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Resisting the Margins:
Black Lesbian Self-Definition and Epistemology

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Abstract

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In writing this thesis, my goal is to encourage the reader to take an innovative and revolutionary view of black lesbians, their relationships, their history, and the way they navigated their lived human existence. This thesis engages the following four questions: How do black lesbians define themselves? How do they experience the world around them? How do black lesbians navigate their identity in a predominantly white heterosexual context? How do black lesbians create community and home?

This thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter, “Resisting the Margins: Toward a Black Lesbian Epistemology,” focuses on the ways in which knowledge is produced and reproduced to benefit specific individuals, namely heterosexual white men. The chapter seeks to understand black lesbian mechanisms for knowing and interpreting lived experiences. The second chapter “Queering the Harlem Renaissance: Historical Understandings of Black Lesbian Identity,” looks at black lesbian history in a United States context. This chapter mainly focuses on black women during the Harlem Renaissance in order to debunk the theory that black lesbian women emerged with the modern Women, Civil, and Gay Liberation movements. Chapter three of this thesis, entitled “The Black Lesbian Paradox: Navigating sexism, racism, and homophobia in heterosexual white America,” concentrates on the ways in which black lesbian women experience interlocking systems of oppression. The final chapter, “Undoing Ethnocentrism: Investigating Transnational Understandings of Black Lesbian Identity,” investigates black lesbian identity outside of the United States. This chapter seeks to understand the experiences of black lesbian women in the social and cultural context in which they live. This chapter illustrates how black lesbian experiences are not universal, but dependent on a myriad of social, political, cultural, and economic factors.

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Introduction

The year is 1938, and two black women are in love and want to be married. In 1938, Florence, accompanied by her mother, married her female lover in a house in New York City. Reverend Monroe, who often passed as straight, conducted the official wedding ceremony. In addition, the bride, the “groom” and the bride’s mother went to City Hall in order to obtain the official marriage certificate. At the ceremony in the New York house, there were approximately thirty-five people attending and everybody dressed up, as the bride’s mother gave her away” (Nestle 934). Some women wore white tuxedos, while others wore white suits. Everyone’s hair was done beautifully and there were no men attending this service outside of the minister. The bride wore a white dress while the groom wore white pants. When at City Hall, the two women passed as “bride” and “groom.” The groom “looked so much like a fellow that you couldn’t tell her apart ... She was the splitting image and didn’t have to change her voice” (Nestle 934). The service proceeded as usual asking the “groom” if he takes this woman to be his lawfully married wife and vice versa. As both women stood there, the minister said “now kiss the bride ... and he knew they were women. He knew because he was gay himself. And that’s all he went in for-was to marry ‘men’ and ‘women’” (Nestle 934). Mabel Hampton recounts her recollection of this wedding between two of her black lesbian friends in 1938 to friend Joan Nestle. Together, these two women started the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. Upon reading this oral history, I became more curious about the lived experience of black lesbians.

In writing this thesis, my goal is to encourage the reader to take an innovative and revolutionary view of black lesbians, their relationships, their history, and the way they navigated their lived human existence. As a fourth year scholar in one of

the top Women's Studies programs in the United States, it has come to my attention that black lesbian women are invisible both within and outside the walls of the academy. In Women's Studies, I have learned that one of the most productive ways to expand an academic field is to challenge its arguments, canonical standards, and methodological assumptions. As a Haitian-American lesbian woman, I am committed to unearthing the rich narratives about black lesbian existence that linger beneath the surface of the American and global collective consciousness. I endeavor to challenge the Eurocentric, hetero-normative manner in which knowledge has been systematically presented to me throughout the majority of my academic career. In writing this thesis, I am invested in confronting the grand narratives that have been systematically spoon-fed to me as the absolute truth throughout my adolescent and adult life. More often than not, I do not see black lesbians represented in the media or in my everyday life. My intellectual curiosity and intrigue in investigating black lesbians stems from the systemic silencing around black lesbian voices and identity.

In writing this thesis, I am following the feminist model and mantra of "making the personal political." Throughout the course of the thesis, I intentionally insert my voice and opinions as it relates to black lesbian identity and epistemology. Following in the tradition of Audre Lorde and many other radical black feminists and lesbians, I believe that theory can derive from one's personal experiences in the world. I do not believe that there is only one model to conduct research where the researcher must present herself as the objective absent. The genesis and inspiration for this project came from my personal experiences and through this work I am transforming curricular silence about black lesbian identity into silence into language and action.

Although black lesbians have made countless contributions to the arts, political movements, and academic scholarship, their public visibility and historical presence remain underrepresented in the United States and around the world. Being a black lesbian in a world that values whiteness, manhood, and heterosexuality completely challenges the dominant current and the status quo. As Patricia Hill Collins states in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, because “the community of experts is permeated by widespread notions of black and female inferiority, new knowledge claims that seem to violate these fundamental assumptions are likely to be viewed as anomalies” (Collins 50). Consequently, it is important to articulate and re-articulate black lesbian experiences and a black lesbian standpoint so that “the cannon will reflect” that black lesbian women lived, fought, contributed, and thrived in this world (Chin 33).

This thesis engages the following four questions: How do black lesbians define themselves? How do they experience the world around them? How do black lesbians navigate their identity in a predominantly white heterosexual context? How do black lesbians create community and home? With these questions in mind, my intension is to gain a multi-dimensional and transhistoric understanding of black lesbians in and outside of the United States. It is my hope that this thesis will enhance our understanding of the repercussions of black lesbian invisibility in the United States and abroad. In the United States, there is a certain degree of acceptance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) culture; however, this acceptability has not moved black lesbian reality into the forefront of American culture. This acceptability has lent itself primarily to white gay male identity.

