and ability to survive. They were forced into a position that seemingly had no options except to accept inhumane treatment and conditions and managed to create a new way using their womanhood and Blackness to create a better reality, and some like Kühberg left a lasting powerful legacy.

Foundations of Enslaved women in American Slavery

Some African women managed to avoid the chains of bondage, but many were forcibly packed onto ships to say goodbye to their homeland forever. Historian Nicolas Radburn charted the contributions of Jamaica’s ten largest slave traders known as Guinea factors—“the indispensable nexus between transatlantic slave trade and the plantation complex” (Radburn 243)—to the Transatlantic Slave trade and discovered that they were responsible for 522 slave vessels that traveled to West Coast of Africa and displaced 152,396 Africans during 1785-1796. Jamaican slave traders were just a small portions of the traffic entering Africa throughout the slave trade and only represents a decade of collected data. The journey to the Americas was especially brutal. At the hands of the white traders, African women experienced a glimpse of the violence and exploitation that they and their offspring would be forced to endure for centuries to come. The institution of slavery in North America was particularly disturbing, not only
because its inception was predicated on the notion that Black individuals are inferior to whites, or one’s status as slave was for life, or that they were rendered powerless, but also because the institution capitalized on African and Black women’s natural biological purpose in a barbaric and forceful manner. Enslaved women were viewed as both workers and breeders. Fannie Moore, an ex-slave in North Carolina recalled in an interview for the Federal Writers' Project the immense fear that slaves felt at the possibility of being sold at auction and the humiliating practices particularly women slaves suffered:

When he spectator come all de slaves start a shakin'. No one know who is a goin’. Den sometime dey take ’em and sell ’em on de block. De 'breed woman' always bring mo' money den de rest [of the] de men. When dey put her on de black dey put all her chillun around her to show folks how fast she can hab chillun. When she sold her family nebber see her again. She nebber know how many chillun she hab. 131

Black women were paraded on slave auction blacks like chattel, along with their children as a means to showcase their fertility which translate into economic gains from the labor of her offspring. The likelihood of a “breed woman” not knowing how many children she birthed highlights the cruelty of the institution and the lack of regard for black women that slaveholders possessed. Each plantation that an enslaved woman was
sold to could result in her bearing multiple children against her will, whom of which she could at any given moment be separated. In addition, the fact that “breed women” were more lucrative than men, reveals the permanence of slavery but also the lasting exploitation of enslaved women through the inhumane way that they and their offspring were commodified and abused. As property to another human being, African women were viewed as chattel and treated as such when they were obliged to use their bodies to breed more “slaves” for economic advantages for the slave-owner. This, regardless
if it was forced upon them, was often used as an example to prove the black woman’s lust and her supposedly natural promiscuity.

All too often, enslaved women suffered sexual trauma caused by white slave owners, whether through breeding or by direct contact. Self-emancipated from slavery in North Carolina, Harriet Ann Jacobs describes in detail the complex relationships that developed in the peculiar institution and the many tribulations she overcame in her devastating and remarkable autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written in the 1850s, sometime after Jacobs fled to freedom, *Incidents* was well received and viewed as a novel rather than a herstory. During the publication of her autobiography in 1861, slave narratives were vital avenues that vividly portrayed the horrors of enslavement, ranging from physical violence and sexual abuse to the unbearable and cruel act of separating of families. Some of the most popular slave narratives that existed as Jacob’s story emerged were the compelling and heart wrenching accounts of William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847); Henry Box Brown, * Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (1849); and Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup* (1853). Slave narratives were dominated by men, which was one explanation as to why readers of *Incidents* believed it was a novel instead of a factual account. *Incidents* was written by a woman, and it also ventured away from the traditional way that male narratives were written. Instead it followed the guidelines of sentimental novels to address race and gender issues, in similar fashion to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the illustrious writer behind the infamous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Jacobs’ narrative chillingly grapples with the sexual abuse that she experienced for much of her life. Initially, Jacob’s early
life was as pleasant as any condition of slavery could be considering that she was still enslaved. She lived with both her parents until her mother died when she was six, then she was sent to live with her mother’s mistress. In these next few years with her new mistress, Jacob’s learned to read and continued to have a relatively pleasant life, meaning one free of physical violence or harm. Once her mistress passed away, Jacob’s life drastically changed and she was thrust into a cruel environment under her new neglectful masters and their predatory father Dr. Flint. For several tireless years Jacob’s was subject to sexual advances and demands from Dr. flint, while also watching her brother succumb to the tyrannies of slavery and longing for the presence of her parents. She recalled that

[Dr. Flint] told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe. 45
Dr. Flint’s automatic and constant assertion to Jacob’s of her status as property serves multiple purposes but specifically as a mechanism to dehumanize her in an attempt to weakened her mind so she would not have the mental strength to rebel against his authority. His superior complex created and nurtured by the racial hierarchy that strongly existed in the institution of slavery gave Dr. Flint the ridiculous notion that he was in fact like a God to Jacob’s because he believed that she “must be subject to his will in all things.” Jacob’s and Dr. Flint knew that his cruel actions would not be condemned by the law and it would in fact be encouraged and supported. This lack of protection for Jacob’s gave Dr. Flint a free pass to repeatedly rape her without punishment, but it also forced Jacob’s to formulate a protection of her own. No one could or would protect her—not her family, the mistress, the law, or fellow enslaved persons. The mistress’ reaction of “jealousy and rage” equated the relationship between Jacob’s and Dr. Flint as an affair instead of a chronic case of rape. It diminished her role within the system of slavery and the horrors that slavery allowed, which resulted in the mistress becoming the victim and Jacob’s the perpetrator. Jacobs, along with many other African and black women trapped in the institution of slavery, was reduced to being a victim of sexual and mental violence. There was absolutely no protection for enslaved women in Southern law and fellow enslaved women and men could do little as well. The women that observed the violations “had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished” (46) and the men were left powerless to act against the slave owners, although some did act violently against their masters or white men who abused enslaved women. Nonetheless whether the perpetrator was
given due punishment or not, it was a devastating position for the women to be placed. With no one to turn to for protection and no one to confide in, enslaved women too often carried the burden of constant sexual violence alone. Despite the repeated attack on Jacobs’ mind and body as well as her lack of sanctuary, her soul “revolted to the mean tyranny”, to the system of enslavement, and to her status as slave.

Similar to the Ga women in Osu, Jacobs’ used her unfortunate circumstance as a means to survive the violent and harsh realities of slavery. No longer able to take the abuse, Jacobs agrees to enter a relationship with a neighboring white man named Mr. Sanders. Although she did not want to enter this union, he was a resource of survival and escape from the cruel treatment she received at the hands of Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint deliberately and excessively relayed the message to Jacobs that she was his property, but by having an affair with another white man, she gave a bold act of resistance to everything Dr. Flint represented. Jacobs was completely aware of the dynamic between herself and Dr. Flint. Her actions were not out of sheer reaction to the abuse, but a calculated act of defiance:

I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him. The crisis of my fate now came so near
that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. 85

Jacobs knew that Dr. Flint viewed her as property in a way that extended beyond chattel. His sexual interest in her made her an unfortunate target of his forceful advances, but it also made her part of his vulnerabilities. Knowing that Dr. Flint would be enraged to see Jacobs with another man, she used her body, her sexuality, and her womanness to take back control from a man that abused her repeatedly. Her level of wit is admirable although, the plan did not take the course she had hoped. Instead of selling her to Mr. Sands out of rage, disgust, and contempt, Dr. Flint reacted in a more vengeful manner and sentenced Jacobs to complete onerous work on his plantation as a field hand. Despite the fact that the end result worked against Jacobs, the reality of her consciousness to the situation and how best to protect herself conveys a deeper understanding of enslaved women about their sexuality and gender. African and black women’s bodies were greatly exploited under the institution of slavery, but they were not always passive and defenseless as the system set them up to be. Through various small acts of resistance, such as finding a new “lover” like Jacobs did, enslaved women found ways to protect their virtue and resist the multifarious forms of abuse.

Equally as cruel as forced entry into African and black women’s bodies was the common practice of slave owners to tear families apart. As witnessed in the recount of “breed women”, families and children were often used as a means to showcase fertility, but the separation under duress intended to sever familial ties in an effort to elicit immense despair and longing. Such acts showcased their power and their ability to
control intimate familial bonds. Economic and often selfish motives drove slave owners to sell children from their mothers and separate husbands from their wives. Those who comment about the dynamic of families in enslavement, which is rooted in the belief that families were able to successfully exist, argue that it is “matriarchal.” If a nuclear family could exist, it was through the institution that the family was considered matriarchal. Southern laws regarding the status of newly born African and Black children were similar to Virginia’s law which stated in December 1662 that the mother’s status as enslaved or free was passed down to her offspring:

Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a Negro woman should be slave or free, be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand Assembly, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother. . .

Neither mothers nor fathers had a legal right to their children, however, women were burdened with passing on the status of slave to their children. Women were legally connected to their children only as a means of economic revenue because the system of slavery still mercilessly tore mothers away from their children. The institution of slavery defined slave families as matrifocal solely because lineage depended on the mother (Stevenson 161). The mother’s lineage is important to note however, because many slave masters sexually abused enslaved women which often times led to mixed race children—a product of rape and the oppressive slave system. Had the lineage been
patrifocal, slave masters would have had to openly admit to impregnating enslaved women and claim their illegitimate child.

Contrarily, many feminists have argued, and I add, that even if physical proximity allowed for a husband and wife to live as one with children, the institution did not allow for African and Black American enslaved people to form nuclear families. As Angela Davis so eloquently explains in *Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slave*,

Nothing could be further from the truth. In the most fundamental sense, the slave system did not--and could not--engender and recognize a matriarchal family structure. Inherent in the very concept of matriarchy is “power.” It would have been exceedingly risky for the slaveholding class to openly acknowledge symbols of authority--female symbols no less than males. Such legitimized concentrations of authority might eventually unleash their “power” against the slave system itself. 82

So even if laws defined enslaved families as matrifocal, the lack of power that women had in their own lives and with their own bodies eliminates the possibility of having a matriarchal home. In addition, enslaved women were laborers first, breeders next, and mothers or wives last. The institution of slavery deduced Black women’s bodies to their biological state, making their humanity completely secondary. While enslaved women’s status was, as Black Studies academic scholar and historian Brenda E. Stevenson describes, “more predictable and stable than that of the [en]slave[d] man,”

Walker  38
due to the benefits of breeding for slave owners, the Black female slave was always forced to make her priority mirror her owner’s.

The dynamic of and interaction between enslaved families relied too heavily on their condition in slavery. If their owners were more lenient, they were often allowed to live together, of course at a price. For example, Henry Box Brown reveals in *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, written in 1849, a different side of the spectrum and the rare allowances that some enslaved families were afforded. Henry Box Brown was among few Virginian slaves that were given the opportunity to pay slaveholders in order to live with their wife and children. Brown recalls that

> He induced me to pay him $5,000 in order to assist him in purchasing my companion, so as to prevent her being sold away from me. I also paid him $50 a year, for her time, although she would have been of but little value to him, for she had young children and could not earn much for him.--and rented a house for which I paid $72, and she took in washing, which with the remainder of my earnings, after deducting master's "lion's share," supported our family. Our bliss, as far as the term bliss applies to a slave's situation, was now complete in this respect, for a season; for never had we been so pleasantly situated before. . . . 50

$5,000 in 1848 is comparable to $155,000 in today’s economy (Measuring Worth). Clearly Brown believed that his efforts to acquire his family would be respected, however the unreasonable fact that his master required him, an enslaved man, to pay
an impossible amount of money implicates the control of slave owners over families. He gave Brown a false sense of comfortability and manhood, in the sense that Brown believed that a non-legal binding agreement would be upheld by a white man who was solely capitalizing economically on Brown’s vulnerabilities. Cases like Henry Box Brown’s were rare, but they did exist if masters exploited and enslaved man’s love for his family. Some slaveholders benefited from the separation of families, while others viewed the family of enslaved people as an anchor grounding them to bondage. Evidently, at any moment an arrangement could be annulled and come to a “cruel termination” (50). As given in the case of Henry Box Brown, while he was diligently working to earn what little cash he could, unbeknownst to him, his wife and children were sold. The nuclear family that did exist was shattered once again by outside forces—the cruel institution of slavery. Brown and his wife were able to live together because he was forced to partake in the dishonorable exchange between money and African and black bodies. While this situation and unbound agreements were not ideal, men were allowed the avenue in which they could better their circumstances, but enslaved women were at the whim of both their master and their male partner. There were several ways for men to prove their worth and gain status in and for his family, such as hunting for delicacies to make meals more hearty, build furniture to beautify the cabin, or put in extra hours to eventually buy their wives scarves or dresses (Blassingame 92). Most of these methods revolve around materialistic means to emulate the status of the slaveholding white families. While many men sought to uplift their status in their families and communities—otherwise feeling powerless in the decisions regarding his family and unable to protect his wife and children from abuse—the responsibilities of
giving life lessons on how best to avoid physical punishment were left for women. Child rearing was communal because a mother could be snatched away at any moment to toil under the scorching sun or summoned to fulfill any and all demands of those occupying the master’s house. Grandmother’s and elderly women typically watched the children in their earlier years until around age seven or eight, the pivotal moment that enslaved children began to know their status of captivity in the institution of slavery. Historian and pioneer in the study of American slavery, John W. Blassingame states that the responsibilities of parents were to “cushion the shock of bondage for them, help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instill in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than their master” (79). Essentially, the parents’ role was to create a sound and self-sufficient thinking psyche, in a system that undermined self-autonomy while simultaneously combating the daily trauma of the abuses of slavery acted upon themselves and their children.

Most aspects of enslaved women’s lives were seemingly controlled by everyone but herself. To name a few restrictions, enslaved women were not in positions of autonomy to decide who they bore children with and were forced to breed children for economic interests of others, they often desired to practice monogamy with their husbands or partners but were often involuntarily stripped of that option, and they also did not have the free will to reject advances of lustful white men without repercussions. So how could a woman stripped of all aspects of her womanness exhibit enough power to render the title as matriarch in a family that could not cohesively exist? That is not to question the significant influence that enslaved women had in enslaved communities,

Walker 41
but rather critically analyze the situation that African women were forced to exist. The family, meaning extended families including those of no blood relation, was crucial to learning survival techniques and developing a sense of self-worth in a system that thrived from their servitude. Seen as chattel by the population that participated in the enslavement of others, women were reduced to their biological being: a body for sex and reproduction, for labor and punishment. It is fascinating that even as they are considered chattel, less than human, black women were greatly desired by white men. Even if their sexual exploits were thought of or portrayed to be out of affection, the social status of both parties, no matter if menial rewards were given to enslaved women, consequently made the interaction coerced and not consensual, therefore rape. As a result, she is a representation of what Davis deems the “the myth of femininity” (87). Enslaved women were not protected from sexual or physical abuse, and although they had to take on the responsibility of the housework, they also toiled under the hot heat from sun up to sun down with their fellow enslaved men. In essence, a contorted form of labor equality amongst enslaved people were achieved through subjugation. Consequently, the status of slave rendered women womanless in the historical sense. Womanhood was solidified by the constituents of femininity— “piety, delicacy, morality, weakness, and dependency” (White 6)— and only white women were afforded such characteristics, regardless of its deeply rooted sexist undertones.

**The Era of Jim Crow (1877-1960s)**

Many enslaved women never escaped the constraints of slavery, but that is not to say that a large amount were not. By the time the Civil War commenced in 1861,
black women made up slightly more than 50 percent of the total free black population (King in Gasper & Hine, 2004). Historian and distinguished scholar Wilma King calculated that the number of free black women “swelled from 120,790 in 1820 to 253,951 in 1860, when the total number of free persons was 488,070” (ibid., 128). There is a misconception that Black men were the leaders in fleeing enslavement and led the numbers of the free colored population due to the glorification of male slave narratives. However, as the numbers suggest, black women dominated the free population and were resilient and capable of surviving in a system constructed to end in their tragic demise. Freedom was arguably the most desired intangible thing. Sought after by many of those enslaved, attained by some, the end of the Civil War theoretically granted it to all. No form of laws, however, existed to protect Black women from sexual exploitation and physical harm that continued to persist, therefore their supposed freedom was very restricting. Life after emancipation further expressed the sentiment that black women were not equal to white women and were not women at all. Of course, black women did not accept such audacious statements and had already internalized their worth and their unique power. Women like “Aunt” Rhody Holsell decided the day that they became free was the same moment that they would not allow another whip to contaminate their blood, or another human to deem them subordinate.

Aunt Rhody, as she preferred to be addressed, recollected the empowering moment of learning of her new found freedom in an interview with a collector of ex-slave narratives for The Federal Writer’s Project. As one can imagine, Aunt Rhody proudly told her story:
Abraham Lincoln done put a piece in de paper saying dat all de slaves was free and if dey whipped any of de slaves after day was set free dey would prosecute them. Me and another little old woman done some shoutin' and hollerin' when we heard 'bout de freedom. We tore up some corn down in de field. De old missus was right there on de fence but wouldn't dare touch us. Once de mistress struck me after we was free and I grabbed her leg and would have broke her neck. She wanted to apologize with me de way she had treated me but I would not let her.

Aunt Rhody, who was seventeen years old at the time, “tore up some corn down in de field,” the very thing that she toiled under the hot sun to cultivate but also the means to the old missus’ wealth. Her rebellious act of economic and environmental sabotage was a way to proclaim that their body and mind was now their own and that they no longer cared to remain obedient under an oppressive system. When Aunt Rhody “grabbed her leg” after she was struck by the missus as not only self-defense, but also an action that showcased her physical strength and her mental toughness. No apology could undo a life of violence and forced servitude. For a mistress or any slave owner to apologize for their actions would be to admit that their participation in the institution of slavery and that their personal actions were inhumane and unjust, but it would also serve as an opportunity to clear their conscious to know that they were forgiven. Yet, for an ex-slave to reject an apology has even more bearing on Aunt Rhody’s admirable dignity.
She did not need a white woman’s apology to validate her lived experiences, both old and new, and she refused to let the old missus’ apology serve as an opportunity to clear her conscious from her sinful activities. Soon after the altercation with her missus, Aunt Rhody left the familiarity of her “home” because after the master and his sons were killed fighting in the Civil War “de mistress married some 'hostle jostle' who helped to kill the boss [ overseer]” and Aunt Rhody “was jus' not goin' to stand dat” (191). Equipped with a heightened sense of self confidence and a new level of independence and autonomy, young Aunt Rhody ventured to search for work. A common saying goes that the older one gets the more stubborn they become, but Aunt Rhody was always strong willed and it showed. Most newly freed blacks were lucky to find a steady and decent paying job, but Aunt Rhody was not satisfied with having a job that required more work than monetary gain:

I den worked from one farm to another. I would stay a year or two each place. Dey wanted me to stay. Dey said I was de best plow boy dey had. I would cut de old roots and dey would pop but dey paid me nothin' and dey didn't give you no clothes. We got so much in de share of de cropping but dey would not share with me so I would leave. . . . I was never turned off from any of my work. I would just work 'til I got tired and quit. Talk about being happy. 192

Aunt Rhody’s choice to “work from one farm to another” is a result of her past experience as a plantation slave. Rhody was shackled to one owner and deprived of the choice of working in a specific setting and is thus using her newly found freedom to
have control over that aspect of her life. Additionally, leaving the farm even though “Dey wanted her to stay” was her way of freeing herself from the white man who may develop a perceived ownership over her and her services. Aunt Rhody was aware that her hard work would not be paid in full so she allowed her employers to benefit from her work until she decided to cut off her services. She was well aware of her economic contributions but more conscious of how her decisions affect the system. Even then she was more focused on her own happiness after being enslaved for her entire childhood. Aunt Rhody achieved economic freedom during a time when physical freedom was a new concept. Now free from “dat yoke offen our necks” (192), Aunt Rhody never again settled for anything less than what she was owed. Her refusal to accept terms placed by society coupled with her will to live vivaciously through her own rules is a testament to the individual strength that many women had. Although she did not lead a whole mass of people in the name of social justice and equality, her personal actions were revolts that may seem small to some, but were hugely impactful in their meaning to her.

Aunt Rhody Holsell mostly kept her resistance personal, but other women such as Sarah Dudley Pettey worked tirelessly to advocate for racial equality and women’s right in Black communities. Born November 9, 1868 in New Bern, North Carolina to former slaves, Pettey herself never lived in servitude but grew up during the years of reconstruction and experienced the horrors of Jim Crow laws in adulthood. Starting at an early age, Pettey learned the value of education and black excellence. Before the age of six Pettey learned to read and write under the direction of her mother and grandmother, which would become a fundamental piece in her speeches and writings.
of black women’s roles and her philosophy regarding black education. After gaining foundational knowledge, she went on to attend New Bern grade school at the age of six, then in 1881 went to State Normal School. Impressively, at the age of twelve she attended Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina, "a highly progressive school” that educated and prepared newly freed Negroes for leadership and “aimed to give African American women a classical education, including instruction in Latin and Greek” (LaPrade 522). Pettey graduated with first honors in 1883, preceding the honorable Mary McLeod Bethune, who attended four years after her. Pettey would go on to become an educator, school administrator, newspaper columnist, activist and feminist, and a church leader. Some of her most notable work revolves around her revolutionary ideas of racial and gender equality. A woman of piety, Pettey garnered most of her supporters and fame through the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church by gaining her own weekly “Woman’s Column” in the nationally known newspaper Star of Zion in 1896 (Gillespie & McMillen, 2014). Notably, Pettey was the first woman to attain her own column in the publication and had very few restrictions on the content she could publish. Mainly through this platform she voiced her opinions of the black home, the racial and unequal plight of the negro, and worked to uplift women to take reigns and push forward with uplifting the race. Founded from personal experiences, Pettey asserted that "the ruler of the home is mother” (LaPrade 522) and that it was the mother's duty to educate herself and her children in order for future generations to exist holistically as intelligent and pious leaders. In 1902, Pettey elaborated on the role and importance of education and the Negro woman in an essay published in Culp’s collection, which declares
The role that the educated Negro woman must play in the elevation of her race is of vital importance. There is no sphere into which your activities do not go. Gather, then, your forces, elevate yourself to some lofty height where you can behold the needs of your race; adorn yourself with the habiliments of a successful warrior; raise your voice for God and justice; leave no stone unturned in your endeavor to route the forces of all opposition. There is no height so elevated but what your influence can climb, no depth so low but what your virtuous touch can purify. However dark and foreboding the cloud may be, the effulgent rays from our faithful and consecrated personality will dispel; and ere long Ethiopia's sons and daughters, led by pious, educated women, will be elevated among the enlightened races of the world. 522

Pettey was a remarkable and well versed woman clearly conscious of the Black woman’s importance in the cause of racial equality. The black race could not ascend without the collective force of black women who were to lead “Ethiopia’s sons and daughters.” She boldly equated women to warriors, professed that women were more needed than men, and that women possessed a power greater than all because “[t]here is no height so elevated but what your influence can climb, no depth so low but what your virtuous touch can purify.” In the turn of the twentieth century, Pettey preached and advocated that women possessed more power than they were allowed to have in a patriarchal system. She refused to be silenced and in turn she sought to empower other...
women. Knowing how vital women were in the elevation of the Black race, she was an avid proponent of the intersectionality of black liberation and gender equality. For her, black liberation and equality and opportunities for women were not exclusion, but had to work in conjunction for true progress to occur.

Source: The Centennial of African Methodism. (New York: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), 539. online

Sarah Dudley Pettey recognized the importance of arming oneself with an education, but her urgency for lower class Blacks to attain this knowledge was a result of her privilege as both fairer tone but mostly as middle class. Her call for the uplifting of the Black race was paradoxical. On the one hand she genuinely wanted the Black race to better themselves and attain an education, but on the other hand she reinforced white supremacist ideals that black people were only respectable if they were educated, wealthy, and preferably fairer toned. Pettey’s affluence blurred her from truly experiencing the harsh environment that Jim Crow laws generated for black people.
Petty typically published her travel notes regarding her church business trips in her column. Her business trips would be considered paradise to much of the black population. Throughout 1897, Pettey, with the company of her husband and colleagues, enjoyed the luxuries of pursuing in summer cottages on Jersey Shore and riding in carriages and trolleys unbothered through northern states such as New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C (Gillespie & McMillen, 2014, 305). While her experiences clearly distanced her from the indignities labor workers faced, Pettey’s effort to advocate for black people and women were admirable. In response to the Plessy v. Ferguson verdict the previous year, which stated that the racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of "separate but equal" was constitutional, Pettey contended that “the numerous contradictory rebuttals by the high courts of America [discriminates] unjustly on account of race, caste, color or previous condition of servitude” (Gillespie & McMillen, 299). Despite being emotionally affected by the Supreme Court’s decision, Pettey still felt obliged as a Christian woman to manage any anger that black people could harbor and limit insurgence while condemning the racially unequal justice system:

Being constituents of this government, we can but be loyal to the American eagle, though he be unjust enough to draw racial lines by hovering beneath his mighty wings all of his white children; while with his talons he ruthlessly claws all who are poor and especially those who trace their lineage to ebony hued parentage. 299
Pettey’s attitude, that “constituents of this government” cannot help but be loyal to the American eagle-- the system has done everything in its power to ruthlessly keep Black and poor people at the bottom, has perpetuated the cycle of slavery and oppression for centuries, and continued to deny them basic American rights-- highlights the constant battle that Black people faced. The oppressed black population was trapped in a continual quest to belong due to severed ties from African heritages and countries. Consequently, they almost have no choice but to be loyal to the very place that has stripped them of their identity in an effort to attain a physical “home” and feeling of belonging. In addition, her stance of blind loyalty also emphasizes her elevated place in American society because as both a Christian woman and of higher class, she is removed from much of the direct racism and discrimination that most of the Black population endures on a daily basis. She can easily advocate for loyalty because while she is still oppressed, her oppression is one full of privilege.

Pettey’s nationally public criticism of one of the most well-known Supreme Court cases and decisions in history is a prime example of her commitment to the advancement and acquisition of civil rights for the negro. To further showcase just how bold and politically savvy she was, it must be mentioned that her response was published in her first column for the Star (Gillespie & McMillen, 2014). She unapologetically began her political career with a controversial and significant case. Pettey was an ambitious woman that knew early on the strengths of women and the intelligence of black people. Although her privilege tainted her view of how black people should improve their race, she was undoubtedly a woman ahead of her time. She worked with what she had and her personal experiences greatly influenced her
rhetoric regarding the improvement of the black race. Pettey was a nineteenth century black woman and political pioneer that sought to educate and advance her race “despite the tightening grip of white supremacy” (Lundeen 309). Her bold and controversial editorials are evidence of overt resistance to patriarchy and white supremacy. Just as important, they also serve as key documentation of Black affluence and intelligence. Pettey dedicated her life to racial and gender injustices and the impact she would have continued to have can only be imagined since a bout with a terrible illness abruptly ended her life in 1906. Over a century after her death, Sarah Dudley Pettey’s life and eloquent editorials continue to serve as inspiration for leadership and showcase ways that black women maneuver groups and oppressed systems to assert their abilities and redefine definitions of woman and blackness.

Black women in early American history have shown that mental exploitation and physical and sexual abuse could not destroy their spirit. Many women like Lene Kühberg, Harriet Ann Jacobs, “Aunt” Rhody Holsell and Sarah Dudley Pettey found effective methods to combat the corrupt systems and cultures in which they maneuvered. Whether it was using marriage to the hegemonic white race as an escape, manipulating economic revenue by destroying crops, or using an elevated economic status to preach uplifting and radical messages to oppressed black communities and women, Black women have managed to survive despite the lingering option to surrender. The historical strength of the black woman is seldom a topic of academia. While history sheds light on the underbelly of America’s atrocities acted against minorities, it can also unveil the wonders of growth and transformation from those who endured and conquered.
Pettey navigated the early years of the harshness of Jim Crow by occupying political spaces dominated by men and by inserting herself in church roles and duties typically reserved for Black men. Her assertion that women could be socially and politically dominant as well as claim to her womanhood serves as a template for future generations. One of the most powerful members of the next generation would be Ruth Ellis, a phenomenal black lesbian, born in 1899. Pettey and Ellis never crossed paths and likely did not know of each other’s existence. Pettey’s legacy established a sure foundation on which Ellis could build and define her womanhood on her own terms.
CHAPTER II
RUTH ELLIS: BREAKING BOUNDARIES AND JOINING THE LESBIANS

“Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbians existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with the behavior demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men.”
Adrienne Rich
On Lies, Secrets and Silence, 1979

Introduction

Ruth Ellis defied all negative expectations and accomplished many remarkable things in her wondrous one hundred years of life in a society wrought with racial oppression and an overall low quality of life. Ellis, a black lesbian and a phenomenal woman, is an example of power, strength, love, and resilience. She died peacefully in her sleep in 2000, though her presence thrives in her legacy and in each individual that comes to know her, even if it is merely through a documentary. The exceptionally talented director Yvonne Welbon captured Ellis’s beautiful essence along with a century of Black, American, and lesbian history in the award winning documentary Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100. Released in 1999 by an independent company Our Film Works, Living with Pride broke many barriers. The film raises new questions about sexuality and the public sphere and invites us to think about the ways in which women asserted their lesbian identity when that same identity is not visible or attainable in the public sphere. The film and Ruth’s life promotes critical thinking around questions of safe spaces, white privilege and self-recognition. What moments define how we come to see ourselves and why? What significance does home and safe spaces
play in societies full of violence and oppression? Can the privileges of whiteness as property extent to those that are “not white”?

Lesbian and gay films were not likely main topics of documentaries until 1971 with the release of Ken Robinson's *Some of Our Best Friends, a film that* brought needed attention to the plight of gay experiences. Robinson, an ambitious student at the University of Southern California, documented several gay activists’ experiences including gay protesters at a psychiatric convention and representatives of a New York homophile group. Despite its unprecedented focus, though, the documentary excluded many others in the LGBTQ community. 1977 was a groundbreaking year for two important films that sparked national attention regarding gay life. Arthur Bressan’s *Gay U.S.A* and Peter Adair’s *World Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* captured twenty-six unique individual experiences and gay celebration at Gay Pride marches and activities in six cities over a span of one weekend, respectively (Summers 2005). Yet, where were the films about lesbians? Why were their voices still virtually invisible in documentaries? This was a time when lesbian documentaries would have been appropriate since this population was gaining visibility through the feminist movement, but creating films were expensive and resources were limited.

A lack of funds for both directors of potential LGBTQ films and for aspiring lesbian directors made the production of independent films challenging. Since the majority of documentaries are independent, monetary difficulties contribute to the scarcity of lesbian and gay films. That financial reality, in combination with societal disapproval and negative sentiments also explains the dearth of lesbian-focused films. Contrarily, the limited number of lesbian and gay attained visibility and popularity,
therefore they gained national attention and noncommercial financial sponsors (Summers 2005). PBS became a reliable funding opportunity after the Public Telecommunications Act of 1988 mandated that Congress allocate funds “for the programming that involves creative risks and addresses the needs of underserved audiences” (qtd. in Summers 94). Gay and lesbian films created controversy but they gave PBS invaluable public attention and recognition. No matter the motives that resulted in bringing attention to oppressed groups, gay and lesbian documentaries witnessed a drastic increase. Lesbian films were very scarce before the Public Telecommunications Act of 1988 but began to surge beginning in the late 1990s, starting with Karen Kiss and Paris Poirer’s *The Pride Divide* documentary, released in 1997. The documentary does not have a lesbian focus but rather illuminates the major differences in the gay civil rights movement between gay men and lesbians (Summers). Two years later, however, Lucy Winer and Karen Eaton's *Golden Threads* unveils the difficulties that lesbians faced when defining their identity in the 1940s and 1950s. The documentary was also a celebration of their lesbian identities and a forerunner of its kind.

Yolanda Welbon’s documentary emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century with about ten other lesbian films, but was very distinct since *Living with Pride* focused on a single black lesbian subject. Welbon’s informative documentary captured Ruth Ellis’ experience as a Black lesbian and Black woman navigating the most racially charged century post-emancipation. Her work is particularly significant because *Living with Pride* captures so many aspects of American history but more importantly it gives voice to a woman who represents the silenced. The camera cuts in to Ruth Ellis in the
beginning of the documentary standing at a mere four feet eight inches exuding a presence much larger. Her vibrant personality is felt through the screen and warms the soul of all those that watches. Ruth dances into the hearts of viewers with her moves, but also because of her unapologetic honesty about her life and sexuality. Dancing, while simple and amusing, signifies a lot more than pure enjoyment to Black women. In the periods previous to Ruth’s lifetime, dancing was often prohibited by slave owners and later used to undermine women’s sexuality and as a means to stereotype them as promiscuous. In the first frame of the documentary Ellis at 100 years old, however, claims her body as her own which sets the tone for the rest of the documentary.

Not many can say that they have lived to experience 101 years of life nor can many lesbians say they have been “out” for their whole lives, but Ruth Charlotte Ellis, a remarkable and friendly lesbian had the privilege of accomplishing both before she passed away peacefully in her sleep in 2001. Born July 23, 1899 in Springfield, Illinois, Ellis was the youngest child and only girl of the four children born to Charlie Ellis and Carrie Farro Ellis. During this period, the Black population in Illinois was a mere 1.9 percent of the total estimated population of 5,639,000 (Historical Statistics of the United States). However, in the urban area of Springfield the total population was slightly less than 51,700, while the general racial makeup is not well known due to lack of census data (ibid). Ellis, though, was born during a period with a very small black population, likely concentrated in one or very few areas. The lack of black people in Springfield definitely made racial tension high,
particularly in the integrated neighborhood that Ellis grew up. Her parents did everything they could to shield her from the oppressive society and encouraged intellectual stimulation. Ellis vaguely recollects in the documentary that “my mother took me to see the first airplane, which was the Wright brothers [in 1903] from St. Louis… I didn't know what I was looking at but they said it was an airplane so it must have been.” Ellis’ mother deliberately brought her to witness this historically significant moment to instill in her that no matter what, Ellis too could be a pioneer or create “the first” of something. The lesson seemed irrelevant to four-year-old Ellis but it would stay with her throughout her life as she became the first to do many things and pave roads for generations after her. Ellis’ mother “died [from a stroke] just about the time I started menstruating,” Ellis recalls, "so she showed me that, but from then on nobody told me anything." Her mother was able to teach her the first essential thing...
about transitioning to womanhood, but the rest of her body was a foreign terrain. After her mother’s death, Ellis did not have much guidance on how to interact with her body or the changes it would make. Growing up with three brothers and her father led her to gain most of that information from other sources:

Once my dad brought me a book. It told about women, different parts of their body, and all like that. He didn't tell me he'd bought that book. He just laid it on his desk. He knew I'd be meddlesome and look in to read it. When he thought I'd seen enough of it, why, the book disappeared. So that's how I learned [about women’s bodies].

Ellis’ father did not know how to talk to her about her own body, likely because as a male, he did not know much about the female body or he did not feel comfortable talking with his daughter in depth about her body. Regardless, the fact that she had to learn about the importance of her body through a book highlights the taboo subject of female bodies and the absence of comfortability and discussion around it. Ellis’ father did not see a need for Ellis to keep the book permanently because “[w]hen he thought I’d seen enough of it. . .the book disappeared.” The idea of viewing a book about women’s bodies and curiosity about the female body and sex was regarded as pornographic. The female body could be explored, but only in moderation. Learning about her body through a book shaped much of her conceptions about women and how she asserted her sexuality early on in life. Without the common teachings of expected female gender roles that tend to accompany the sex talk and the female body, Ellis

Walker 59
formulated her own understanding and relationship with her body. Discovering her body on her own terms allowed her to eliminate outside forces that would perpetuate negative body images and discourage body exploration.