Homophobia, racism, sexism and classism deeply affect black lesbians. Even as mainstream American culture begins to accept some aspects of queer identity, it is

primarily white men who disproportionately reap the benefits. For instance, most queer bookstores and bars and neighborhoods are populated by literature about and written by white men, and white men themselves. While North American culture is becoming more LGBT friendly, black lesbians continue to remain in the shadows, a combined function of racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism. This begs the question why don't white gay men threaten the patriarchy in ways that black lesbians do.

This thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter, "Resisting the Margins: Toward a Black Lesbian Epistemology," focuses on the ways in which knowledge is produced and reproduced to benefit specific individuals, namely heterosexual white men. This chapter contests the ways in which knowledge and culture are universally understood to represent all people. The chapter seeks to understand black lesbian mechanisms for knowing and interpreting lived experiences. The second chapter "Queering the Harlem Renaissance: Historical Understandings of Black Lesbian Identity," looks at black lesbian history in a United States context. This chapter mainly focuses on black women during the Harlem Renaissance in order to debunk the theory that black lesbian women emerged with the modern Women, Civil, and Gay Liberation movements. Chapter three of this thesis, entitled "The Black Lesbian Paradox: Navigating sexism, racism, and homophobia in heterosexual, white America," concentrates on the ways in which black lesbian women experience interlocking systems of oppression. The final chapter, "Undoing Ethnocentrism: Investigating Transnational Understandings of Black Lesbian Identity," investigates black lesbian identity outside of the United States. This chapter seeks to understand the experiences of black lesbian women in the social and cultural context in which they live. This chapter illustrates how black lesbian experiences are not universal, but

dependent on a myriad of social, political, cultural, and economic factors. In conducting this research, I am indebted to the feminist scholarship and activism of Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith, Mabe Hampton, Jewell Gomez, Makeda Silvera, Anita Cornwell, Patricia Hill Collins and many other black lesbian and feminist scholars.

CHAPTER 1: Resisting the Margins: Toward a Black Lesbian Epistemology

This thesis looks at the tradition of black lesbian self-definition through theory, essays, and literature. This chapter aims to discuss the ways in which a black lesbian epistemology can be used as a theoretical framework to understand black lesbian experiences and worldviews.

While many Women's Studies texts focus on the subordination of women through a gendered lens, they tend to gloss over or completely ignore the active exclusion of black, Latina, and Asian women based on race, the erasure of poor women in relation to class, and the invisibility of lesbian women with respect to sexuality. Furthermore, in these courses, black lesbian women are rarely or never mentioned at all. When I originally signed up to be a Women's Studies major, I naively assumed that the women's oppression we studied would not be compartmentalized into raced, classed, and heteronormative hierarchies.

Middle and upper class white heterosexual women wrote the overwhelming majority of the texts I am assigned to read. On the rare occasion that we did read a text by a lesbian, she was usually white and middle class. This led me to evaluate the invisibility of black lesbian experiences as well as the theories advanced by these women. I often found myself wondering the following questions: Who are these women? How do they experience, interpret, and operate in the world? Did they have safe, intimate spaces that they shared with other women? How did they deal with racism, sexism, and homophobia on a daily basis?

White Male Epistemology

According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Epistemology is the study of the philosophical problems in concepts of knowledge and truth (Collins 48). This being

said, the standards used to assess this knowledge and the route leading to Truth are highly politicized and nuanced. For instance, traditional historiography in the United States is indicative of a white, androcentric epistemological orientation that Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde and many other black feminist theorists systematically critique in their work. Collins makes the following commentary on white male control of Truth and societal power structures:

Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge validation, white male interests pervade the thematic content of traditional scholarship. As a result, Black women's experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in, or excluded from, traditional academic discourse.

(Hill Collins 47)

Collins explains that because white men control knowledge validation apparatuses, it is extremely difficult to get any other points of view to be recognized as legitimate sources of knowledge. White male positivist epistemology constructs knowledge in a scientific and linear manner, only leaving room for one Truth. Hill Collins and hooks argue that there is no such thing as universal truth or objectivity. Hill Collins argues that truth depends on your perspective and social location in the world.

In bell hooks' book *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center* (1984)¹, she discusses the ways in which knowledge produced on the *margins* looks very different from knowledge produced in the *center*. This can be attributed to a fundamental difference in standpoint, or societal location (Collins 201). Patricia Hill Collins continues this discussion on epistemology and subjugated knowledge in her description of the *outsider within*. Collins defines the *outsider within* as the "social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power... Outsider within

¹ The title of this thesis "Resisting the Margins: Black Lesbian Self-Definition and Epistemology" is inspired by bell hooks' book title *From the Margins to the Center*. Resisting the margins points to the tensions and contradictions that exist in the margins for black lesbian women. These tensions include but are not limited to questions of homophobia, racism and sexism.

locations are riddled with contradictions (Collins 5). In her essay, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” Collins writes that individual and group “standpoints are rooted in material conditions structured by social class” (Collins 345). In this essay, Collins also problematizes white male epistemology as the authoritative vehicle for understanding and producing knowledge. She states:

Just as the material realities of the powerful and the dominated produce separate standpoints, each group may also have distinctive epistemologies or theories of knowledge. It is my contention that black female scholars may know that something is true but be unwilling or unable to legitimate their claims using Eurocentric masculinist criteria for consistency with substantiated knowledge and Eurocentric masculinist criteria for methodological adequacy.