**Race, Riots, and Resistance**

Ruth Ellis’ recognition that her race was a basis for discrimination gave her the strength early on in her life to confront oppression and to develop coping mechanisms that would persist through adulthood. Social interactions in early childhood cultivate initial views of the self and are also where young children begin to situate themselves, or rather are placed, on the social hierarchy. Ellis quickly learned that she was on the bottom:

[so]mething happen when children start to school. The white go with the whites and the blacks go with the blacks. Sometimes I would be the only colored in class. I think that that maybe made me shy. There were some colored people that lived in my block. But sometimes some of them think they're better than others. So I was a poor person and another girl lived down my block, her daddy owned a grocery store so she thought she was a little better than I so she didn't play with me much. So I would stand in the corner in the schoolyard during recess and I didn't have anybody to play with.
Ellis realized that her shyness stemmed from her early battles with racial segregation. Since she lived in an integrated neighborhood, both race and class became defining traits that made her a target of discrimination. The social hierarchy is a corrupt system that pollutes even the youngest of minds and then ensures that the cycle of discrimination is perpetuated. The other colored girl on Ellis’ block who was of a perceived higher class granted her the privilege of discrimination against poorer people in order to boost her self-worth. The young girl therefore could not associate with Ellis because “she thought she was a little better” and doing so would reflect poorly upon her. Ellis was the only girl in her home and did not have any friends to play with so she learned to entertain herself to fill the void that desired companionship. Although she was perpetually segregated and alone through her entire education experience, Ellis was among the elite 5% of African American women to graduate high school in 1919 and among the 16% of Americans to do so. Attending high school during the second decade of the 20th century was itself a big feat for Ellis, and she also went on to graduate and earn high school diploma.

Jim Crow laws were detrimental on the Black psyche. The persistence of Black people’s oppressive state and desperate need for equality was disheartening, especially for young children who had yet to fully comprehend the politics behind the racial system. Ellis lived in an integrated neighborhood but the public sphere in which she
A Black woman solemnly holds a sign in protest while linking hands with other women in solidarity.


navigated remained segregated and acted as constant reminders that her Black identity was deemed subordinate to white Ellis dejectedly recalls in Living with Pride, with her head resting on her hand, that

the city was prejudice. We couldn’t go to the restaurants, we couldn’t go to the theatre, some theaters didn’t let you in at all and if one happens to be that you could go, you’d have to sit in the back. If you go to the opera house you'd have to sit up in the last gallery called peanut heaven. The good restaurants you couldn’t go in them. The only restaurants you
could go in would be some sort of a, what do you call it, short order place where they serve chili or something like that. Just couldn't go.

Ellis internalized her experiences living in a prejudice city, which likely contributed to her decision to reside in homogeneous social circles and neighborhoods for most of her adulthood. The disrespect that fueled the notion of “separate but equal” was not unnoticed but since it was the law, she and other black individuals abided by the rules knowing that regardless of their desire to enter certain spaces, they “[j]ust couldn’t go.” Survival was a means of accepting things as they were, but also staying vehemently aware of how unjustly the system treated Black communities.

Legal racial discrimination is a disastrous breeding ground for violence that stems from racism and frustration. Violence enacted on Black communities throughout America, both physical and systematic, created tense atmospheres that often times led to riots. Ellis witnessed two major race riots and several acts of direct discrimination against black individuals. Ellis’s father Charlie Ellis became her model in her mother’s absence for digesting how to navigate the social world in racial turmoil. Due to the heightened racial tension during the beginning of the twentieth century, at a young age Ellis learned about both tragedy and exceptionalism. Ellis’ father demonstrated perseverance and courage that she internalized. Ellis, only nine years old, witnessed the harrowing Springfield Race Riot of 1908. The riot began in response to false accusations of a white woman being sexually assaulted by a black man. Since white lynch mobs did not have access to the man accused of the crime, they targeted black
men married to white women and extended their rampant violence by burning black homes and businesses. As Ellis recalled,

[th]ey had a lot of trouble in one section of Springfield. They burned [40] homes, shot people, got shot back. I think they hung a black man because he married a white lady. And uhh they were going to burn all the homes where all the men had married white women and there was a man on my block who had married a white lady so that umm, that scared us. We were in an integrated neighborhood so they told the white people to put up a sheet so they wouldn't burn their homes, they're just gonna burn the colored peoples' homes.

White lynch mobs targeted black men and black communities, not for the sake of the preservation of justice to a crime, but as an instrument of violence to uphold white supremacy. The black man that Ellis thought they lynched, was actually an 80-year-old Black man married to a white woman whose murder severed their 32 years of union in the name of white dominance. Burning homes and businesses were removed acts from the initial sexual assault allegation that sought to control Black communities, illicit fear, and keep them in their socially subordinate state. Ellis, only nine years old at the time lived in the midst of this tragic violence. Her world became less about loneliness from lack of friends and quickly spiraled into fear for her short lived life. Of course, Black people in the surrounding communities were fearful for their lives and fled their homes from the terrorist attacks. Ellis’ father, however, remained in his home and sought to
protect it with a sword he owned as a member of the Knights of Pythias-- a fraternal order established in 1864 and the first to be chartered by an Act of Congress (Pythias.org):

And he had a sword, that’s the only ammunition he had so he laid down in the front door, it was in the summer time, he laid down the front door with his sword and the boys they didn’t have nothing but brickbats [a piece of brick particularly one used as a weapon]. They had those up in the windows upstairs, but they didn't get to our place. And everybody who wanted to leave home they had a big arsenal there and they'd let ‘em come down to the arsenal and let ‘em stay over until the riot was quieted.

Ellis’ fathers and brothers sought to protect one another with just a sword and bricks. They may not have had much ammunition, but their courage and resistance to the violence was enough to keep them safe and secure in their home. Young Ruth saw many of her neighbors flee for safety, but her father’s courage to stand his ground by any means would reflect in Ellis’ actions throughout all aspects of her life. Witnessing violence unravel all around her was overwhelming, but the men in her life eased her worries and became a constant reminder of resistance. Unlike Ellis’ black skin that made her a target, whiteness gave individuals protection from white brutality but also permission to enact such extreme violence on racial minorities. Influential and profound activist and writer Ida B. Well commented extensively on race and lynchings.
at the end of the twentieth century, but all of her words were true well into the twenty-first century. One of her most acclaimed pieces, *Southern Horrors. Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, asserts that

[t]he miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women. White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women.

Wells unveils the massive double standard present in American miscegenation laws. White men raped, sexually assaulted, and “seduce[d] all the colored girls he c[ould]” for centuries without condemnation or punishment, but Black men were lynched for “succumb[ing] to the smiles of white women.” What message does this send to Black women, white women, and even Black men? White men were in positions of power because of their whiteness to control the social interactions between all groups. Lynchings inherently stated that as a Black man you are not worthy of speaking to a white woman because she was a possession of white men. In addition, it

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Other inter-racial murder or shooting    11

Inter-racial fight, no mention of lethal weapons    16

Civil liberties, public facilities, segregation, political events, and housing    14

Negro strikebreakers, upgrading, or other job based conflicts    5

Burning of an American flag by Negroes    1

No information available    4

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A table of the immediate precipitants of race riots in 1913-1963.


showed Black women that they were disposable and belonged to white men but only for sexual gratification. Black women did not have protection, therefore the detrimental cycle of white male patriarchy vigorously thrived under the guise of white female fragility. Wells positions a few instances of rape by white men next to instances of accusations of rape and lynchings of Black men next to truly reveal the sinister motives behind such violence:

In Nashville, Tenn., there is a white man, Pat Hanifan, who outraged a little Afro-American girl, and, from the physical injuries received, she has been ruined for life. He was jailed for six months, discharged, and is now a detective in that city. In the same city, last May, a white man outraged an Afro-American girl in a drug store. He was arrested, and
released on bail at the trial. It was rumored that five hundred Afro-Americans had organized to lynch him. Two hundred and fifty white citizens armed themselves with Winchesters and guarded him. A cannon was placed in front of his home, and the Buchanan Rifles (State Militia) ordered to the scene for his protection. The Afro-American mob did not materialize. Only two weeks before Eph. Grizzard, who had only been charged with rape upon a white woman, had been taken from the jail, with Governor Buchanan and the police and militia standing by, dragged through the streets in broad daylight, knives plunged into him at every step, and with every fiendish cruelty a frenzied mob could devise, he was at last swung out on the bridge with hands cut to pieces as he tried to climb up the stanchions. A naked, bloody example of the blood-thirstiness of the nineteenth-century civilization of the Athens of the South! No cannon or military was called out in his defense. He dared to visit a white woman.

White men, as previously stated, have the protection of whiteness to elude them from any guilt and prosecution of wrong doing, while Black men are subjectively always criminals. Pat Hanifan abused a little Black girl, a child, and was allowed to become a detective in the same city. The young girl was abused so badly she was “ruined for life.” A perpetrator was now allowed to investigate crimes, meaning he was now given the legal authority to perpetuate systems of abuse and protect himself and fellow white offenders. The inhumane examples given by Wells only occurred about a decade prior
to the riot in Springfield. Both Springfield and the many lynchings in the south show the culmination of deep racism in American societies. Lynching are commonly thought to have only occurred in the south but racism and hunger for power and control does not know any boundaries. The torture and brutal lynching of Eph. Grizzard, a man who “dared to visit a white woman” and that of the eighty-year-old man in Springfield happily married to a white woman for decades are “bloody example[s] of the blood-thirstiness” of white supremacy asserting that “This is a white man's country and the white man must rule” (Wells). The Springfield race riot highlighted the violence against Black communities, revealed that white supremacy expands beyond the south, and further proved the lack of justice and legal protection for Black communities. How could Ellis cultivate a positive self-image in a society that degraded black women and killed Black men? Was her sexuality a form of protective shield?

The Springfield Race Riot was devastating for Ellis but her young age and minimal understanding of the travesty of the situation lessened its direct impact on her life. The riot taught her many lessons regarding racial interactions, but the most salient uprising in Ellis’s memory is that of the July 23rd riot of 1967. Ellis spoke of the uprising with detail and passion because the devastation was still vivid in her memory and it occurred on her sixty-eighth birthday:

I'd gone to church and when I come back home, I noticed the bus had a different route, I didn’t think anything of it. And when I got home they take me out for my birthday way out to a park someplace, and I didn’t know anything was going on. And that evening we could see where they
were burning homes. I could stand in my window and see the flames down about four or five blocks from me. And uhh they burnt quite a lot of damage on the west side part of town, but I was on the north end of town and they didn’t hit out that way. And they had to call out the troops. And they had the troops to come in with the machine guns and they had a curfew on and you couldn't go out after a certain time. They go up and down the street with their machine guns. It was finally quieted down. That was the biggest one I ever seen.

Ellis, now a senior citizen, witnessed the destruction that the racial violence during her childhood produced. She was unaware of the war in the streets just blocks from her home, but quickly realized the gravity of the situation when black clouds polluted the skies. Unlike the race riot she witnessed as a young girl, the 1967 riot in Detroit began as a response to police raiding an unlicensed Negro bar, but was also potentially fueled by pre-existing tensions with the Detroit police force, inadequate living conditions, and
increased rates of black unemployment. The riot required 7,000 National Guardsmen and United States troops to end the disorder and by its close, 1,400 buildings were burned, 342 people were injured, thousands were arrested, and a calculated 43 people died--33 black people and 10 white. Sociologists Lieberson and Silverman analyze conditions of race riots and suggest that riots are more likely to occur when social institutions function inadequately, or when grievances are not resolved, or cannot be resolved under the existing institutional arrangements. Populations are predisposed or prone to riot; they are not simply neutral aggregates transformed into a violent mob by the agitation or charisma of individuals. Indeed, the immediate precipitant simply ignites prior community tensions revolving about basic institutional difficulties. The failure of functionaries to perform the roles expected by one or both of
the racial groups, cross-pressures, or the absence of an institution capable of handling a community problem involving inter-racial relations will create the conditions under which riots are most likely.

897

Riots are therefore uprisings against “the absence of an institution capable of handling a community problem involving inter-racial relations.” Of course they exist in part because of “prior community tensions revolving about basic institutional difficulties,” but on a deeper level, institutions perpetuate uprisings because of violence enacted on Black individuals, unequal living conditions, police brutality, and many other oppressions. The Detroit race riot was not an anomaly, rather a direct result of the unjust system that produced multiple riots throughout the nation in the twentieth century. Ellis managed to flourish in a system that sought to limit and destroy black moral, progress, and affluence. She opened Ellis & Franklin Printing Co. from 1946 to 1969 that operated in the basement of her home. The company was immensely popular and successful in her community because clients knew her prices were inexpensive and her services impeccable. Less than 1% of Negro women in 1940 owned a business and Ellis was the first woman to own a print shop in Northeastern Detroit (Welbon, 2000). While systems of racial oppression hindered Black success and promoted violence, Ellis continually proved that boundaries did not exist for her.
Lesbi-Gay Together: The Importance of Ruth Ellis’ Home

During the mid-twentieth century, Black queer communities in Detroit lacked spaces that allowed for them to freely express their identities. Imprisoned by racism and homophobia, attending black centered clubs meant risking violence and hostility if one’s sexuality was questioned, and venturing into white queer spaces meant facing rejection on the premise of racism. Contrarily, Harlem experienced a flux in Black homosexual subculture during the Harlem Renaissance from the 1920s to the 1930s. A large part of the Harlem Renaissance involved music and artistic expression that highlighted Black experiences and personal hardships. Some lesbian figures in the Harlem Renaissance include Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Alberta Hunter, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Josephine Baker (Garber). Gladys Bentley and Ma Rainey were two major influences in lesbian culture that embraced their sexuality unapologetically during a period when homosexual relations were punishable by arrest.

Gladys Bentley’s popularity gained momentum in 1923 at the young age of sixteen when she began performing at “rent parties” and the legendary speakeasies of "Jungle Alley" at 133 between Lenox and Seventh Avenue… Harry Hansberry's "Clam House" on 133rd Street, one of New York City's most notorious gay speakeasies, in the 1920s, and headlined in the early thirties at Harlem's Ubangi Club, where she was backed up by a chorus line of drag queens.
Bentley performed in public spaces, but more importantly the Harlem Renaissance cultivated a Black community that provided open and public spaces for queer people to celebrate and express their sexuality. Many cities across the country still lacked such spaces which left many other Black queer communities thirsty for sexual freedom. Bentley’s unspeakable courage to perform in drag and sing about lesbian existence attracted blacks, whites, and gays alike. In an *Ebony Magazine* article that she wrote many years later she recalled

[i]t seems I was born different. At least, I always thought so...From the time I can remember anything, even as I was toddling, I never wanted a man to touch me...Soon I began to feel more comfortable in boys clothes than in dresses. (qtd. in The Butch Caucus)

Bentley, beginning at a young age refused to abide by gender norms. Much like Ellis, Bentley was never in a closet about her sexuality but instead flaunted it freely. Bentley acquires autonomy over her body by revealing her perpetual lack of desire for a man and stating that even as a child “I never wanted a man to touch me.” A large butch black woman would become the idol of many queer black communities all over the country.
Gladys Bentley dressed in a dapper white tuxedo and dress shoes and top hat

Ma Rainey-- "The Mother of Blues" -- was another female artist that sung about lesbianism during the Harlem Renaissance. Although she was publicly married to a man, "Prove it on Me," released in 1928, was one of Rainey’s most straightforward songs about her sexuality which dares society to "prove" her gayness while also admitting that

It’s true I wear a collar and a tie
Makes the wind blow all the while
Don’t you say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me
You sure got to prove it on me.
Say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me.

I went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.
Wear my clothes just like a fan
Talk to the gals just like any old man. . .

Rainey’s direct statement that “[i]t must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men...talk to the gals like any old man” is profound. She owns her sexuality in a way that she wields the power in identifying herself despite what society may think. Lyrical displays of obvious female attraction coupled with her urges for someone “to prove it on me” because “ain’t nobody caught me” asserts that only she can define her sexuality and it is not in society’s place to bind labels onto her based on perceived actions. Rainey was a dangerous woman who was in complete control of her sexuality.

Ruth Ellis, however was not capable of accessing the power that Bentley and Rainey projected, but she still expressed her sexuality on her own terms. Ellis recalled in Living with Pride that “[m]y daddy didn’t allow us to play the blues” because it was “what they call lowdown music so he didn't allow that.” Blues music typically tell stories about betrayal, hardship, triumph through explicit language. Bentley and Rainey’s lesbian proclamation through their style of dress, performances, and music
was particularly revolutionary because during the late 1920s and into the 1930s, American society was trying desperately to conceal female centered relationships after the publication of *Wells of Loneliness* in 1928. The lesbian novel, written by Radclyffe Hall is a tale of a woman born in the Victorian Era who early in life displays attraction to female and later in adulthood falls in love with another woman. Of course, the novel was publically rejected but became the lesbian handbook for many young queer females in the 1920s and beyond. Ellis was among those young women that looked to *Wells of Loneliness* to educate her on lesbian life. “Everything was hush hush, everything was sort of secret like,” Ellis announces in the documentary that “I didn’t know anything about lesbians. We called them women lovers but I read that book The Wells of Loneliness and that put me wise to some things.” Ellis, was a lesbian but had not known how to identify her sexuality but learned through this novel, that she was not alone in her homosexual desires.

Unlike the open spaces for Black queers in New York, Detroit was very racially segregated and did not allow for Black lesbians to publically display their homosexual desires or express their sexuality. Fellow lesbian and feminist Roey Thorpe addresses the “larger questions about the way historians of lesbians have defined public and private space, and the impact of these definitions have had on the history that has emerged” (41) in her essay “A House Where Queer's Go: African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit.” Thorpe explains that black queer people had to forge personal connections in order to find public spaces that celebrated lesbian and gay lifestyles. Before Ellis’s own home became a popular party spot she recalled in her interview with Thorpe that in the 1930s
[w]e got acquainted with a couple of girls, one of 'em worked in a restaurant and we used to go there to eat, and come in contact with 'em. Then they knew other girls, and they'd introduce me to these other girls. And you just kept meeting different people in that line. . . . We went to visit girls' houses, had parties, and then we'd meet other girls, maybe we'd go to somebody else's house. 41

In order for Black lesbians to interact with one another they not only had to forge an initial connection but they also had to allow others to penetrate their private safe spaces in order to provide public safe spaces for other queer, gay, and lesbian individuals. The private becomes the public, thus eliminating any connotations of a personal haven for the providers. How could these spaces of celebration become places of destitute? What psychological and emotional impact could invite others into personal spaces cause? Black lesbian experiences were vastly different than that of white lesbians. Ellis described her participation in party and house hopping as meeting people and making connections. Meanwhile, many white lesbians had the luxury of attending an extensive range of bars reserved for their comfort which were often exclusive. Among the most popular lesbian clubs in Detroit were the “Sweetheart Bar, Palais, Fred’s, Mary’s Memory, the K9 Bar, and the Golden Bar” (Thorpe, 1997, 166).

Black lesbians did not have public spaces reserved for them to celebrate their sexuality, but the forced alternative of house parties created an atmosphere of acceptance and community, which was vital in generating confidence and self-love.
when combatting double oppression as Black and queer. For thirty years, beginning in 1941, Ruth Ellis and her lover Babe opened up their home on the weekends to gays and lesbians. It was widely known as “The Gay Spot” and “everybody knew were Babe and Ruth’s were.” Ruth and Babe’s home was more than just a party spot. It was where young Black lesbian women and gay men gathered to showcase their talents by singing and playing the piano or just relaxed and played card games. Most importantly however, it was a safe zone for everyone to be who they truly were and to do it unreserved. It was not uncommon for butch women to dress in drag and for men to openly socialize with one another or even engage in public displays of affection. They knew that when they stepped into Ruth and Babe’s home, they would be welcomed. Ellis, in *Living with Pride* happily reflected on the years that her home was a sanctuary for many, stating that

we had a gay couple who lived downstairs and they were black and they were men so if we had a party we just opened up the whole house. …. Every Saturday we would have a little get together, play the piano. They would sing and uhh some of ‘em would play cards and some of ‘em just sit down and talk. And that’s how we spent the evening, it was sort of a haven for the young people who didn't have any place to go…. sometimes we would try to help them through school. We tried, it wasn’t much ‘cause we didn’t have much but we helped them a little.
Ellis gave all that she could to those around her. She welcomed others into her home as a party space, opened rooms to provide homes for those struggling, and gave what little money she had to improve and uplift the minds of generations. Ellis’ genuine compassion for others, helped a generation attain a college education, gain self-love and confidence, and find love within a home when they were without shelter. Allowing people into her home, into her safe space, however, produced emotional damage that Ellis had to endure and left her without a place to breathe and recollect herself. Ruth and Babe’s relationship suffered throughout the many years that “The Gay Spot” was the hot spot for gays and lesbians. On one occasion, Ellis caught Babe in bed with a man whom she suspected had won all of Babe’s money in a game of poker. Ellis, thus considered Babe’s actions as an effort to win her money back instead of a display of infidelity. Of course, Ellis could not keep Babe’s mistreatment a secret since people were constantly flowing through their home. “The Gay Spot” became an intrusive environment that significantly affected Ellis and Babe’s relationship. Their relationship became more of a living accommodation than a romantic relationship:

[Babe] got in love with this girl. Well if she wanted to stay all night she stayed all night but she had a husband in a home of her own. Babe go over there I guess Babe had keys to her house too. One night she came and she was gone sit up, until Babe come home, sit up in my house and I said "uhh uhh you gotta go home. If you wait for Babe you go home and wait for her." So I put her out…. I didn't have any place to go if I left, so it was my house and it was [Babe’s] house so I stayed there…. I
learned how to stand on my own feet. The way she treated me I had to form a life of my own.

Ellis dealt with infidelity in her own home, because it was a means for survival. Ellis’ home was an extension of her. The young people entering her home gave her something that Babe was no longer giving her--love, companionship, and respect. Babe, however, took away her safe space. This deep sense of betrayal that stripped Ellis from her safe space was a feat that forced her to “stand on [her] own two feet” and to “form a life” of her own, outside of the place that she once considered home. Left without a place to call home, Ellis’ house became a home for everyone else.

Threats of the outside world forced participants in house parties to make their public realm of expressing their various queer identities into the private. While there were many house parties and homes that welcomed queer black individuals, making a connection with one person was crucial in becoming a part of such a welcoming and open community. Once that connection was made though, new friendships and various partying options became readily available every weekend. Ellis and Babe’s two family flat in Detroit was one of the hottest and most welcoming spots. Margaret Lorick in an interview with Thorpe nostalgically recollected that “I always know that we was always welcome when we went there and they was all looking forward to us coming” (45). Perhaps it was the fact that Ellis would “cook up these great big pots of food--like sometimes she had string brings in one, carrots in another, and some kinda meat or hot dogs or something like that” (45-46) that made everyone feel welcome and safe in her home. It was more likely, however, that Ellis’s welcoming spirit and gentle aura
attracted mass numbers of Black queers and encouraged anyone who visited to mirror her friendly and warm vibes.

One of the best qualities about Ellis’ house for Margaret was not only the open and honest environment but also the opportunities to become acquainted with lesbian women and gay men “from all walks of life--all backgrounds and [with] all kinds of people” (45). The diverse and inclusive atmosphere attests to just how confidential everyone in the space remained to one another. During the 1930s well into the 1960s, and even beyond, revealing one’s sexual identity was extremely risky but at a queer even like this, sexuality went often went unsaid. More surprisingly, however, was their willingness to share their occupation as well. Margaret revealed that “[t]hey weren’t afraid about using their own names [first and last]. . . . I guess they felt like this was just a like a clique and everybody would keep this information there. I don’t think it ever got out to their jobs or anything” (46). Public, but also secretive, interactions between black queers required an unspoken truth of kinship and trust and values that went beyond a club scene. People who attended Ellis’s house gatherings all knew of the dangers that awaited them once their bodies traveled back through the threshold of Ellis’s door and the bottom of their heels and shoes rapped against the pavement. Still, for those carefree nights, lesbians and gays from Detroit, and neighboring cities in Michigan, Cleveland and Dayton, Ohio travelled to Ellis’s spot to boldly be themselves, but also to dance (Thorpe, 1996).

Dancing serves as a stress release from the heavy burdens of oppression and the silencing of one’s identity and as a form of asserting autonomy over one’s body, but it also acts as an artistic form to outwardly convey internalized sexual desires. Dancing
with other women was not a luxury that lesbians had in predominantly heterosexual clubbing scenes, but it was a unifying component of why people gathered at Ruth and Babe’s home. One night when Margaret was out with a friend and her friend’s sister at a black heterosexual bar, Margaret’s persistent rejection to a man’s advances and requests for a dance eventually led to an altercation:

This man, he got real smart and E.’s sister say, “She said she didn’t wanna dance now get on with yourself.” [The man] said, “Don’t she like men?” [S]he said, “Maybe, if she does, so what, she don’t like you!” It went on and on and on…. One night she got in a fight with him and then I think we took up, . . . and they threw us out the bar. 45

Rejecting a man’s advances was not only questionable to a woman’s sexuality but also a threat to male dominance. The guy’s questioning of “Don’t she like men” inherently displays male privilege and centered thinking. The question itself assumes that she should like men and if she “don’t” she is not normal. Margaret’s experience was not an isolated event but a result of lesbian heightened awareness of lesbian existence in Black communities. Contrary to what many believe about the (in)visibility of black queer life during this same time period between the 1940s and 1960s, black communities were engaging with homosexuality in a way that questioned its existence and its place in the community, though primarily from ignorance and societal conditioning for heterosexuality.
During the 1950s, *Jet Magazine*, a prominent black publication founded in 1951, released several issues regarding both male and female homosexuality. While the headlines were not particularly positive, and often read as “WHY LESBIANS MARRY” (Jet Magazine January 1, 1953) or “WOMEN WHO FALL FOR LESBIANS” (Jet Magazine February 25, 1954), lesbian visibility was still on the rise. The cover of the headline “WOMEN WHO FALL FOR LESBIANS” is definitely intriguing. *Jet* positions the article headline next to a singer who is accused of marrying a man secretly. *Jet* was likely alluding to the need for lesbians to marry men, a topic covered in another publication of *Jet* the previous year. Black lesbian visibility was increasing but was still situated in relation to men, thus contradicting the notion of
lesbian existence. Often times the lack of male counterparts and vulnerability were marked as vicious culprits of such deviant behavior:

Just why some women fall for lesbians is perhaps best summed up in an observation made by writer Arthur Guy Mathews, who stated recently in a health magazine: The lesbian makes a point of seeking out widows, lonesome women, the victim of broken love affairs, and those who have suffered from nervous breakdowns and other mental ills. Additional victims come from the ranks of the sexually un-initiated, as was true in the case of the college coed. And with one woman in four remaining unmarried in the U.S. today, spinsters more and more are becoming likely prey for lesbians. Jet Magazine, 1954

The phrase itself “fall for” suggests that the supposed unsuspecting women are not in control of their actions but are merely “victims” to lesbian predators. Jet, while they tried to bring light to lesbian existence during a pivotal moment in American history, they still contradicted their critique of lesbians. If so many women are falling prey to lesbians, who are seducing the initial lesbians? Was Jet suggesting that there is a set number of deviant lesbians that lurk around women “who have suffered from nervous breakdowns and other mental ills” to spread the gay agenda? Their underlying assertions are alarming and cause more harm to lesbian communities than any potential good outcomes. Consequently, with heightened awareness of lesbian existence came elevated levels of accusations and assumptions about women who dared to reject a
man’s advances. Single women or women uninterested in men automatically became associated with lesbian activities and Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s unequivocal staggering results in his widely known book *Sexual Behavior In The Human Female* (1953) made aware the frequency in which women enjoyed same sex relations. Kinsey stated that “nearly one out of five American women experience homosexual relations of some type either as a pursuer or pursued, and their ages range from early childhood to middle-life” (Jet Magazine, 1954). The public acknowledgement of lesbian women and behavior in history at that particular time was astounding to come across, however, it leaves insight into why men began to feel more threatened by women who did not seek male attention. Despite four in five women reportedly having solely heterosexual interactions, the twenty percent can be assumed too great of a chance for the fragile male ego. Hostility toward suspecting lesbian women increased was positively correlated with heightened lesbian visibility as a means to protect the male’s ego and assert male dominance.

The unwarranted violence and harassment that many women, like Margaret, experienced in predominantly black and heterosexual spaces made Ellis’s home all the more important. Having a space to intimately dance with women and share that intimacy with a room full of others with similar emotions and desires was revolutionary. Private house parties allowed for the sexual and provocative to be normal and acceptable. Contrarily, Black lesbians that did frequent predominantly white bars did not have that luxury. Sandy, a stud--common vernacular to describe a Black lesbian that displays features considered masculine-- remembered her comfortable and accepting experience in a white gay and lesbian club Palais. Although

Walker 86
she was welcomed, it came at the price of not socializing in sexual manners with white femme lesbians as to not offend or threaten the dominance of white butch lesbians. For those that did not want to venture the slippery terrain of interracial interactions, they stayed with within the Black spaces and maneuvered freely without having to micromanage their words or their actions. Ellis was not oblivious to the impact she had on the black queer community, but the gravity of her hospitality may have eluded her simply because she genuinely just wanted others to have a great time. Once black owned and operated bar and clubs began to become readily available in the 1970s, the house party scene changed. They differed from those at Ruth and Babe’s house, mainly because they were after parties, dubbed “rent parties” for their coverage fee (Thorpe, 1996), but also because they were more public and abundant. Still, Ruth and Babe’s spot remained one of the most talked about and popular partying spots from 1940s to the early 1970s. Ellis was infamous for her parties, her incomparable hospitality, and her lively and selfless spirit.

It comes as no surprise that black queer communities found alternative and less restricted avenues to express their wide range of personalities and identities. Wrought by oppression for centuries, black people have always found ways to thrive in the face of injustice. Ruth Ellis provided a space and a home for many black queer young adults searching for themselves and who they were to become. Ruth Ellis provided strength, courage, love, and acceptance. She allowed for generations to become comfortable in their own skin beginning with the sway of their hips under her roof and ending with her smile as they walked out her door with new confidence.
Joining the Lesbians

Ruth Ellis did not consider her many years as a host to black queers as the defining moment of when she joined the lesbian community, but rather when she finally acquired the necessary language to label herself as such. Black lesbians during Ellis’ generation did not title themselves as such, but instead were known as “women lovers” because the title “lesbian” was a term of white privilege. Renowned critical race theorist Cheryl L. Harris elaborates on whiteness and its privileges in her influential article *Whiteness as Property*. Harris argues in the section titled “The Property Functions of Whiteness” that

[t]he right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be “not white.” The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. . . . “White” was defined and constructed in ways that increased its value by reinforcing its exclusivity. Indeed, just as whiteness as property embraced the right to exclude, whiteness as a theoretical construct evolved for the very purpose of racial exclusion.

1736-1737

Walker 88
Harris explains how systemic racism blatantly holds whiteness as an unattainable property by those labeled as “not white,” leading to exclusivity although white participants may not actively and consciously exclude others. Whiteness as a whole prospers from excluding other races, specifically Black individuals. The “possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others” and although 1960s veered away from legal discrimination, movements like The Second Wave Feminist Movement inherently excluded those deemed “not white.” The movement was a beautiful call to action in theory, but in reality it perpetuated racial discrimination by ignoring voices and experiences of women of color.

The Second Wave Feminist Movement featured groups of women creating women-centered events, spaces, businesses, and political movements based on realities of patriarchal oppression including heterosexism, sexism, gender discrimination, and a multitude of other aspects. There are vast amounts of research and commentary--Kathy Rudy, Frances Beal, Ruth Frankenberg, Benita Ross, Angela Davis and bell hooks to name a few--that analyze and critique different facets of the movement including its pros and cons. Jane Gerhard succinctly explains in “Desiring Revolution” the movement of middle class white women to create an image of the feminist movement as one that tackles the idea of sexuality, that specifically moves toward an ideology of woman identified woman--placing women’s emotional relationships with other women above all else. In doing this, Gerhard attests that white women eliminated the intersectional identities that would not allow for most women to solely base their identities on their sexuality. Professor and critical queer, sexuality, and gender theorist Anne Enke extensively and effectively elaborates on the whiteness of the second wave
feminist movement and the detrimental harm that it caused to women of color. Enke quotes Evelynn Hammonds, “black women have created whole worlds of sexual signs and signifiers…they are worlds which will always have to contend with the power that the white world has to invade, pathologize, and disrupt those worlds” (658) to preface her deep analysis that

One of the ways that "the white world" reproduces this power is by creating places in which the codes of sexuality and sexual agency refers to white systems of privilege: lesbians and lesbian space could claim visibility by appropriating jeans and work boots precisely because that very practice marked "lesbian" as youthful, white, and middle class, distinct from women of color and migrant workers. Women of color in "dressed up" clothing, could not appropriate that [white] sexuality any more easily than they could appropriate the prestige of whiteness. . . . while white feminists and lesbians enacted and brought new visibility to white female sexual self-determination within certain women's spaces, they maintained structures of cultural power that limited women of color in those same spaces. Indeed, the visibility of feminist and lesbian sexualities seemed to rely on whiteness not only to help secure privileged property but, simultaneously, to supply a normative definition of woman. 658
Enke argues that the white appropriation of a lesbian look—“jeans and work boots”—essentially claimed that to be labeled as lesbian you had to possess whiteness, a club that certainly excluded “women of color and migrant workers.” This specific aspect of the second wave feminist movement that Enke maps is critical in imaging and understanding the climate and privilege that Ellis entered. White women were the face of the feminist movement, however, that is not to proclaim that a Black feminist movement was not simultaneously occurring that met the needs of Black women. White feminists used their visibility, privilege, and whiteness as property to redefine the ways in which sexuality and woman was imagined. Ellis, well into her mid-seventies, identified herself with these definitions and labels of lesbian typically afforded whiteness. In her youth, Ellis did not have the language to articulate her lifelong lesbian existence or have the social privilege that would have allowed to appropriate the mark of lesbian as “youthful, white, and middle class.” Her old age and her blackness forced her to identify with herself through a lens of whiteness, which was her young white friend Jaye Spiro. Ellis took a lot of pride in her shared experiences with other black lesbians, but when asked in *Living with Pride* “[w]hen was it that you recognized yourself,” she answered “[w]hen I met Jaye Spiro. When she introduced me to the girls.” In addition, when prompted with “what was your greatest accomplishment,” she enthusiastically proclaims, “[j]oining the lesbians. I have been more happy joining the lesbians than I have ever been.” Ellis’ response to major questions regarding self-identification is critical to understanding the ways in which Ellis imagined lesbianism. Why at that moment in her life did she finally recognize herself? Why did it take her entering lesbian spaces, those historically afforded to white women, for a Black lesbian
to mark this specific time in her life as a defining moment in her identity and her life? Ellis has several defining moments in which she is emerged into lesbian and queer culture throughout her journey as an active lesbian woman. She did not consider neither her sexual relationships nor her romantic relationship with Babe essential in her self-identification as a lesbian. The single fact that “joining the lesbians” was synonymous with immersing herself in white spaces attests to the marginalization of black women in the liberation of lesbians during the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Whiteness as “privileged property,” however, extended beyond appropriation of definitions and images and reached public domains.

The lesbian group that befriended Ellis was mixed race, but the introduction to more white lesbians after seventy years of living gave her the opportunity to experience aspects of lesbian existence that was not previously afforded to her. Once she “joined the lesbians,” Ellis was finally able to travel and publicly socialize with other lesbians of various backgrounds and ages. Jaye and Ellis’s relationship grew during the heart of the second feminist wave, which prided exposing lesbianism to the greater American public. Ellis came into her new found identity with open arms and amazing experiences of unity and solidarity in the lesbian community. Jaye and other lesbian women introduced Ellis to the Womyn’s Music Festival, home to many naked women, positive vibes, and a variety of music. The Womyn’s Music Festival—a yearly event that gathered from the 1970s to 2015 that allowed for solidarity between and celebration of “womyn born womyn”—was a new privilege that Ellis indulged and favored, namely for the young naked women. Many lesbians that had the honor of spending time with Ellis, such as Dr. CiCi Mclay and Jaye, described her presence as a “hunger for our

Walker 92
Women Embracing at Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, 1976

history” and proclaimed that “the lesbian community was dying for Ellis,” respectfully (Welbon, 1999). While the festival provided Ellis with a loving and welcoming environment, its mission can be extensively critiqued for its lack of inclusion for transgender and working class women as well as the underrepresentation of black lesbians. The absence of individuals deemed “not white” was a result of the lack of privilege to access the knowledge of such events, the means to participate, and not having a welcome and deliberate invitation. Experiencing something new and different with Jaye was essentially a period when Ellis was able to see how the other half lived. She was accustomed to hardship, to discrimination and prejudice, and to living and associating with individuals of the same racial background. The world she was thrust
into involved significantly more white women thus included access to the privileges of whiteness. There is not accessible data that analyzes or lays out the racial demographics of The Womyn’s Music Festival, but it would be critical to see how many Black lesbians were in attendance in comparison to white women. The numbers would bring needed attention to the disparities of public spaces afforded to Black queer individuals.