(Collins 343)

In this statement, Collins specifies how black female scholars may feel trapped by an epistemology originally designed by and for white men. Building upon Collins’ critical insight, I argue that the identification and articulation of a black lesbian epistemology is essential to understanding the thoughts and experiences of black lesbian women from their particular standpoints. Black lesbian thought, “as specialized thought reflects the thematic content” of black lesbian experiences. But because black lesbians “have had to struggle against white male interpretations of the world in order to express a self-defined standpoint,” Black lesbian thought can “best be viewed as subjugated knowledge” (Collins 48).

Black Lesbian Epistemology

In order to comprehend black lesbian identity and experiences as told by black lesbian women, it is important to locate the intersecting factors that specifically affect and influence these women. Feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins discussion of standpoint theory can be helpful to understand how a group’s placement in society

affects the way they see, experience, and navigate through the world. Collins states the following:

Standpoint theory argues that group location in hierarchical power relations produces shared challenges for individuals in those groups. These common challenges can foster similar angles of vision leading to a group knowledge or standpoint that in turn can influence the group's political action.

(Collins 201)

While standpoint theory's range of application exceeds the focus I have for this chapter, I think it can be used as an important mechanism to unearth and understand black lesbian epistemology. In the following statement, Collins discusses the difficulty that black women confront when putting forth their ideas and experiences amidst a strong current of white male "ideological hegemony" (Collins 340):

Expressing an independent black feminist consciousness is problematic precisely because more powerful groups have a vested interest in suppressing such thought... Those who control the schools, the media, and other cultural institutions are generally skilled in establishing their view of reality as superior to alternative interpretations... An oppressed lack of control over the apparatuses of society that sustain ideological hegemony makes the articulation of their self-identified standpoint difficult.

(Collins 340)

By pointing out the control of cultural institutions by dominant groups, Patria Hill Collins highlights the difficulty in constructing a perspective different from the dominant group's Truth. Validating the existence of alternative realities directly challenges the exclusive claim to Truth that a "Eurocentric masculinist" epistemology holds (Collins 343). The proclamation of alternative epistemologies shakes the foundation upon which dominant knowledge systems find their strength. This "Eurocentric masculinist" control of cultural and social institutions in the United States contributes to why the majority of the films, advertisements, magazines, and books in the public sphere affirm narratives of white, heterosexual, male superiority.

This control of the public sphere is extremely powerful because it sends a message to subordinate groups that their knowledge, history, culture, and existence is not as important as the knowledge that floods the public sphere. As a black lesbian, I have often felt as though I have no history. For this very reason, I would like to challenge the dominant narrative, which ignores subordinate knowledge.

Black lesbian epistemology is a distinctive and essential lens through which to evaluate the world. One unique element of this epistemology is the emphasis on the importance of intersectional experience and analysis. “Intersectionality provides an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example, shape any group’s experience across specific social contexts” (Collins 2008). Black lesbian epistemology stems from an existential space that encompasses distinctive types of experiences, ways of knowing, and sets of values, all of which serve to establish the fundamental integrity of the former. Transformative in nature, black lesbian epistemology constitutes a comprehensive understanding of the way systems of oppression are constantly operating in society. Through a black lesbian framework, I have learned the importance of recognizing and appreciating difference. A black lesbian framework encourages one to be inclusive of different perspectives and lifestyles. This framework calls for an alternative vision for understanding and experiencing the world. As a black lesbian woman, I have a particular stake in this transformative and progressive vision.

Bringing black lesbian existence to the forefront is important not only for black lesbian mental and emotional health but for that of all people. Without accurate information, the collective imagination tends to create superficial narratives of erotic fantasy and sexual perversion. These problematic narratives are often fraught with

violence and in turn proliferated in the media on a global scale. These images produce an artificial understanding of the black lesbian “other.” Until black lesbian experiences are defined by black lesbian women, then their experiences and identity still runs the risk of “being bruised or misunderstood” (Lorde 40). When I think about important markers of an individual’s identity, gender, age, race, and sexuality come to the forefront. Historically, black sexuality as a whole is an area that has not been sufficiently explored or theorized about. When individuals do not understand the historical context in which black sexuality was regulated and repressed in the United States, it is impossible to even begin conceptualizing black lesbian sexuality and identity. This is precisely why it is important to investigate black lesbian epistemology as a dynamic and transformative discourse that works to deconstruct existing power relations and stereotypes while creating a vision for a more inclusive society.

Cheryl Clarke: A Black Lesbian Standpoint

Historical accounts of white radical lesbian feminism suggest the idea of lesbian separatism. Radical white lesbian feminists proclaim that patriarchy and by extension sexism and gender oppression are the main sources of their oppression. On the other hand, the black lesbian feminist “Combahee River Collective²” explicitly denies an allegiance with lesbian separatists because of this narrow understanding of oppression that fails to include race and class analysis. This collective of radical black feminists, which began meeting in Boston in 1974, reflect upon the following genealogy of black feminism in the United States:

² The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist group in Boston whose name came from the guerilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863, in the Port Royal region of South Carolina. This action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman (Smith 272).

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960's. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation.