Ruth Ellis’ age allowed for a certain flexibility within lesbian groups regardless of race. While she was always deeply loved and appreciated in the predominantly black queer community that she was accustomed to belonging, her new multicultural circle introduced her to a different kind of expressed appreciation. The added distinction of her age also contributed to her identifying with Jaye Spiro and her feminist associates. Lonely from Babe’s sudden death in 1975, Jaye’s companionship and the women’s true interest in Ellis and her life gave her a sense of pride, respect, and acceptance in a community full of younger lesbians. Ellis’s age differentiated her from all the other women thus attributed to her fame. Upon reflection she states in the documentary that “I wish younger people would pay more attention to old people…. We have to join ourselves together with young people. I think that is the only thing that’ll make them realize that we are still alive and kicking.” Breaking the age barrier as Ellis discussed allowed for younger generations to dismantle false notions of “old people,” including their lack of mobility, energy, and sexuality. No longer seen as just an old woman but a source of wisdom, knowledge, and history, Ellis broke boundaries that initially placed her in the shadow of whiteness. For instance, Kalimah Johnson and Dr. Kofa Adoma proclaims that “Ruth represents power, strength, and dignity” as well as “strength endurance courage and the things we need to value in our community to keep going,”
respectfully. Her power comes from not only living and excelling in a racist and heteronormative society, but also by being a force of nature that made a world of difference in many lives that crossed generations, and racial and cultural boundaries. In the words of Jaye, “[t]he lesbian community was dying for Ruth” because as Dr. CiCi McLay articulates, “it’s like a hunger for our history.” Ellis was living proof of history’s invigorating and revelatory importance. Ellis is history and embodied “strength, power, and dignity” which empowered oppressed lesbian women and gay men that Ellis encountered. In her lifetime, she created a distinct community inside her home when spaces were not available to Black queers and she reconstructed a feminist social group by placing her blackness at the center of a white washed and privileged movement, consequently, multiplying definitions woman, lesbian, and feminist. Ellis embodied the opposite of what popular second wave feminisms exemplified. She was not youthful, nor white, nor middle class yet she was a focal point in the lives of many self-identified feminists and the social movement as a whole. Whether she was aware of her power and influence or not, Ellis deconstructed part of a system that rejected her blackness and reclaimed it how she saw fit. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorates degree in humanities for her life accomplishments and substantial impact on queer communities as well as acquire a day solely dedicated to and named after her in 1997. After all of her feats Ellis still managed to modestly say that “I am just a common ordinary person who has enjoyed life.” If she is ordinary, she redefined and enhanced yet another definition.

Ruth Ellis’ involvement in the Second wave feminist movement was unprecedented, but even her presence did not completely alter the mission and message
behind it. Throughout the two decades that the movement was generating impactful rhetoric, all too often Black women’s experiences were overshadowed and cast aside. White middle class women dominated the sphere and were not willing to share the platform. Black women constantly criticized the movement and the women for perpetuation the same oppressive environment as patriarchy. Audre Lorde, a feminist, poet, mother, and warrior, was one Black women who relentlessly critiqued the actions of white feminist figures in the movement, challenging them to engage in necessary dialogue that would engender a more inclusive environment. Lorde often was misidentified as abrasive and her attempts were grazed over. Lorde also created visceral poetry and prose that revealed the deepest parts of her complex existence. One of her most riveting prose pieces includes her reclaiming of the erotic. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” Lorde reminds that “[t]he 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” (55). Lorde connected with and applied the erotic to every aspect of her life. She grew powerful in the sense that she became more aware, as a result, she lived in harmony with the chaos within in and outside of her. Ellis, like Lorde, personified love in every part of her life which gave her access to different spaces and why her life was so transformative. Lorde would go on to urge many women to assert the feminine life source of the erotic during the ending years of the feminist movement. Ellis, however, already had portrayed the potential strength of what the source of the erotic could produce if utilized, Lorde was capable of transfiguring the action into luminous prose.
CHAPTER III
A NEW TELLING OF HERSTORIES: AUDRE LORDE, THE EROTIC
AND ZAMI

There are so many ways of describing "lesbian." Part of the lesbian consciousness is an absolute recognition of the erotic within our lives and, taking that a step further, dealing with the erotic not only in sexual terms. While Black sisters don’t like to hear this, I would have to say that all Black women are lesbians because we were raised in the remnants of a basically matriarchal society no matter how oppressed we may have been by patriarchy. We’re all dykes, including our mommas.

Audre Lorde

Interview with Audre Lorde with Karla Hammond, 1980

Introduction

As a young girl around the age of six I never understood my curious and erotic feelings toward my mother. I never verbalized the many instances when I would look forward to cuddling next to her at night, secretly waiting for her to fall asleep so that I could feel the warmth of her breasts on the side of my cheek, welcoming me home; or the times that time moved too quickly so she dragged me into shower with her to preserve time. I wonder if she knew my young eyes gazed upon her body and felt inexplicable sensations run through my core, which quickly traveled in the blood through my veins. My mother’s body was an uncharted domain that peaked my curiosity. The wet glow of her skin seemed to glisten for me, beckoning me to return and implant my small body onto hers. But I never did. I knew that no matter how strong those feelings were it would not be received well. I was already becoming “too big” to sleep with my mother every night, but despite her adamant refusals, I snuck into her bed anyway, nestling next to her almost every night until I was ten years old. One night
I was mortified to find an intruder in my spot. I perfected the multiple ways to open the bedroom door to ensure that it did not creak, and I tiptoed to the opposite side of the bed, my bed might I add, and there he was—a brick wall blocking me from the luscious softness of my mother’s breast and stomach. The intruder woke with fist balled and guard up. My mother was furious for some reason, and though I was aware that she knew that I would sneak into our room like I did every other night, she had somehow come to the preposterous conclusion that that night was different. She scolded me as she led me to the foreign confinements of my room, communicating through clenched teeth that “This has to stop. You are too damn big and too old to sleep with me. No more Jenae. You will sleep in your bed from now on.” As the sound of my middle name slid off her tongue I felt a piece of my heart fall into the pit of my stomach. I wept well into the night only to find that when I had awoken, I was outside my mother’s bedroom door in the same position that I had lived for nine months, protected by her.

Years later, as I ventured into my preadolescent years and began to grapple with the sensual feelings that I had toward other girls, I began to reminisce about the feelings that were all too similar to the ones I had directed toward my mother. How could this be? Did I want to be with my mother the same way that I wanted to be with her—the girl whose smile gave me the feeling of warm rain gathering within me? Was I perverted because I wanted to gather myself inside my mother? Was I deviant because I wanted to explore the familiarities of another girl’s underdeveloped body, and to take her into my arms while traveling the insides of her—whatever that meant? I was terrified. I suppressed those feelings for my mother and familiarized myself with the wonders of girls, soon to be women. I was in fifth grade when I allowed myself to
acknowledge to my best-friend, in between stutters and silences, that “I think I like girls.” I was in the eighth grade when I had my first play date under the covers.

Five years later, during my freshman year of college, these unfamiliar memories abruptly rushed into my mind as I read the amazing and poetic work of Audre Lorde. It was both refreshing and frightening to recollect the depths of me that I tucked away in the darkest parts of my chaotic mind. My Black Feminisms course in the second semester of freshman year, Lorde captured my attention through the illuminating and powerful piece “Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider*. It was the first time that the feelings I harbored for my mother were not self-perceived as pornographic; Lorde had articulated what I was too young to even formulate:

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feelings. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. 54

Audre Lorde understood me and how I should come to know myself. Though they were projected differently, the feelings that I harbored for my mother and for the girls that I desired were natural, and had stemmed from the same deeply rooted place.
Pornography was created to stifle any intense feelings in fear that it was purely sexual in an attempt to reject the erotic, the “measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (54). Women accepting the erotic and identifying its difference from pornography would threaten the power of the patriarchal system because women who are well aware and informed about their deep feelings are dangerous in what all they can accomplish. Binding “confused,” “trivial,” “psychotic,” and “plasticized” to deep natural sensations severs women’s connections to “a source of power and information” in a way that goes unnoticed--except by Lorde.

I buried myself inside of Lorde, divulging her essays, poems, novels, and anything else I could grasp. She grappled with and completely redefined definitions and understandings of social interactions with other women, beginning with the relationship between mother and daughter. This woman captivated me and I needed her to tell me about who I was to become. Lorde was the lighthouse guiding me through a dark untraveled sea of emotions that most women, including my mother, denied. The severance of the use of erotic begins with mother and daughter. Deep affections and connections to our mothers were only known to be expressed certain ways, obviously not how I wanted to, which is rooted in oppression stemming from patriarchy. Patriarchal society has created a profound disconnect between women by preaching that women who feel deeply for other women are anomalies, and thus have historically punished such women severely through social isolation or procedures of lobotomy in order to instill fear and to reject the erotic. It does not matter if a young daughter feels such emotions toward her mother since the mother has already internalized what is acceptable as forms of love and what is perverted. Sadly, those actions are balanced on
a thin line. Is it really so alarming for a child to feel strong erotic feelings toward a mother whom protected, nourished, physically housed, and created her? Why does American society fight so hard to go against our natural innocent tendencies of love and intimacy in fear? Regardless of the answer to this key question, societal pressures and expectations have been so deeply ingrained in black women’s multilayered oppressive psyche that the erotic is then also suppressed within the self and unknowingly taught to young black girls to do the same. Lorde, in an enticing interview with Karla Hammond, explains that

we were taught to suspect each other, and it begins between mother and daughter. But this occurs in a situation of grave oppression where oppression comes not just because you're a woman so much as because you're Black, and because you are a Black Woman. It's triple jeopardy. The structures of the distortion change—what passes between you. 18

Lorde eloquently sums up how “grave oppression” from multiple identities, has distorted all exchanges between females beginning with the relationship between mother and daughter. “The structures of the distortion” are the systems of oppression that constrain Black people, especially Black women, coercing them to suppress all deep connections. Severing the erotic weakens non-pornographic intimacy within relationships, which makes Black women easily susceptible to manipulation by the patriarchal system. Lessons about racial issues were consequently viewed as personal attacks upon young Lorde’s ears, and signs of erotic connections between mother and
daughter were misconstrued as perversion. She explains that “survival, for my mother, meant being white or being as close to white, while being Black, as you could be” (18). Originally, Lorde was speaking of racial oppression and the many ways in which her mother taught her how to survive, which will be explored later in the chapter, however the same rings true for heterosexuality. The word “white” can be replaced with the words “heterosexual” and “Black”, while the connotations of what it means to be Black is arguably synonymous with heterosexuality and with being proud. How can black women begin to interrogate and deconstruct the ways in which they have come to view intimacy and the erotic while unknowingly being engrossed in structures of distortion?

My mother knew how to survive in a heterosexual world and feared that I was too different to handle the discrimination destined for me in the future. I projected all the signs that I was not the feminine daughter she imagine, but secret hopes lived inside my mother that it was just a tomboy phase and I believe those hopes still linger somewhere in the depths of her as she continues to accept that those tendencies are just a part of who I am. Giving me freedom to reign as a rambunctious child while also keeping me close to heterosexual norms would later serve as a blueprint for what was acceptable as a hobby and how those indulges were very different from what I was required to do as a woman, a Black woman. It was less about actions and more about presentation: “Wear earrings Alexis”, “Oooh isn’t this dress so cute? And it’s your size, try it on”, “Don’t sit like that, cross your legs,” “Stop acting like a boy. Settle down and quit being so rough!” Similar phrases rang through my head every day as a navigated girlhood into womanhood and I struggled to follow them while remaining
proud of who I was as a Black individual. I questioned, how can I be proud to be Black when that very blackness rejects the lesbian part of me?

Source: Audre Lorde lectures students at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida in 1983. (Photo by Robert Alexander/Archive Photos/Getty Images)

**Biography**

Audre Lorde wrestled with questions that have been left unanswered for many girls and women trying to fit into a society that suffocates the world growing inside of them. Lorde’s birth on February 18, 1934 coincided with the last pivotal years of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, social, literary, artistic, and intellectual movement that sprouted at the end of World War II in the 1920s and lasted until the mid-1930s. The multifaceted goal of the Harlem Renaissance and its proponents was to create a new black cultural identity during a period when racial tension was high and artistic beauty within black communities was booming. The 1930s
were also a time of disorder due to the Great Depression, leaving more than 50% of Blacks in urban areas, such as Harlem, unemployed and elevated levels of police brutality contributed to the growing stressful environments. Racial tensions were high, but peaked in 1935 when New York had its first race riot of the twentieth century. The Harlem Riot of 1935 began on March 19 when sixteen-year-old Lino Rivera, a black Puerto Rican, was caught stealing a penknife from a dime store. The owner called the police but asked the officers to let the boy go as to not cause disruption in the neighborhood. His efforts were too late, though, because although the police complied, residents in the neighborhood did not believe the boy was safe since his physical body was not present. Already feeling defeated by lack of employment and previous mistreatment by police officers, the black residents caused an uproar which resulted in three black people being killed, nearly sixty injured, seventy arrested, and over $200 million in property damage (Black Past). This riot is considered to have been the event that terminated the Harlem Renaissance. Almost a decade later in 1943, another race riot occurred resulting from, as *The New York Times* explained

Bad and costly housing, lack of recreational facilities, the failure to give equal economic opportunities—these things corrupt the weak and unstable Negro population just as they do among other varieties of population.

Again, consistent outside forces meant to hinder Black progress led to tensions and frustrations with the political system for their lack of concern for the well-being of
black individual until a single event became the tipping point. Black communities were already exhausted by an unjust social sphere and economic woes further “corrupted[ed] the weak and unstable” livelihood of Black communities. Black people still managed to navigate through this disorder to find ways that would uplift their well-being and better their financial situation. “Rent parties” became very common among Blacks living in urban areas. Unlike the era in which the notorious Ruth Ellis provided her home for parties in Detroit for three decades, black urban communities in Harlem hosted “rent parties” to provide spaces to celebrate their blackness in social and political chaos by offering food, drinks, and music for a small fee. While rent parties warranted a desired escape from personal hardships, they also assisted in creating necessary revenue to support the host. Lorde was a part of the generation that followed this surge of black excellence and continual survival. She inhabited the lasting effects
of a new cultural, intellectual, social, and artistic identity spawned from the Harlem Renaissance and the years directly following it.

Audre Lorde would go on to become one of the most influential and critiqued Black feminists of her time. Self-identified as mother, poet, warrior, lesbian, and Black feminist, Lorde produced several poems, books, essays, and poems in her lifetime. Her artistic pieces were steadily published during the 1960s and appeared in the notable Langston Hughes' 1962 New Negro Poets: USA, numerous foreign anthologies and black literary magazines, right alongside her published work. A significant portion of her work critiqued the feminist movement in the 1660s for ignoring the intersectionality of Black women and focusing on the voice and experiences of white middle-class white women. She sought to challenge white women to rethink their oppressive rhetoric while also challenging Black women to reimagine their understandings of race and sexuality. Her essays “Age, Race, Sex, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” and “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” brings attention to the importance of recognizing differences as means to integrate instead of discriminate. Many white feminists defensively accused Lorde of trying to privilege her race and suffering over that of other women and assumed she was trying to rebrand the feminist movement. Alexis De Veaux describes in her biography of Lorde that

"in the institutional milieu of black feminist and black lesbian feminist scholars [...] and within the context of conferences sponsored by white feminist academics, Lorde stood out as an angry, accusatory, isolated black feminist lesbian voice. 247

Walker 106
White feminists in academia resorted to stereotyping Lorde as “an angry, accusatory, isolated black feminist” revealing how they could not handle that Lorde was calling them out on their oppressive ways. Lorde’s experience with the feminist movement differed greatly from the experiences that Ellis had. The generational gap between Ellis, Lorde, and the women immersed in the feminist movement created this vast difference of relationship. On the one hand Ruth Ellis, a black lesbian, experienced support, love, respect, and acceptance. As such, Ruth enjoyed the atmosphere and saw no need to critique it because it was new to her and more colorful than the decades preceding her “joining the lesbians.” On the other, Audre Lorde, a black lesbian as well, grew up during a time of enlightenment and black excellence that nourished her appetite to critically think about systems and ways of imagining oneself at the intersexuality of race, gender, and sexuality. Both women lived and thrived, although differently, through a defining feminist movement. Lorde and Ellis devised ways to navigate the racial and civil disorder present during the duration of the Second Wave Feminist Movement that best fit their generational experiences.

Lorde’s feminist critique was a major part of her work, but she wrote a large collection of poetry and prose. Lorde’s prominence and lasting importance to building confidence in and tapping into sources of power within Black women resides in all of her written pieces, including her poetry, novels, and prose. Some of her most illustrious work include Coal (1976), her seventh book of poetry titled The Black Unicorn (1978), The Cancer Journals (1980), Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), an illuminating essay A Burst of Light (1988), and Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (1984). Lorde
pulls a piece of her into each of her poetry collections, essays, and speeches sharing her vulnerabilities, beauty, frustration, and anger. Her last three publications—*The Cancer Journals, Zami,* and *A Burst of Light*—poignantly interacts with her vulnerabilities and affirmations including her battle with cancer, coping with her mastectomy, and later accepting her diagnosis of liver cancer six years after her mastectomy. *Zami,* however, was a special project that distracted her from the complications of her cancer and the emotional side effects that accompanied her healing process. *Zami* recollects Lorde’s unstable life growing up in New York and other diverse places as she journeyed the world and ultimately herself. Lorde begins with describing her colorful childhood in New York with Caribbean immigrant parents from Grenada, Frederick Byron Lorde and Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde. Severely nearsighted to the point of being legally blind by age three, from an early age Lorde viewed the world vastly different than most. This early period developed Lorde’s poetic way of seeing and describing the world around her. As Lorde continues on her journey, her poetic prose gives multiple readings of every event and person who impacted her life. Ending in the 1960s, *Zami* is a rich source that documents and explores female development, definitions of sexuality, and racial interactions. As such, it is a mesmerizing novel that transcends standard autobiographies.

Lorde’s biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* unleashes poetic and unapologetic prose dedicated to revealing the most vulnerable and empowering sentences swimming inside of her crafted out of confusion. Lorde’s *Zami,* in a plethora of ways, did what most authors are too afraid to do—display surreal honesty in unconventional ways. Lorde’s deliberate choice of calling her story a biomythography-
- a collection of biography, autobiography, and mythology--is the first signifier that *Zami* would not be like any other prose. Black women's autobiographies were birthed from slave narratives. For that reason, black women autobiographies are grounded in oppression, strength, and successful triumph through the harsh navigation of race, gender, and sexuality. English philologist and academician María Pilar Sánchez Calle charts the main differences and similarities between traditional black women's autobiographies and the innovation biomythography coined by Audre Lorde. I elaborate on her categorical elements, giving textual evidence that supports Calle’s points while also revealing the resistance embedded in the personal actions and not just the textual deviance from tradition. Calle touches upon five major themes present in both traditional narratives and *Zami*: the political, the concept of life as a journey and the reclaiming of home, identity, chronology of life events, and lastly intended audience. While all areas are of significance, I will only address the first three, some of which will be more in depth than others, but each is a representation of Lorde resisting all that she had come to know and ways that she claimed autonomy. The critical questions that this chapter examines are: What is there to gain from Lorde’s lived experiences? What are the implications present in the dire importance of personal female relationships? In what ways do the political become the personal and how does that affect the psyche of Lorde? Through addressing these questions, this chapter will outline how and why *Zami* is essential in critiquing oppression and cultivating intellectual and emotional growth for Black women.
Personal as the Political

Slave narratives were a direct result of the link of the personal and political. The very purpose of slave narratives was to expose the tyrannies of racial and gender discrimination during slavery and periods that follow. The telling of one’s story, as discussed in chapter one, serves a political purpose that attempts to dismantle the false pleasant notion of American society and disrupt comfortability with ignored truths. The political is never separate from the personal for Black women. As the political constantly impedes on the personal, Black women continuously have to garner strength to combat mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. This strength for survival then blocks Black women from perceiving themselves as victims of deep emotional trauma and instead of addressing it, they continue to suffer quietly without much complaint.

Lorde later becomes very aware of her emotional and mental state, but during the early parts of her journey she, like many Black women, bore the weight of oppression through clenched teeth. Lorde’s political truth lies in her experiences as a Black woman penetrating white lesbian circles and spaces, navigating Black spaces as a lesbian, and desperately trying to find love in a society wrought with disorder. Lorde’s defiant act of socializing and familiarizing herself with white people in the 1940s and 1950s was dangerous, more importantly, though, it unveils her early political stance that combats the racial tension that American society fostered and wanted to thrive:

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I
had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me... I was acutely conscious. . . that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs, and would be, gay, or straight. The question of acceptance had a different weight for me. 180-181

Lorde directly addressed the clashing realities of being Black which acted as “armor, mantle, and wall,” meaning that her Blackness was a shield that protected her by providing strength embedded within her and an important responsibility passed down to her that she had to assume but that Blackness also created a barrier that blocked intimate relations with white women and her white friends. Bringing up race in amicable situations was “bad taste” or finding fault in a situation when the majority saw none. Although Lorde experienced discomfort in white spaces because of her Blackness, she had to cope with it on her own as to not “breach some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me.” Politically, her friends were trying to avoid an impassioned topic so they would not have to acknowledge their privilege and experience white guilt; socially, their lack of interest communicated to Lorde that her issues with her Black identity were hers alone which then leads to the conclusion that their friendship was predicated on one sided satisfaction. “The question of acceptance had a different weight” for Lorde because as a lesbian, woman, Black woman, and Black individual, no matter what space she entered, she had to make one identity more salient than, unlike her white counterparts, which created a division
within herself. Lorde had to bear the weight of verbally ignoring major parts of her identity so she wouldn’t have “bad taste.”

Despite interacting with mostly white lesbians, Lorde realized that regardless if she crossed racial lines, her blackness would continue to remain a boundary that could not be intersected into that space. She felt comfortable around her white friends and built a community among them yet she could not comfortably expose her conflicting identities because she was forced to identify as lesbian first as a means to connect with the white lesbian in her circles while to them, Black was just something she happened to be and a difference that they should avoid. As Calle adequately states, Lorde “is conscious that women's inability to cope with their differences and the response of silence produce a simplification of women's oppressions, which is a mistake because the variety of differences require diverse responses” (165). Despite knowing that silence was not the correct way to combat racism or oppression, Lorde still chose to ignore the blatant difference that remained a barrier, not because it was easy but more so because it was how she learned to cope with it from her mother and patriarchy. Whether she allowed for her Blackness to wash over her white spaces or combated directly, the emotional toll still would have been drastic because both modes are still combating oppressive systems. Since Black women are culturally and self-perceived as impenetrably strong, weakness is imagined by these constituents as intolerable. In 1996, MHA commissioned a national survey on clinical depression revealed that “63 percent of African Americans believe that depression is a personal weakness, this is significantly higher than the overall survey average of 54 percent” (Mental Health America). Black public sentiment regarding mental health did not change drastically.
over the course of a couple of decades, if anything, time could have lessened the percentages. The results are staggering and all too telling of the Black psyche that is riddled with oppression and personal conflict on how to combat the daily traumatic occurrences of subjugation. Lorde, as an adolescent and young adult maneuvering white lesbian spaces, resorted to silence to keep her pockets of friendship even if it caused her mental distress. The silencing that she felt was not confined within her lesbian circles. Lorde’s life was a constant political playground that taught her silence was a single mechanism meant to destroy.

The silence Lorde experienced and witnessed in her short lived ecstasy with Gennie/Genevieve tragically shows how destructive it could be. Due to the lack of seriousness regarding depression in Black communities, Black women and girls are too frequently ignored when they display mental instability, such as proclaiming threats of suicide, which are really desperate screams for help. Through her lived traumas, Lorde depicted the political by unveiling the lived truths of sexual abuse, molestation, and depression. She only briefly describes the two instances of molestation that she herself experienced by age ten and again when she escaped the harrowing silence of her mother’s apartment, gliding over their occurrence as if to avoid the pain that lingered but had not yet been fully realized. David Morris, academician, is well known for his commentary regarding trauma, believing that

Suffering encompasses an irreducible nonverbal dimension that we cannot know— not at least in any normal mode of knowing— because
it happens in a realm beyond language. The quality of such suffering remains as blank to thought as the void opened up by a scream. 27

Suffering, then, is something that can only be felt and not properly conveyed in words. The “void” that lingers when suffering occurs cannot be filled or expressed in “any normal sense,” hence why people who suffer from depression tend to attempt suicide; that is there way of communicating the “irreducible nonverbal dimension.” The “void opened up by a scream” is the only thing that can quantify the suffering caused by trauma. Screams are obvious sounds of distress but are still muted, ignored, and dismissed instead of addressed and comforted. Sadly, black adolescents are more likely to attempt suicide than their white peers—8.2 percent v. 6.3 percent, respectively—although they are less likely to end fatally (MHA). Beginning as young as preadolescence, Black children are taught that the only way to survive in the world wrought with oppression and created to work against them is to remain strong. Strength is subjective and can only endure so much. While Lorde did break a layer of silence by sharing her personal trauma, it is still conceivable to assert that the ways of dealing with her own trauma lives somewhere trapped between a blank thought and screams, not yet formulated into language that can be scripted onto paper. It is easier to acknowledge one’s own suffering when there are external factors. Lorde shatters her voiceless when she extensively mourns the loss of “the first person in my life that I was very conscious of loving. . . .my first true friend” (87). Gennie was special to Lorde, however Gennie’s tragic story is very telling of the unsettling political climate that permeates personal and communal attitudes regarding sexual assault and depression.
It is well known that sexual abuse is a taboo subject in Black communities although it has drastically affected the lives of many black women dating as far back as the dreaded unwarranted journey to American soil. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, there is a 1 to 15 ratio for African-American/Black woman that reports her rape to African American/Black women who do not report theirs (WSCP, 2015). Black women’s relationship with sexual abuse is long and has yet to be properly mourned, therefore it continues to be silenced. Under the guise of keeping her private life separate from her family, Lorde unveiled her consciousness of this dynamic; she did not verbalize any parts of her relationship to her mother, especially not Gennie’s abuse nor her suicide. The night Gennie ran away from the tyranny of her father and visited Lorde, her mother sensed that something was awry in the living situation that Gennie endured but instead of expressing genuine concern, she warned Lorde:

“Listen, my darling child, let me tell you something for your own good. Don’t get mix-up with this girl and her parents’ business, you hear? What kind of jackabet woman. . . and to let her go off with that good-for-nothing call himself father. . . . Whatever she doing she buying trouble to feed it. . . I wouldn’t be a bit surprise if she bring stomach” (95).

Despite sensing that a man, a father at that, was sexually exploiting a young female, Lorde’s mother not only attacks Gennie’s mothering and protective skills but continues
to blame the victim for her situation by assuming that “[w]hatever she doing she buying trouble to feed it.” All too common black women are shamed for the sexual abuse they endure, believing that somehow they elicited it, and as a result, that form of oppression is internalized by black women and targeted at women in their own community. The absence of reconciliation with the extensive history of abuse and rape does not allow for black women to heal, therefore with the lack of language to articulate historical suffering, Black women victimize each other further perpetuating rape culture.

Internalized victimization is so deep that female victims believe that even appealing to mothers is futile. Systems that produce rape culture—victimization of survivors of sexual abuse—successfully induced fear and self-blame in survivors to the point where revealing the one of the most intrusive acts becomes impossible to speak. Society should encourage women to bring attention to acts of personal violations. Doing so would give women empowerment and strength over the patriarchal system that cultivated the weakened mentality of women. Keeping women subordinate and unaware of their power is one of the most successful ways that maintains male dominance. The moment Lorde visited Gennie’s mom Louisa, reveals this phenomenon, when the lingering sadness and stark absence of Gennie snapped her back to the night when Gennie appeared disheveled at her doorstep and hysterically proclaimed that “I can’t go back, there’s no room for me anymore. . . I can’t talk to my mother about Phillip. . .” (102). Homeless and alone, Gennie had no one to shelter her body or her battered spirit. She chose her father over her mother and her consequences were twofold—abused by one parent and abandoned by the other. Death was her only solace. Lorde suffers from the loss of Gennie through poems and verbalized pain. The
void left by Gennie would never be filled again, only closely resembled later in Lorde’s life when she falls in love with Muriel. Through Cassie Premo Steele’s provocative approach to positions of abuse and the process of mourning, anthropologist Anh Hua shows how Lorde’s work suggests that

our individual, personal link to a political, collective history necessitates a decision: we must choose to witness or not . . . we must choose to take responsibility or not. To refuse these choices is . . . to be a “false witness,” to contribute to . . . the perpetuation of violent destruction. . . .

While witnessing thus creates hope for the future, it also . . . gives rise to the necessity for mourning. Mourning is inevitable because of the pain, loss, and heartache that arise when the full recognition of the “horrors we are living” comes to the surface.

The fact that Black women’s mere existence links them to a “political, collective history” forces critical decisions upon them. Whether one chooses to “witness or not . . . to take responsibility or not” heavily influences the end result. All too often Black women choose, sometimes unconsciously, to be a “false witness” thus perpetuate “violent destruction.” If we as Black women can collectively accept that abuse happen and cognitively realize that the fault is not our own, then the mourning process and positive expression of “pain, loss, and heartache” could begin. Healing from “our individual, personal link to a political, collective history” is one of the first internal steps that can occur for Black women to heal and support rather than suppress and
accuse. Lorde chose to witness those horrors acted against Gennie and mourned accordingly. However, Lorde, and of course Louisa, were the only two who suffered the loss of a young life, but even though Lorde took responsibility and chose to see the situation as a result of trauma, abuse, exploitation, and depression, her guilt coupled with emptiness and loneliness from Gennie’s death and familial isolation forced Lorde to identify with her family’s sentiments regarding Gennie’s life— a microcosm of societal beliefs:

We did not weep for the thing that was once a child/ did not weep for the thing that had been child/ did not weep for the thing that had been/ nor for the deep dark silences/ that ate of the so-young flesh./ But we wept at the sight of two men standing alone/ flat on the sky, alone./ shoveling earth as a blanket/ to keep the young blood down./ For we saw ourselves in the dark warm mother-blanket/ saw ourselves deep in the earth’s breast-swelling—/ no longer young—/ and knew ourselves for the first time/ dead and alone./ We did not weep for the thing— weep for the thing—/ we did not weep for the thing that was/ once a child. 97

Lorde deeply desired to keep her private life separate from her family, because their values impeded her conscious just as the political disrupts the personal. Despite Lorde’s personal mourning, through the collective “we” of whom she speaks in the poem shows recognition of her knowledge that people choose who and what to mourn over, often times not properly protecting or mourning young people, specifically girls. The “deep
“dark silences” are all of the secret battles and abuses that children are forced to endure alone that eventually lead to “ate of the so-young flesh”, leading to Gennie’s self-destruction and suicide. The “two men standing alone/flat on the sky, alone” potentially refers to her father and uncle, the former whom was clearly abusive. Gennie did reveal to Lorde, while fingering scratched on her face, that “my father and uncle Leddie are drinking all the time. And when Phillip drinks he doesn’t know what...” (94). Lorde cast light on the dejecting reality that society mourns for the men who “shovel[s] earth as a blanket/ to keep the young blood down”— the “young blood” is Gennie and the earth’s blanket is synonymous with abuse. The very people that are mourned are responsible for the metaphorical and literal burial of “the thing that was once a child.” However, the incorrect direction of mourning stems from the lack of self-healing and witnessing that is imperative to effectively cope with instances of sexual abuse and depression. Lorde continues, seeing ourselves in those who are buried alive-- “we saw ourselves in the dark warm mother-blanket/ saw ourselves deep in the earth’s breast-swelling”— necessitates that “we” do not identify with the thing that was once a child as a means to continue to live in denial of our own trauma thus solidify our survival. Lorde asserts that even if we do not readily identify with the child, we still “knew ourselves for the first time/ dead and alone”, therefore not weeping for “the thing that was once a child” means that we as a society have yet to mourn over our own personal traumas which in turn blocks us from properly going through the stages of grief over similar traumas present in other young girls’ lives. Lorde’s decrypted yet very blatant poem could not have been a better example of the dire and lasting effects of the political becoming the personal.
Political situations happen every day in Black women’s lives, sometimes disguised as a friend group indirectly casting Black as other or an entire culture that adjudge and belittle Black women’s trauma. Regardless, chaos constantly swarms around Black women and cannot be avoided. The dangers of the idea that black women are always strong are twofold: first it eliminates the possibility of showing weakness thus enduring it alone, and second it creates a culture that internalizes the notion that lasting sadness, pain, or silent suffering is normal therefore rejects the gravity of depression and its potential fatal outcomes. Lorde divulged issues that were persistent in her lifetime without directly stating the problem. Her experiences in life are evidences of silenced realities that still occur in today’s society. Revealing the secrets within Black communities and speaking her truth allowed for Lorde, as an activist, a poet, and a prominent public persona to reconcile with her past and her pain. Such a process is required for Black women and Black lesbians alike to heal from their own truths that have been shoved down their throats, choking them into silence and forcing them to suffer alone.

**Journey to a Place Called Home**

The political aspect of Black women’s lives that drastically disrupts the personal makes it difficult for Black lesbian women to possess a space that embodies the warm connotations of home. Many Black lesbians, thus occupy spaces that are not conducive to their personal growth and do not facilitate positive modes of self-care. Home is a place that one is capable of retreating to when chaos begins to corrupt the individual. Home is a feeling of love, acceptance, and renewal. When spaces that could be
considered home inhabit people who do not exude all that home is, loneliness and isolation occurs. Consequently, they are left to embark on a seemingly endless journey to create one. Historically, Black women have relied on a journey through life in a quest to define home in relation to their individual experiences and traumas.

First portrayed in Black women slave narratives, home was often associated with family, community or freedom, sometimes all of them. Centuries later, Lorde searched for a family to wrap her in love, for communities to accept her identities, and for freedom from the straightjacket that society confined her to. Throughout Zami, Lorde’s poetic prose beautifully conveys the internal dialogue that occurs when home is unstable and constantly shifting. While the journey to home is painful and arduous, the reward of finally finding home is immeasurable. Despite the immense suffering that takes place within Black women embarking on this necessary journey, they still provide others with a space that allows for them to unapologetically express all their identities even though said space does not exist for her.

The common saying goes “Home is where the heart is.” Most people assume that the heart is with family or for many immigrant families, home is wherever their native land is located, hence the term “homeland.” Lorde, a child of immigrant Caribbean parents, first recognized home as a faraway foreign place of Carriacou island:
. . . as I was growing up, home was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper, nor to throttle and bind up between the pages of a schoolbook. It was our own, my truly private paradise of bulgoe and breadfruit hanging from trees, of nutmeg and limes and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums. 14

Although Lorde never visited Carriacou as a young child, she “knew [of it] well out of my mother’s mouth” (13). It was an unmapped secret that was passed on from her mother to her. Lorde did not physically see “bulgoe and breadfruit hanging from trees, of nutmeg and limes and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums”
but the detailed imagery and passion with which her mother spoke allowed her to vividly imagine it. *Home* was a place linked to the strength of her mother, but as she grew older, her linkage of Carriacou with home began to fade right along with her relationship with her mother.