(Smith 273)

The collective continues to trace their genealogical roots, when in 1973, "black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist organization ... the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) (Smith 273). The purpose of this organization was to specifically address the concerns of black feminist women. While these women were committed to a black feminist praxis, many of them were also deeply involved in "movements for black liberation, particularly those of the 1960's and 1970's" (Smith 273). These black feminists contributed to the Civil Rights movement, the Black nationalist movement, Lesbian politics the Black Panther movement and "were greatly affected by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals (Smith 273). As these black feminists and lesbians contributed to different communities and movements that reflected their identities, it would be virtually impossible to adopt a lesbian separatist ideology. For black lesbian women to espouse lesbian separatism, this would require them to compartmentalize their identity ignoring questions of class and racial allegiance to black men, black heterosexual women, and their male children. In late 1974, key NBFO members split from the group and formed the Combahee River Collective. These black feminists decided to form their own organization they had "serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of clear political focus" (Smith 279).

Black lesbian author, poet, and university administrator Cheryl Clarke addresses black lesbian identity in many of her publications. For example, in her

article, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” Clarke makes the following assertion: “For a woman to be a lesbian in a male supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance” (Clarke 242). By framing lesbianism as an act of resistance, Clarke implicitly suggests that lesbians reject the heteronormative standard that all women are expected to abide by. In her description of North America, Clarke speaks to the multiple forms of systemic oppression that plague society. In her essay, Clarke suggests that lesbian resistance and the ability to navigate through these interlocking systems of oppression should be celebrated on a global scale. Clarke emphasizes that there are many individuals and groups fighting for freedom from “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks xiv), which she refers to as “the same slave master” (Clarke 242).

According to Clarke, lesbianism and feminism are two important “women-centered and powered ideologies” (Clarke 243). She presumes both of these women-centered ideologies actively resist interlocking systems of oppression. For Clarke, women who embrace lesbianism are committed to “the liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny ... and male-supremacist tyranny” (Clarke 243). Similarly, Clarke purports that feminists must commit themselves to the “liberation of *all* women from *coerced* heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue” (Clarke 243). Clarke portrays the lesbian and the feminist in a similar manner in order to “break the silence and the secrecy” (Clarke 243). In doing so, Clarke points to the ways in which the lesbian and the feminist have shared ideologies despite the popular attempt to highlight every thread that distinguishes them. By highlighting the similar ideological standpoints that these two identities hold, Clark makes room for individuals who may fit into both categories of analysis:

the lesbian feminists. In drawing these comparisons, Clarke also illuminates homophobia within feminist movements. I would argue that despite the intersectional nature of black feminist theory, black lesbian identities are often relegated to the backburner. In her groundbreaking essay “Black (w)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelyn Hammonds states the following:

Most important the outsider-within stance does not allow space for addressing the question of other outsiders, namely Black lesbians. Black feminist theorizing about Black female sexuality, with a few exceptions-Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Barbara Smith, and Audre Lorde-has been relentlessly focused on heterosexuality. The historical narrative that dominates discussion of Black female sexuality does not address even the possibility of a Black lesbian sexuality, or of a lesbian or queer subject.

(Hammonds 308)

As Hammonds indicates in the above quote, overshadowed by discussions of race, class, and gender, minimal or no attention is allotted to black lesbian identity or existence. Clarke contends that “the lesbian-feminist struggles for the liberation of all people from patriarchal domination through heterosexism and for the transformation of all socio-political structures, systems, and relationships that have been degraded and corrupted under centuries of male domination (Clarke 243).” This is particularly important because Clarke suggests that a lesbian-feminist vision for liberation is relevant and important for the liberation of *all people*. Because lesbian-feminist ideology attempts to counter intersectional, interlocking systems of oppression, it advances a comprehensive vision to approach social change. A black lesbian-feminist epistemology can be used as a framework to examine social systems and create visions for social transformation.

Both Patricia Hill Collins and Cheryl Clarke make comprehensive assertions that speak to the importance of a black lesbian epistemology. While Collins makes room for alternative epistemologies, Clark invokes a black lesbian standpoint to

contextualize her experiences along with the experiences of women like her. Clarke states:

If radical lesbian feminism purports an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual, reciprocal, as infinitely negotiable, as freedom from antiquated gender prescriptions, and proscriptions, *then all people struggling to transform the character of relationships in this culture have something to learn from lesbians.*

(Clarke 248)

In this statement, Clarke positions radical black lesbian feminism as an epistemological framework that “all people” are capable of learning from. Clarke also emphasizes that black lesbian feminism aims to transform society at every level while negotiating the intricate strands and layers of human identity. The subsequent chapters of this thesis aim to examine specific black lesbian experiences in the United States and abroad. It will also address what mechanisms black lesbians have utilized to transform their exclusion and invisibility into active resistance and transformative movement?

CHAPTER 2: Queering the Harlem Renaissance: Historical Understandings of Black Lesbian Identity

This chapter focuses on historical understandings of black lesbian identity within, but not limited to, a United States context. This project is essential because historical and inquiry-driven analyses about black lesbians is crucial in understanding how they operate in society and construct their personal identities.

In order to counter the idea that black lesbian identity is a recent phenomenon or social construct, I examine the lives of black lesbian women born at the turn of the 20th century. Shifting the focus to black lesbians in the Harlem Renaissance, this chapter argues that black lesbian identity did not emerge with the Women's Rights, Gay Rights, and Civil Rights movements. From the women highlighted in this paper, it is clear that a tradition of black lesbian women existed and thrived in the early 20th century. As Evelyn Hammonds asserts in her essay "Black (w)holes and the Geometry of Female Sexuality," "certainly institutional racism, homophobia, and the general structural inequalities in American society have a great deal more to do with this invisibility than personal choices" (Hammonds 302). This is an important assertion because it points to the structural inequality that contributes to black lesbian invisibility in America.

In order to counter this tradition of invisibility, the first section this chapter will give brief biographical information on three black women writers who lived before, during, and after the Harlem Renaissance. Although the following writers do not publicly embrace lesbian and bisexual identity, they all expressed same gender desire in the writings. The second part of this chapter explores one black women's journey as a lesbian living in New York in the 1920's.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935)

Born in New Orleans in 1875, Alice Dunbar-Nelson was a prolific poet and public figure. During the Harlem Renaissance, she frequented with individuals such as W.E.B. Dubois, Mary Church Terrell, and Leslie Pickney Hill (Hull 190). She was married to Paul Laurence Dunbar who was considered to be “America’s first nationally recognized Black poet” and a very important figure in the Harlem Renaissance (Hull 190). According to feminist scholar Gloria T. Hull, Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote society columns but was not permitted access to very many publishing opportunities. Therefore, although Dunbar-Nelson appeared to belong to the black “aristocratic” circles, she often had financial strains and difficulties due to her status as a black woman in the United States (Hull 192). While Hull conducted this archival research, she met Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s niece and gained private access to the collection of Dunbar-Nelson’s personal papers, which were strictly held under the family’s possession. In these papers, Hull was able to read unpublished poems by Alice Dunbar-Nelson that discusses her love and sexual desire for other women (Hull 192). After several conversations with Dunbar-Nelson’s niece, Hull was allowed to use these letters in her research in order to discuss Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s bisexual identity. Gloria Hull urged Dunbar-Nelson’s niece that this information is vital to understanding Dunbar-Nelson’s identity. She states:

These relationships did not besmirch Dunbar-Nelson’s character or reputation, that they did not harm anyone else, that there is nothing wrong with love between women, that her attraction to women was only one part of her total identity and did not wipe out the other aspects of her other selves and finally, showing her and the diary as they in fact were was the right thing to do that.

(Hull 192)

While conducting research and writing about Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Hull did not want to contribute to the legacy of invisibility surrounding Dunbar-Nelson’s bisexuality.

By gaining permission to make her diary and unpublished poetry public knowledge, Hull was unearthing a complex narrative and understanding of Alice Dunbar-Nelson work and life. Hull is challenging readers, critics and admirers to look at Alice Dunbar-Nelson through a different lens. Instead of assuming that Dunbar-Nelson is heterosexual, we can begin to examine her life's work and personal biography through a different lens. In *Odd Girl and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, Lillian Faderman also states that Alice Dunbar-Nelson was bisexual and her husband Paul Dunbar was reportedly disturbed by her lesbian affairs (Faderman 67).

Nella Larsen (1891-1964)

Speculated to be a biracial and "bisexual African-American novelist," Nella Larsen is known for creating covert homoerotic undertones between the characters in her novels. Born in 1893 to a Danish mother and West Indian father, Larsen studied at Fisk University, the University of Copenhagen, and became a nurse before taking up the career of a novelist (Hutchinson 14). Published in 1929, Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* "explores the cultural identity and psychological positioning of modern black individuals marked by difference from whites" (Davis ix). This story revolves around one mixed race woman and one fair skinned black woman, Clare Kendry Bellow and Irene Westover Radfield, who are both capable of passing as white during the early 20th century. In an introduction written to *Passing*, Thadious M. Davis states the following about Clare, Nella Larsen's protagonist in *Passing*. "Clare may be read as a biracial and bisexual person. Her model of white womanhood is based not on racial difference, but on freedom, glamour, sexuality, fashion, sophistication, and wealth" (Davis xiv). In *Passing*, there are several scenes where a type of homoerotic desire

exists between Clare and Irene. One instance in particular that feminist theorist Judith Butler analyzes in her book *Bodies That Matter* is a scene where Clare has come over to Irene's house for a visit. Clare is waiting at the bottom of the staircase and looks absolutely stunning. As Irene descends the staircase, she notices Clare's beauty and is overtaken by it. At the same instance, Irene's husband walks in through another room and notes Clare's beauty. There is a triangular interplay where lust, love, loyalty, and trust are all simultaneously in question.

Critics like Butler and Basu theorize that the lesbian desire between Irene and Clare originates from Irene's desire and attraction to Clare's whiteness. H. Jordan Landry, author of the article "Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" simultaneously builds upon Butler and Basu's work while challenging it. Landry argues, "*Passing* challenges earlier representations of the mulatto female character and offer an alternative reading in which Irene's and Clare's lesbian desire emerges from their idealization of the black female body" (Landry 2). Clare makes a statement in the novel can be read in a variety of ways: "I've often wondered why more colored girls ... never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve" (Larsen 28). The concept of "Passing" in Larsen's text can be read as racial as well as heterosexual passing. Knowing that Larsen herself identified as bi-sexual adds a more nuanced and complex reading of texts like *Passing* where early critics had a singular focus on the role that race and racial tension played in the text.