Connections between Lorde’s home and the theme of alienation exposes the combative climate that home is not always loving and sweet, but destructive and stifling. Lorde leaves her mother’s house when she begins to search for something more within herself, the world, and the land in which she inhabits. As early as sophomore year in high school Lorde regarded her house as a battlefield:

. . . I was in an open battle on every other front in my life except school. Relationships with my family had come to resemble nothing so much as a West Indian version of the Second World War. Every conversation with my parents, particularly with my mother, was like a playback of Battle of the Bulge in Black panorama with stereophonic sound. Blitzkrieg became my favorite symbol for home. I fantasized all my dealings with them against a backdrop of Joan of Arc at Rheims or the Revolutionary War. 82-83

Comparing a home to a war is tragic, but when Lorde links her home to the devastation of World War II it makes it even more so because of the personal and specific connection with American history and her family. The Battle of the Bulge was one of the costliest battles in the war, causing more than 100,000 American casualties. It was
in December of 1944 that Adolf Hitler ordered three German armies comprised of more
than a quarter-million troops to surprise Allied armies in northwest Europe with a
blitzkrieg—an intense military campaign intended to end in a swift victory—as an
attempt to split them and conquer that domain. The weak, inexperienced, and
outnumbered American army that guarded the outskirts of Ardennes was unprepared
for such an attack and quickly succumbed to the German’s mass attack. Luckily, the
efforts of the fallen soldiers were not in vain as the combat allotted Brigadier General
Bruce C. Clarke’s much needed time to arm his men in a successful defense formation
at St.-Vith (“Battle of the Bulge”). Lorde revisits this historic event and casts her
mother as the Allied forces and herself, the German army. While Lorde may believe
that she has a chance at winning a conversation with her mother, she is soon mistaken.
The conversation quickly turns into a war. Her mother’s voice and presence consumes
the room and engulfs Lorde before culminating in the mother’s victory. Never having
time to herself and constantly in a fight with her mother, Lorde’s home becomes a place
that brings her exhaustion and a feeling of defeat. Even desiring any level of privacy is
treated as “an insult... an outright act of insolence” (83) and as a result, privacy virtually
does not exist. Black girls, especially those like Lorde who are deemed as outcasts, are
often combative with their mothers particularly because in Black communities it is
common for the mother’s word to be final and her way to be the only way. Girls like
the young Lorde have difficulty being subservient to authority because they want to
question everything as a means of intellectual or emotional stimulation. Too often,
home can begin to feel like a space that limits personal growth and restricts
individuality. Black mothers, whether they are immigrants or native to America, have
a reputation of being totalitarian in the sense that they are always right and the child must always submit out of respect. But, why are small acts treated as personal attacks? What perpetuates this type of culture in Black families and how can it be reversed?

Many Black women’s autocratic parenting style stems from the oppressive system that they endure every day. Without necessarily being conscious of it, Black mothers may teach their children to be submissive to authority, to accept things the way that they are, and to not deviate from what is considered normal. Consequently, the patriarchal and racial oppression that they receive is internalized and enacted onto their children. It may be a mechanism for some, to prepare their children to survive in the real world by way of eliciting little conflict, but in reality it is slowly destroying their relationship and taking away autonomy from their child. Lorde could not bear the weight of alienation and experience the terror of feeling “that I had died and wakened up in a hell called home” (83). At the ripe age of seventeen, after her high school graduation, Lorde escapes her mother’s authority to begin her journey of self-fulfillment and survival.

Audre Lorde is the journey that she navigates but is also subjectively a part of it. A journey is “traditionally associated with changes in the traveler’s consciousness that lead to new definitions of the self” (Calle, 167). While her “journey to this house of myself” (31) is empowering, it did not come without many moments of loneliness, heartbreak, and disappointment. Lorde inhabits many different spaces and homes throughout her biomythology. She travels between states and countries as she tried to locate home, whether outside of herself or within. Hau, through Jennifer Gillan’s understandings of Zami, asserts that for Lorde, home is a “temporary stopover” because
she envisions this constant movement as the source of her strength, she is not devastated by the number of times she must create new homes for herself… Knowing that “home” is always a temporary location, she lives in-between homes, on the border of many different communities.

Each space that Lorde inhabits empowers her in a different way. Some of her homes exploited her vulnerabilities while others, helped her to embrace the chaos called her life. While each place gives her something different, because none of them can provide everything that she needs, they embody temporality. However, each site plays an integral role in her life journey to a place called and defined as home.

Similar to Black women’s slave narratives, Zami discloses the most vulnerable and impassioned parts of an individual’s journey. It is a testimony to the wise, passionate, and empowered woman that the author later becomes. The first moment in which Lorde reveals her vulnerabilities as she transitioned from adolescence to adulthood occurs when young Lorde moves out of her friend’s house into a quaint place of her own on Brighton Beach in New York. After a summer of “feeling free and in love” (104) due to her invigorating sense of independence, her new landlord’s brother ruptures her pocket of happiness when he penetrates the house of herself. Lorde never specifically stated that her bout with depression was linked to this intrusion and she actually dismissed the gravity of the scene by expressing that “it was all pretty stupid” (105). Regardless of whether it was one of the root causes of her quick spiral into a
depressive state, the sexual assault definitely contributed to an added helplessness onto her feelings of loneliness. The following months after September were “an agony of loneliness, long subway rides, and not enough sleep” (105). Her new home was more alienating than ever. Lorde had to deal with the new stresses of financial instability, breaking up with a partner, losing the companionship of her mother, and sexual assault while juggling going to school fifteen hours a week and working forty-four hours. The burden of it all ate at Lorde’s spirit from the inside. Towards the end of November, her depression became so unbearable that she was bedridden for three days. She lost her job and that induced even more misery and isolation. Lorde secured another job by the end of December through school working afternoons for a doctor, but that too became problematic when Lorde discovered that she was pregnant. The father of her unexpected fetus was not specified, but Lorde alludes that it was the landlord’s brother since it was not her ex-boyfriend Peter, who abandoned her at a bus station two weeks prior after promising a camping trip together. Pregnant, alone, isolated, and barely making ends meet, Lorde’s journey began at a low point, which would make her climb to self-love, strength, and acceptance all the more powerful. Sadly, similar to Gennie, Lorde could not go back home because she chose to move out and experience life as an adult. Her pregnancy, then, would be considered an indication of her character. Making a decision that had dire consequences was hard for Lorde to accept but even harder to admit to her mother whom she was constantly at war. Lorde was not able to confide in her mother or other family members so she curled into herself and buried her problems within. On her eighteenth birthday, as she laid doubled over in intense agony and alone, the coiled catheter tearing at her uterus via her cervix “rupture[d] the
delicate lining and wash[ed] away my worries in blood” (110). The daring honesty that Lorde provides in her moments of vulnerability is refreshing. She erases all standards of communication and opens herself up to be examined and read. Her sharing of the most personal moments of her life gives Lorde a power to define herself through her experiences void of any judgment. No girl or woman should have to endure an abortion, especially an illegal makeshift abortion without support. Lorde, however, could not expose her pregnancy to her mother. The pregnancy was a result of sexual assault and Lorde learned of her mother’s unreasonable opinions regarding sexual exploitation through her best friend Gennie. Not celebrating a birthday with family or friends is a level of solitude that one should not experience. The added indescribable agony that she endured in conjunction with her intense loneliness is unimaginable. Although Lorde suffers from multiple layers of pain, the vivid details in which she recounted her experiences forces readers to experience it with her without harboring feelings of pity. In contrast, Lorde’s powerful description of her physical and emotional wounds provokes readers to mourn for the many females who are still silenced out of shame and who have yet to gain the voice to tell their tragic story.

Witnessing the pain that Lorde experienced in her home on Brighton Beach not only shows other girls that they are not alone, but it also helps them to embrace their suffering as a stepping stone along their journey to mental and emotional stability. It is often easiest to judge a situation that is at a remove, but the same is true for learning how to cope with depression. Zami allows others to retrace Lorde’s steps and to follow the uneven trail that is her journey. No longer able to occupy the space that was once considered home, two weeks after the heartbreaking abortion and reaching her lowest
point, Lorde moves to an apartment on Spring Street that she describes as "not exactly an enchanted place, but it was my first real apartment and it was all my own"(115). The apartment on Spring Street represents a distinct period of loneliness in Lorde’s life even when she is surrounded by friends. Often, black women find themselves ignoring the pain within because pain had become a part of living and Lorde’s early experiences were no different: “I was physically fine and healthy, it didn't occur to me that I wasn't totally free from any aftermath from that grueling affair” (116). Society frequently fosters the belief that Black women cannot show weakness and that any intense sadness that they feel is normal, not medically related, and should be dealt with alone. However, according to Elliot Institute Study, fifty percent of women who have abortion experience Post Traumatic Stress symptoms while twenty percent are medically diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Burke, 1994). In addition, Lorde’s delayed and unexpected suffering from a tragic situation supports trauma theorist Cathy Caruth’s arguments that “[t]he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness….Trauma is not a simple or single experience of events but that events, insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay” (in Hua, 120). Lorde’s suffering became so integral in her everyday life that it often became too bearable to handle and as a necessity to survival she mentally checked out and allowed her body to go through the daily motions of her routine, but even then sometimes habit failed her:

I came home from school and my part-time job to sometimes sit on the edge of my boxspring bed in the center room, still with my coat on, and
would suddenly realize it was the next morning, and I had not taken my coat off yet, much less put away the container of milk I had bought for the cat I had found to join me in my misery. 116

Lorde could not even recognize her own state of depression, despite the countless reasons that suggested her suffering was not normal. Her depression completely changed her, yet no one realized because she did not have anyone to whom she could reveal her perceived weakness. Lorde dealt with what physicians have recently identified as Post Abortion Syndrome, a condition where

[t]emporary feelings of relief are frequently followed by a period psychiatrists identify as emotional ‘paralysis,’ or post-abortion “numbness.” Like shell-shocked soldiers, these aborted women are unable to express or even feel their own emotions. Their focus is primarily on having survived the ordeal and they are at least temporarily out of touch with their feelings. (Elliot Institute, 2000)

The fact that Lorde’s level of suffering is parallel to the psychological effects soldiers feel after combat contributes to the sense that she indeed was a soldier, a warrior caught up in life threatening battles. While life journeys are peppered with intrusive painful experiences and their unwarranted effects, home is typically imagined as a place full of love, relief, and warmth; not misery, coldness, and a boxspring bed. Even with the lack of cozy tenderness in her new apartment, it was still sentimental because it was “the
only thing that belonged to me” (116). Having ownership of something, even if it contributed to her emptiness, was vital to her sense of autonomy. Lorde believed that her home, although she was miserable, was part of her successfully possessing something on her own. Essentially, home became a representation of personal property instead of sanctuary. Ownership breeds pride and accomplishment which was something tangible unlike a space to retreat to.

In spite of her desolation, she dedicated that following summer to "wetnursing" her high school clique, The Branded, in her "tiny tenement apartment" (118). While some may agree with Calle’s argument that a home is imagined to be a safe space, Lorde does the opposite as she welcomes other women into her mental and physical space. Yet when Lorde expands home in this way, she further eliminates the possibility of creating a safe place for herself (166). Lorde’s definition of home at this point in her life has not yet transcended geographical representation into an idealistic symbolic space, but the arrival of The Branded challenges Lorde to rethink the implications of home. The Branded were her girls, they helped her survive the trying years throughout high school but even their bond required high levels of discretion and flawless facade of composure. Lorde admits that

the abortion had left me with an additional sadness about which I could not speak, certainly not to these girls who saw my house and my independence as a refuge, and seemed to think that I was settled and strong and dependable, which, of course, was exactly what I wanted them to think. 118
Lorde’s sense of awareness of her situation as it happened is keen, but even when Lorde is able to show her growth and vulnerabilities through *Zami* while experiencing her truths she, like many black women, had to silently suffer and slowly wither away as she outwardly projected strength, wholeness, and dependability. The Branded were the only girls with whom Lorde could potentially vent but in order to keep her image of “independence” she had to pretend to be alright. Lorde did not have a safe space to gather her hidden jewels, yet she still opened up her home and herself, in order to create a space for others to refuel, much like Ruth Ellis. Such accommodation of others occurred even as Lorde was going through an internal war in her search to grasp the concept and self-definition of home. Ellis and Lorde both exhibited selflessness at especially difficult moments in their lives. It is not surprising that Lorde began to feel exhausted and even failed summer school because of her hospitality to The Branded. She had given them what little was left of her and left none for herself. As a result, she fled New York and all of its “emotional complications” (122). She temporarily moved to Stamford, Connecticut where jobs were rumored to be plentiful, but only as a rest stop to her ultimate destination: Mexico City. Since she was a little girl Mexico City had seemed to Lorde a dreamlike “accessible land of color and fantasy and delight, full of sun, music, and song” (147). It had an added attraction because it was “attached to where I lived. . . that meant, if need be, I could always walk there” (147). The intense urge to escape to Mexico City persisted throughout the summer of 1953 and “shone like a beacon” (148) that kept her steady and stable.
That summer, the McCarthy era was still at its peak and Lorde dedicated her time, energy, and resources to rallying for the Rosenbergs. The Rosenberg case was especially important because it involved a white couple who were American citizens and who were accused of being spies for the Soviet Union. The claim against them included distributing atomic bomb and nuclear war secrets to the Soviets. Despite their vehement protest of their innocence, they were sentenced to execution. Lorde felt a deep connection to the Rosenbergs because their “struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive in hostile surroundings” (149). Lorde came to know herself better through the Rosenbergs so when they were electrocuted on June 19, 1953, Lorde was deeply affected and part of herself withered away with them:

I walked away from the memorial rally in Union Park into the warm Village night, tears streaming down my face for them, for their sons, for all our wasted efforts, for myself--wondering whether there was any place in the world that was different from here, anywhere that could be safe and free, not really even sure of what being safe and free could mean. 149

The system failed the Rosenbergs and Lorde knew it was failing her too. Lorde realized she could not be free or safe not only because neither was not possible but also because these concepts could not even exist in her mind. Lorde’s life has been completely void of spaces that allowed her to exhibit all of her identities without reservation. Her deep
yearning for such a place made going to Mexico City necessary for survival. So, less than a year since returning to New York from Stamford and two weeks before her nineteenth birthday, Lorde fled from the city that made her feel like “hounds of hell [were] at her heels” (153). Unlike many young Black girls trapped in vicious feelings of loneliness and disillusion from not having a safe space or freedom, Lorde dared to risk it all as she searched for what she desired.

Unsuspecting but full of hope, Lorde found Mexico City to be all that she needed. Mexico City was the defining place where nineteen-year-old Lorde continued her journey and began the taxing task of loving herself and the world around her. Luckily, on the second day of her arrival the foreign and rich land in which she now dwelled soothed her and she already felt “more and more at home” (154). Unlike her homes in New York, Mexico City represented everything a home needed be for her during this stage of her life—beauty, love, and poetry. Mexico City pulled the beauty out of Lorde and made her come to terms with realities that she hid from herself, one of which was “[b]eing noticed, and accepted without being known, gave me a social contour and surety as I moved through the city sightseeing, and I felt bold and adventurous and special” (154). This new source of energy that gathered around her brought a welcoming feeling that encouraged her to come to terms with the fact that “I had never felt visible before, nor even had known I lacked it” (154). In Zami, Lorde communicates that sometimes in a journey, a change of scenery is necessary to alter perceptions of several aspects of life and of self. As she started to “break my life-long habit of looking down at my feet as I walked along the street. . . [and] practiced holding my head up as I walked,” (156) the feeling of the hot Mexico sun on the side of her
face was a welcoming burn. New York conditioned her to cower as she walked, ultimately eliminating her self-esteem and promoting her submission and loss of pride. Mexico City, though, gave rise to poetic language and she finally was able to see that happiness and beauty did not have to be created out of imagination but instead lived in her surroundings:

The birds suddenly cut loose all around me in the unbelievable sweet warm air. I had never heard anything so beautiful and unexpected before. I felt shaken by the waves of song. For the first time in my life, I had an insight into what poetry could be. I could use words, to recreate that feeling, rather than to create a dream, which was what so much of my writing had been before. 160

Mexico City was only alive in her mind but its physical manifestation made it a poem. For nineteen years, Audre Lorde felt alienated from her family because she saw the world in a beautifully colored way, detached from her lesbian friends because of her blackness, and divided from the black community because she was a lesbian. She experienced molestation, the death of her first love, depression, economic problems, abortion, and abortion. Now, in a foreign city full of strangers she was finally healing and grasping what home meant to her. The beauty, colorfulness, and light captivated her more than any New York landscape could. New York was ugly, dirty, crowded, and became a reflection of how Lorde saw herself. The unsightly aspects of New York
coupled with her personal experiences created an environment that was impossible to survive. If she had not escaped, she would not have grown.

Although Lorde lived in different places after Mexico City, this specific place had the most impact on her journey to home. Mexico City offered her something in its landscape, its air, and its natural beauty that Lorde did not receive anywhere else. One of the most beautiful and identifiable aspects of Mexico City was a statue of a “young naked girl in beige stone, kneeling, closely folded in upon herself, head bent, greeting the dawn” (155). This statue was an external manifestation of the girl that Lorde no longer wanted to be. Her changed perspective of the young girl “greeting the dawn” instead of kneeling in defeat is testimony to Lorde’s mental and emotional growth:

As I walked through the fragrant morning quiet in the Alameda, the nearby sounds of traffic increasing yet dimming, I felt myself unfolding like some large flower, as if the statue of the kneeling girl had come alive, raising her head to look full-faced into the sun…. I felt the light and beauty of the park shining out of me… 155

Lorde blossoms into a “large flower” after years of “kneeling” in submission to those all around her. Until this moment Lorde was spiritually dead most days just going through the daily motions and mentally detached as an attempt to survive. This moment awakens the “light and beauty” inside of her and she finally begins her transformation into living and blossoming. Lorde’s life was mostly shaped after this point in her journey by people she met and spaces she occupied with those people. This captivating
and alluring place was the nourishing soil that stimulated the growth of self-love and appreciation, thus turning the journey to home inward. Lorde finally learned that the only true safe space that could exist was the home she could provide herself within herself.