Angelina Weld-Grimké (1880-1958)

Born to a biracial family in 1880 in Boston, Angelina Weld-Grimké is best known for her writing, poetry and journalism specifically. In the introduction to

Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, author Barbara Smith states that “ In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries poets Angelina Weld-Grimké [and] Alice Dunbar-Nelson . . . all addressed forms of sexual as well as racial identity in some of their work” (Smith 146). In addition, in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Mab Segrest traces an ongoing tradition of “anti-racist lesbian writing” to Angelina Weld-Grimké, Carson McCullers, and Lillian Smith among other writers. Angelina Weld-Grimké was known for producing a respectable body of poetry, some of which was not published because of its obvious lesbian undertones in the verses. For instance, in her poem “You,” it is clear that Weld-Grimké is describing an individual’s desire for a woman. Although it is not clear whether the author herself also identifies as the voice in a poem, there is a distinctive female-desire represented in this poem.

You
 I love your throat, so fragrant, fair,
 The little pulses beating there;
 Your eye-brows' shy and questioning air;
 I love your shadowed hair.
 I love your flame-touched ivory skin;
 Your little fingers frail and thin;
 Your dimple creeping out and in;
 I love your pointed chin.
 I love the way you move, you rise;
 Your fluttering gestures, just-caught cries;
 I am not sane, I am not wise,
 God! how I love your eyes!

(Weld-Grimke)³

Furthermore, in the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* Gloria T. Hull offers the following information on Weld-Grimké. She states “ The manuscript poems that Grimke wrote during the early 1900’s parallel the diary’s story of heartbreak and unhappiness and indicate, further, that the lover was female -either Mamie [a girlhood

³ This poem was extracted from Gloria T. Hull’s book *Color, Sex & Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*.

lover] or some other woman... [A] poem, entitled 'To Her of the Cruel Lips' and ending 'I laugh yet-my brain is sad,' was written November 5, 1903" (Hull 456). Hull also states "unlike Dunbar-Nelson, Grimke does not appear to have acted on her lesbian feelings with continuous and mature assurance" (Hull 456). When looking at the life of Angelina Weld Grimke and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, it can be speculated that the people and heteronormative systems around them repressed their lesbian desires. "Hull describes the life of Angelina Weld Grimké, a poet of the Harlem Renaissance whose poetry expressed desire for women. This desire is circumscribed, underwritten, and unspoken in her poetry. McDowell's critical reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing* also point to the submersion of sexuality and same-sex desire among Black women" (Hammonds 302). Both of these women were using their writing as sources of strength and sites of subversive action.

Mabel Hampton (1902-1989)

In an oral interview conducted by feminist scholar Joan Nestle, Mabel Hampton provides a genealogy of her life. Born at the turn of the 20th century in 1902, New York performer and activist Mabel Hampton started her life in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (Nestle 927). Her grandmother and her mother's youngest sister primarily raised Mabel because her mother died when she was only one month old (Nestle 927). When Mabel was eight years old, her grandmother passed away and she went to live with another aunt and her aunt's husband, Uncle George, in New York (Nestle 929). Extremely involved in the church, Uncle George converted the living room into a space where he conducted private sermons on Sunday afternoons (Nestle 930). As a minister, Uncle George instructed Mabel to clean up the entire house before and after each sermon and made her sleep on the soot floor in the

basement (Nestle 930). Minister George beat Mabel regularly and raped her when she was only eight years old when her aunt was out for the day (Nestle 930). At this point, Mabel ran away to Jersey city where she met a woman in a public park who took her in and nourished her into her teenage years (Nestle 932). From her account, it seems like this woman centered space was one of the rare spaces where Mabel felt safe and comfortable.

Mabel Hampton paints a portrait of black lesbian life in New York City in the 1920's (Nestle 929). According to Joan Nestle:

Ms. Hampton worked as a singer, dancer, domestic worker, and hospital janitor, always moving in a lesbian world. She attended parties thrown by A'Leilia Walker during the Harlem Renaissance; danced in the Garden of Joy, a Harlem nightclub; marched with thousands of mourners when Florence Mills died; and socialized with the two Ethels, as she called them-Ethel Waters and her girlfriend.

(Hampton Oral History)

By sharing the momentous occasions and lasting memories of her life, Mabel Hampton paints a picture depicting what it was like to be a black lesbian woman in New York during the Harlem Renaissance. Mabel Hampton discusses her social life with other lesbian women as well as extravaganza events she attended at A'Leilia Walker's mansion. According to a *New York Times* article, "in 1974, with three other women, [Mabel Hampton] founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Manhattan, a collection of lesbian books and artifacts including her personal library" (NY Times).

In this interview, Mabel Hampton discusses her life in New York as a "colored" lesbian in the 1920's and 1930's. When strangers and friends asked her when she came out, she was known for replying, "What do you mean? I was never in" (Nestle 927). In 1920, when Mabel was seventeen years old, she lived and worked in New York City on West 22nd Street. She remembers traveling in and out of New

York and working in different places all the while keeping a room for herself in New York to come back to (Nestle 932). From these years of her life, Hampton recalls living next door to a lesbian woman who hosted great parties and social gatherings for the lesbians in their community. Ms. Hampton recalls:

Next door, this girl, they were all lesbians, she had four rooms in the basement and she gave parties all the time. And sometimes we would have pay parties. We'd buy up all the food-chicken and different vegetables and salads and things, potato salad, and I'd chip in with them you know 'cause I'd bring my girlfriends in, you know. We also went to rent parties-where you go in and pay a couple of dollars. You buy your drinks and meet other women and dance and have fun. But with our house we just give it with our close friends. Sometimes there would be twelve or fourteen women there. We'd have pig feet, chitlins. And sometimes it was corn. In the winter time it was black-eyed peas and all that stuff.

(Hampton Oral History)

In the above statement, Ms. Hampton recounts a scene in which we can imagine black lesbian women creating community with one another. We can imagine women coming together, during a time period where it was dangerous to do so, in order to enjoy one another's company and validate one another's existence. Because of a lack of visual and written documentation of black lesbian existence in the early 20th century, this oral history interview is a historical testament of these women's lives. Ms. Hampton goes on to describe the women who frequented the black lesbian social scene. She describes their styles of dress, their demeanors, and the complex binary system that existed then and still exists now between more masculine-identified and feminine-identified lesbians.

Most of the women wore suits. Very seldom did any of them have slacks or anything like that because they had to come through the street. Of course, if they were in a car, they wore slacks. And most of them had short hair. And most of them was good-lookin' women too. There was singles and couples because the girls just come and bring-the bull-dykers used to come and bring their women with them, you know. And you wasn't suppose to jive with them, you know. You wasn't suppose to look over there at all. They danced

up a breeze. They did the Charleston ... they were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them... We got along fine.

(Hampton Oral History)

When we deconstruct Hampton's description of the "colored women" in these social settings, she portrays these women performing gender in very specific ways. As feminist philosopher and theorist Judith Butler states in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", "Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 402). In Hampton's statement, three types of colored lesbians are described. First she points out the "girls" who frequent the social scene. Because of these girls, singles also frequented these parties in the hopes of meeting someone. Next, she mentions the "bull dykers" who came to the party. Inherent in the term "bull-dyker" is the concept of masculine gender performativity. "Bull-dykers" are located on the opposite side of the gender spectrum the "girls." After the "bull-dykers," "women" come into the picture. From the description, it seems as though the "women" were the "bull-dykers" attachés. As Hampton recounts, no one was allowed to look at or interact with the "bull-dykers" "women." While paired up in couples, the "women" and the "bull-dykers" performed heteronormative gender identities. Although they were in lesbian relationships, a heteronormative framework was transposed their interactions.

In addition to the colorful social gathering depicted in the interview, Mabel Hampton recalls an official wedding between two black lesbian friends of hers around 1938 (Nestle 934). When reading about this wedding, it seems like an impossible

occurrence because there are no signs or remnants in American popular culture that suggest that a wedding between two black lesbian women in 1938 was possible. This is precisely a reminder why Mabel Hampton's history is so important. Her personal history charts memories and events that have been obliterated from public historical records and consequently erased from the American and global collective consciousness.

In addition to her activism work and social life, Ms. Hampton also discussed personal joys and accomplishments that impacted her. According to her interviewer and friend Joan Nestle, "Ms. Hampton's proudest moments were not these. For over thirty years she made a home with her wife, Lillian Foster, on 169th Street in the Bronx. It was here on her street that Miss Mabel, as she was known, lived the deeper history of her days" (Nestle 925). Hampton's characterization of her relationship with her partner as a marital partnership helps construct an alternative narrative of the social and legal realms of black lesbian relationships during, before, and after the Harlem Renaissance. In sharing her personal history, Hampton destabilizes the narrative of black lesbian invisibility and powerlessness. Hampton's narrative recounts black lesbian women coming together to form community, black lesbian women marrying one another when the status-quo forbids it, and black lesbian women creating safe spaces like the Lesbian Herstory Archives for other lesbians to have a place where they are welcomed. Hampton's "persistent journey to full selfhood in a racist and capitalist America is a story we have not yet learned to tell in our lesbian and gay history work" (Nestle 926).

The information about four black women's lives who lived and thrived during the Harlem Renaissance suggests that much work has been done by a variety of sources to try and keep their lesbian and bisexual identities secretive. One common

theme that I have uncovered through Angelina Weld-Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Nella Larsen's lives is that this information would shame their family and potentially ruin their careers. Consequently, specific family members and friends have attempted to actively suppress their non-normative sexual desires and celebrate them as heterosexual African American women who thrived during the Harlem Renaissance. For this reason, I think it is imperative to re-evaluate the lives of these women and look at their work knowing the intersectional nature of their identities. In her essay "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities," Audre Lorde reminds us that:

When you read the words Langston Hughes you are reading the words of a Black Gay man. When you read the words of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Angelina Weld-Grimké, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, you are reading the words of Black Lesbians. When you listen to the life-affirming voices of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, you are hearing Black Lesbian women. When you see the plays and read the words of Lorraine Hansberry, you are reading the words of a woman who loved women deeply.

(Lorde 61)

Lorde makes an important interventionist commentary on the ways in which lesbians and gay men are historically imprinted into the American imaginary. Knowing that Weld-Grimké, Larsen, and Hampton were women who loved and identified with women changes the way they are understood and the way their work is interpreted. It is important to understand how their sexuality influenced the work they produced and their lived experiences. Although some individuals work tirelessly to conceal this information, it is important to be articulated and re-articulated so that a more accurate portrait of their lives can be unveiled and discussed by the individuals who admire them and come into contact with their work.