**Imprinted Love and the Erotic**

*Everywoman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her.* (255)

Lorde’s *Zami* demonstrates how love is shared in various intimate ways that challenge notions of what it means and how it should be expressed. Lorde’s work compels us to ask how can the erotic not be pornographic? How is a woman unapologetically bold and honest? Can strength be gained from vulnerabilities? Everything about *Zami* is unique—its distinct genre, content, and poetic language—and the depth of information Lorde conveys through her relationship with various women in her life, fact or myth, not only provides a window into the intricacies of her many identities but also how those relationships shaped how she identified herself for herself. Elizabeth Alexander, the acclaimed black American poet, essayist, and playwright, explains that *Zami* “ruminates how the self is put together and how the book is the body for Lorde’s ideas about self-construction” (1994, 699). Lorde’s body is indeed made up of the different women in her life. She has come to be largely in how their bodies were imprinted onto her, shaping and putting her together. Any woman

Walker 137
that meant anything to Lorde is important and shapes her identities as Black, lesbian, and black woman. Zami reveals that Lorde’s erotic relationship with her mother and lovers, have had the greatest impact on how Lorde learned to create intersections between her identities. There were many women in Lorde’s life that helped to mold her into a legendary woman —her best friend Gennie, her sisters, The Branded, Ginger, Beau, Eudora, Muriel, and Afrekete. These relationships taught Lorde the basics of female relations and the right way to love even if Lorde had to forget and absorb her own definitions and meaning of the action. The erotic relationship between Lorde and her mother and that between Lorde and Eudora are specifically important to forming Lorde’s sense of self. Both women are older than Lorde and offers her something within herself that she would not have been able to attain otherwise. While there are many erotic relationships that are of great importance, these two in particular occurred during defining moments in Lorde’s life, thus have deeper meanings permanently etched between the pages of Lorde’s skin.

Audre “Zami” Lorde’s volatile relationship with her mother grounded her understanding of what it meant to be Black and forced her to deal with being different, something she later embraced. Lorde recognized at a very young age that her mother was “different from other women I knew” (15). Initially Lorde assumed her mother was differently simply because she was her mother. Her initial misconception grew into an understanding of how her mother was a very powerful woman. . . in a time when that word-combination woman and powerful was almost inexpressible in the white American common
tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind or hunchback, or crazy, or Black. 15

The transformation of language shifted from *powerful woman* being too strong to convey into words in “white American common tongue” to being rendered palatable for Black women (Turpin, 24). This strength and power though, made Lorde feel disconnected from her mother. Her mother welded a power that was created in an oppressive society, one that taught her to ignore problems that she could not immediately control. She also impulsively sought to protect her children from racism even if it meant exhibiting similar hostility. In high school, for instance, Lorde felt overwhelmed with the feeling that she was like “an only planet” (34) and revealed all of her mother’s and familial secrets to a guidance counselor: “I told her all my unhappiness. I told her about my mother’s strictness and meanness and unfairness at home, and how she didn’t love me because I was bad and I was fat, not neat and well-behaved like my two older sisters” (84). Young Audre had mistaken her mother’s teachings and ways of surviving as moments of expressing her lack of love and disappointments in who she was. Since her mother’s strictness, meanness, and unfairness was a response to Lorde’s curiosities, Lorde later believed that her intellectual curiosity was inherently bad. Her marked differences from her sisters and everyone else made her an outcast, someone who was not lovable because she was “fat, not neat and well-behaved.” Later in life, of course, Lorde realized that her mother’s parenting was a reflection of her coping mechanisms in an oppressive and discriminatory society. Lorde became a reflection of her mother’s “secret poetry as well
as of her hidden angers” (32). Lorde knew only what her mother taught her until she explored life on her own and her mother could only present to Lorde what she had assimilated in the harsh American society. Lorde and her mother both grew because of their experiences as Black women and “had to use these [wily and diversionary] defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little, at the same time” (58). As a result of their learned mechanisms, “[a]ll the colors change and become each other, merge and separate, flow into rainbows and nooses” (58). The internalized mechanisms helped them to survive, but it also forced them, specifically Lorde into a place of loneliness and confusion until parts of her died before she could revive them on her own terms and own definitions. The techniques they acquired for survival were the same ones that slowly choked them into assigned submissive roles, suffocating who they could become.

Lorde’s poetic prose creates a space for ordinary and common occurrences in Black households between mother and daughter to become erotic. One of the most vivid memories that Lorde took great pleasure in was helping her mother make sousse. Lorde anticipated this precious moment since it only occurred once or twice every year. Her favorite part of preparing sous was pounding the seasoning using her mother’s mortar and pestle. The up and down motion “transported [her] into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied” (74). Lorde makes the sexual undertones of the action very obvious, but she also evinces the eroticism that she felt earlier in her life. The summer of her fifteenth year she experienced her first period and that moment marked the last instance in which she could transport herself into a disparate and sensual world. Lorde’s mother was
previously anxious that she had yet to get her period but had developed breasts. So on the hot summer day that Lorde menstruated, her mother was particularly relieved and reassured that nothing was wrong with her. She never outwardly expressed her pleasure toward Lorde but rather gave that “amused/annoyed brow furrowed half-smile...that something very good and satisfactory and pleasing to her had just happened” (77). That day, as a reward for Lorde finally doing something right, Lorde’s mother allowed her to choose what was for supper. Lorde, of course, chose sous. Lorde lets her readers into her rhythmic world as she explained in erotic detail how

[a]s I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits...78

Pounding the spice becomes metaphoric for masturbation. Her “molten core” is a reference to her uterus, and she feels the “insistent downward motion” produced by her “round brown arm” therefore she becomes the pleaser and the pleased. It is unorthodox for Lorde’s sexual revelation to happen while cooking but the timing is fitting since it is her first menstrual. She links her womanhood to sexual awakening and poetically explains that
[t]he tidal basin suspended between my hips shuddered at each repetition of the strokes which now felt like assaults. Without my volition my downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler, until its velvety surface seemed almost to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar. 78-79

The pain in Lorde’s uterus from menstrual cramps is paralleled with her thrusts to her own body. Her self-awareness of her body is special in this moment and she illustrates her new knowledge of her body when the “downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler.” The eroticism that is present in this scene intensifies as she would later look back on this moment remembering her “womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly delicious” (77) and fantasize about

my mother, her hands wiped dry from washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places. 78

The aroma of her menstrual mixed with her mother’s satisfaction of finally becoming a woman created the perfect atmosphere for Lorde to utilize her erotic source to cultivate a memory that would provide her with “strength and information” (79). Sexual connotations are removed from the pornographic and transcends into the erotic in both the physical act of cooking and the fantasy. Lorde rewrites relationships
between mother and daughter and brilliantly displays her definition and uses of the erotic. Lorde, at the ripe age at fifteen, felt the power of the erotic, unsure of all the powers that it would later give her but still aware of its existence.

Four years later while taking refuge in Mexico City, Lorde saw the world in the same colorful and abstract way that she had when she was a four-year-old not yet wearing spectacles that she needed. Mexico City’s beautiful, bright, and colorful landscape and culture significantly enhanced Lorde’s depressed state but a forty-eight-year-old magnificent and grey-haired woman, Eudora, became the highlight of her trip. Eudora’s “strong and pleasant” voice that cracked and “sounded like a cold, or too many cigarettes” (161) enticed Lorde. Eudora knew that Lorde liked the ladies and did not hide her sexuality either. Unlike Lorde, Eudora hated the word “gay” and preferred the term “lesbian” since “most of the lesbians she had known were anything but gay” (162). The fact that they were “anything but gay” has two imbedded meanings. The first could be the literal definition of gay, and that her lesbian friends were not happy because of their subordinate and discriminant sexual orientation in a heterosexual world. Secondly, Eudora’s impatience here could allude to the fact that these individuals were not outwardly gay because they were not in public romantic relationships with other woman. Additionally, to Eudora’s welcoming sexuality, the intellectual stimulation that they shared grew into sexual attraction. Lorde reminisces about the various parts of their romantic relationship, the moments that they discussed the many topics of Eudora’s research as a reporter, the time that they played dirty-word scrabble, and the pleasant occasions on which they read poetry together. Lorde’s recollection becomes a fantasy about “the feel [of] the curves of her cheekbone under
my lips as I gave her a quick goodbye kiss. I thought about making love to her” (164). Distracted by her sultry thoughts, Lorde burns her pot of curry. Lorde was not well versed in female relationships but she was not a novice either. The previous year, her first female sexual relationship with Ginger was full of passion and eroticism but also was a rejection of the powerful feelings between them. Eudora, though, embraced her lesbianism, and her contradictory traits of “delicate and sturdy, fragile and tough, like the snapdragon she resembled” which besotted Lorde.

Eudora embodied what Lorde needed to become—a balance of contradictions. On the other hand, Eudora’s reservation about sharing parts of herself enticed Lorde to break down her barrier, to mend the broken pieces of her because damage people love to fix others especially when they are unsure how to fit their own pieces together. Their intimate relationship is more than sex; it is poetry in motion. Lorde’s anticipation of putting “my mouth upon hers and inhal[ing] the spicy smell of her breath” (167) made Lorde feel “my love spread like a shower of light surrounding me and this woman before me” (167). Lorde, only nineteen at the time, feels deep sensations for a woman more than twice her age. Some could argue that Eudora was a way to act out her erotic feelings for her mother, but Eudora was different. Lorde’s feelings for her mother were erotic but stemmed from a place of love, admiration, curiosity, and innocence. Her relationship with Eudora, gave her everything that her mother took away: intellectual stimulation, intimacy, light, beauty, and so much more. Essentially, Lorde makes love to the woman she wants to become. Eudora’s strength and vulnerabilities gives Lorde the power to fully embrace the eroticism that she was forced to suppress. Lorde does not describe their intimate interaction in great detail but rather highlights the moment.
she penetrates Eudora’s “force-field” (164), an entity that had previously blocked her from seeing the most vulnerable part of her body. Lorde writes

In the circle of the lamplight I looked from her round firm breast with its rosy nipple erect to her scarred chest. The pale keloids of radiation burn lay in the hollow under her shoulder and arm down across her ribs. I raise my eyes and found hers again, speaking a tenderness my mouth had no words for yet…. I bent and kissed her softly upon the scar where our hands had rested. I felt her heart strong and fast against my lips. 167

This particular moment for Lorde is less about sex and more about the erotic and raw passion. Lorde, kisses and caresses the piece of Eudora that is literally missing, and she fills the void with love. Just as the tenderness that Lorde’s “mouth had no words yet for,” the lack of sensual description in the sexual act itself clearly shows that many years later she still had yet to find words for the love and tenderness that she and Eudora shared.

Lorde’s readers must contemplate her deliberate words and impassioned actions. The way in which she explained her relationship with her mother forces one to think about the erotic. Contrarily, her love for Eudora fosters the welcoming acceptance of everything inside of herself, including her creative passion derived from the erotic. Aside, but not detached from the romance, Eudora offered Lorde the language that she had desired and the connections she needed tap into the deepest parts of herself that allowed Mexico City to become her last external definition of home. Eudora traveled

Walker 145
with Lorde, helped her plan trips, and informed her about topics ranging from “nomadic Lacondonian Indians” to “ancient contacts between Mexico and Africa and Asia” (170). It was through Eudora that Lorde was able to see the beauty of Mexico City, and as she says,

it was Eudora who opened those doors for me leading to the heart of this country and its people. It was Eudora who showed me the way to the Mexico I had come looking for, that nourishing land of light and color where I was somehow home. 179

Eudora is Mexico City. She is the light, the beauty, and its people and simultaneously the conductor of the enriching sounds of Mexico City that nourishes Lorde’s deadened spirit making it more alive than ever. Even when Eudora drunkenly dismisses Lorde before she is to leave for Cuernavaca for three weeks, it was Eudora in whom Lorde found herself:

I was hurt, but not lost. And in that moment, as in the first night when I held her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with another woman in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths. 175

Eudora opened herself to Lorde in a selfless way that allowed Lorde to see pieces of herself in Eudora. She was able to retrieve pieces of herself that she had lost and in
return the relationship between these two women enabled powerful and empowering healing.

All too often women in the Black community, as Lorde puts in her memorable interview with Adrienne Rich in *Sister Outsider*, fall victim to a clever system that patriarchy set up to make women reject their erotic creativity:

> The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is to build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don’t even have to stamp it out. 103

Lorde speaks here of the internalization of devaluing the self, and how for Black women specifically, such acts translate into the devaluing of her sisters. She proposes that Black women do not see value in their existence or power in their voices, not because of “police tactics and oppressive techniques,” but due to damaged self-esteem that create seemingly beautiful rainbows that will ebb and flow into nooses. Lorde’s mother exhibited, even as an immigrant she learned to passively accept racism. She learned to cope with her oppression in ways that disconnected her from the power that she had, the power that Lorde saw as a child. It is vital for Black women to connect with one another on an erotic level to break down patriarchal barriers that divide and will eventually conquer. Lorde conveys that although she identifies as a lesbian, loving and sharing with other women is not always in the name of lesbianism but thriving. Her
relationship with her mother taught her how to survive but her connection with a more liberated woman indoctrinated the importance of balance and staying true to one’s self. Lorde uses *Zami* to insist that despite the chaos of life and the emotional trauma of political impeding on the personal, Black women must connect with each other as a means to gain autonomy, to build safe spaces, and to feed the creativity that is essential to life.
EPILOGUE

I think you change whenever you get ready. I don’t care how old you are; you can always change.

You live ‘til you die. Just keep living.

Ruth Ellis
Living with Pride, 1999

During the grueling and stressful process of writing this paper I have come to view myself in a different way. At first I was skeptical that this essay would bring something new to academia but I knew its purpose was unique. My intention was to generate a piece that served to answer unknown questions and ponder on seemingly unrelated topics of social negotiations, provision of safe spaces, and autonomy. This essay was created to form a complex web of the beauties of black women as they navigated the daunting realities of sexuality and their personal ways of resistance. I have come to know myself through these women. I see the will and fight of Aunt Rhody as she decided her own economic contributions in a society that tried to exploit her drive and found her sense of freedom and satisfaction in my near future as I navigate the world, finding my place in society. I hear the loud drums of determination of Harriet Ann Jacobs’ heart as she sought freedom by any means necessary and coaxed me to never give up. I taste the legacy of Ruth Ellis in the air with every inhale as the days pass and I become more invested in my communities and more dedicated to affecting the lives of young queer black youth afraid to blossom between the cracks of the scorching concrete. I feel the love and passion of Audre Lorde swelling in my ribs as I experience deep passion and love for women in the feminist way and in the lesbian
way. Most importantly I have come to know myself through the constant war with my parents.

Audre Lorde's biomythography enlightened me on my own understanding of familial disconnection. Beginning this project, I was so torn, confused, and lost because I was secretly wailing for my parent's love and affection, for their acceptance. I had yet to grow from the coddled false childhood memory of being free without restraint. Connecting with Lorde's uneasy relationship with her mother forced me to realize that I may not always understand the perceived harshness of my parent’s actions. I had this epiphany when young Lorde ran for student body president in her all-white elementary Catholic school under the pretense that she was guaranteed to win. When she lost to the popular yet less educated student, Lorde boiled with disappointment and sadness despite her mother's warning her that she should not care or get involved. Instead of comforting her in her time of fragility, Lorde's mother smacked her several times and offered her what is now realized words of motherly wisdom: "... stop acting like some stupid fool, worrying yourself about these people’s business that doesn’t concern you. ... Just do what is for you to do and let the rest take care of themselves" (65). Although her reaction seems harsh, it gives insight to the constant battles that parents face in the height of oppressive systems that they try desperately hard to shield their growing children from feeling. They can often become harsh out of fear, a sign of survival mechanisms they acquired to protect both themselves and their children from being swallowed whole in a society dedicated to destroying self-worth and love. While my situation is different, I feel my parents’ intention were similar. Whether they approve of my sexuality or not has become less significant as their innate desperation to protect
me becomes more evident. My father's authoritative plea for me to dress in women's clothing and to alter my presentation was from fear that my hard work and arduous journey to what he deems as successful would be thwarted by judgmental people with power. He knew that being a black woman navigating a sexist and racist society would prove difficult and that my sexuality would further complicate that. His articulation of his love and concern were muddled by anger and condemnation. My mother's disapproving and homophobic comments were a rejection not of who I am but of her own untapped and frightening erotic feelings. I reflect her inner most hidden beautiful jewels. My parents love me. They may still be trapped in the ideals that were forced upon them by society and reject anything that drifts outside their realm of comfortability, but now I know, their love for me has always remained unconditional.

It is hard for me to accept that I was so self-absorbed that I failed to recognize that their objection was out of fear. I recognize that my negative response and immediate assumption of mal intent was rooted in fear as well. Fear of the unknown. I prepared to combat the harsh realities I was sure to encounter--and have thus far encountered--by fighting with the two people who I am of. I was afraid that I was weak and not yet sure of who I was to become, I was terrified that I was not going to be good enough. Writing this essay brought me clarity, hope, and a sense of calm that I have never experienced before. Initially I hoped to bring attention to the rejection of lesbian existence in black families but somewhere in the process it became a collection of herstories, of bravery, and of power. Through expressions of sexuality and resistance to various types of subjugation, black women have created spaces, whether it was within themselves or in collective circles, that allowed them to breathe when the air
became too thick. I have come to the conclusion that somewhere deep inside my unconscious I was craving a celebration of my intersectional identities instead of condemning a community I love beyond expression. Rejection of homosexuality in Black communities is not exclusive but it is unique in its relation to patriarchy and the many things that that entail. Sometimes we know not what we need until we create it. This is exactly what this essay provides: a knowing of desires I left unexplored. I can only hope that it has awakened a dormant need and desire in anyone who is unknowingly lost. I can only hope that it does for others what it has done for me. All it takes is for a small connection to spark a new relentless thought that spirals into exploring the fears and chaos that lie within about one’s own sexuality and ways to resist all that needs to be dismantled. In the end isn't the goal to produce something new and refreshing in academia? Is excellence and creativity not the desired outcome? I am the product of my own writing. I am aware of the power of suppressing thoughts, feelings, and emotions. I am aware that the topic discussed is not entirely new, however, it presents the importance of black female sexuality and resistance in a refreshingly new methodical and personal way. The lessons from this journey are etched in my skin, forever an emotional and intoxicating reminder of the possibilities that can be breached.
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