CHAPTER 3: The Black Lesbian Paradox: Navigating Sexism, Racism, and Homophobia in Heterosexual, White America

Racism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.*

Sexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance.*

Heterosexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.*

Homophobia: *The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others.*

(Lorde 45)

This chapter focuses on key black lesbian writers and theorists in the United States during the 1980's. Through a surge of publishing, the creation of independent presses, and creating dialogue with one another, radical black feminists generated a conversation that brings black lesbian voices and experiences into the public sphere. Many of these authors discuss the pervasive nature of racism, sexism, and homophobia in American culture as they experience it in their own lives. The first portion of this chapter focuses on *Home Girls*, a key black feminist anthology published in the early 1980's while the second half concentrates on theories of silence and difference advanced by self-defined black, lesbian, feminist, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde.

Black Lesbians and Feminists Redefining Feminist Identity

Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, edited by Barbara Smith, is a compilation of writings by black lesbian and feminist authors. *Home Girls* presents black feminist thought in a multitude of forms ranging from poetic expression to the essay. Through this variety of mediums, the contributors challenge the ways in which *knowledge* has been traditionally produced and proliferated while forging an alternative vision for feminist theory.

In the prefatory statements of this anthology, Barbara Smith describes her

choice for its title. Drawing on the metaphor of home as a safe space, Smith called for the thoughts, stories, world-views, and experiences of “the girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with” (Smith xxii). Smith emphasizes how “by being a black feminist (particularly if you are also a Lesbian) you have left the race, are no longer a part of the black community, in short no longer have a home” (Smith xxii). The choice of the title for this anthology is an active attempt to include the voices of women who are traditionally not included in feminist anthologies. By titling the anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Smith is calling for the re-appropriation of black feminist thought. This anthology grants black feminist and lesbian writers a space to speak, advance their theories, and tell their stories. In doing so, *Home Girls* extends the significance of feminism beyond a white, middle class, heterosexual narrative. Barbara Smith contends “black feminism is, on every level, organic to Black experience (xxiii).” Smith’s affirmation of black women’s experiences as substantial, relevant, and central functions in redefining the concept of *home* to include black feminist ideologies, writings, and knowledge.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press published the first edition of *Home Girls* in 1983. This is symbolic in terms of the text entering into a critical moment. In 1983, most white presses, both feminist and mainstream would not publish the work of black women and other women of color, black feminist writers being no exception. Therefore, in order to circulate their work, women of color had to create alternative publication routes which included creating their own publishing companies. In October of 1980, Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith had a phone conversation in which Lorde said “We really need to do something about publishing” (Smith 11). After this conversation, Smith organized a group meeting of African American and Caribbean feminists in which they decided that an independent women

of color press was vital to their survival. Collaboratively, these women pressed forward and a year later founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Smith states that “on the most basic level Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us” (Smith 11). The exclusion, misrepresentation, and invisibility that Smith describes is historically grounded as it was only seventeen years later, in 2000, that popular Rutgers University Press reprinted *Home Girls*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press also published *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Morraga. This revolutionary anthology gave voice to radical feminist and lesbian women of color voices in an unprecedented manner. According to Barbara Smith, this anthology helped “Black women, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women ... involved in autonomous organizing ... find each other. More than any other single work, *This Bridge* has made the vision of Third World feminism real” (Smith xlii).

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press’ choice to publish anthologies to express ideas is a very political one in nature. The anthology as chosen medium is powerful because it allows for a collective of individuals to come together around a given theme or topic while also allowing space for individualism and difference. This is evident by the diversity of voices and opinions represented in *Home Girls*. This is a perfect example of Audre Lorde’s call to black women to organize across sexuality and difference (Lorde 57).

Home Girls is strategically divided into five sections. In the introduction, Smith explains that instead of putting out a call for papers when assembling this anthology, she sought out already published texts. In addition to this recruitment

method, Smith met women at conferences and solicited their work in that capacity. As Smith explains in the introduction, the five section titles are chosen from the name of a specific piece from that section. In “The Blood Yes,” the first section of *Home Girls* authors discuss identity politics focusing on what it means to be black and female in white America. In the second section, “Artists Without Art Form,” authors discuss art as a “cultural legacy” that black women have had to reclaim because it was taken from them. In the third section, “Black Lesbians-Who Will Fight For Our Lives But Us?” the pieces touch upon the erasure of the black lesbians from both black and white communities in the United States. The fourth section, “A Home Girl’s Album” consists of selected photographs of black women writers and theorists. These photos include but are not limited to images of Audre Lorde, Bernice J. Reagon, Jewell Gomez and Barbara Smith herself. In the final section entitled “A Hell of a Place to Ferment a Revolution”, the authors put forth common ideals surrounding theory and action in the context of black feminism. The revolutionary Combahee River Collective Statement, in which Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith and other women of color discussed the genesis of black feminist theory, identity politics, and the art of grassroots political organizing, was first published in this final section.

For the purposes of this chapter, I specifically focus on Audre Lorde’s short story “Tar Beach” and Cheryl Clarke’s essay “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community”. It is also important to pay close attention to the selected photographs in *A Home Girl’s Album* to gain a visual understanding of which women are behind the work put forth in this anthology. Audre Lorde’s “Tar Beach” discusses her experiences as a black lesbian in New York in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Lorde describes how she navigated through romantic relationships with white and black women, her identity as a American-born daughter from Caribbean parents, as

well as how she did or did not personally fit into the heterosexist Butch-Femme dichotomy also present in Lesbian/Gay culture. Two years later, in 1985, this same piece appeared as a section in Audre Lorde's famous biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In her introduction, Smith states that it was an encounter between the two women that inspired Audre Lorde to write this book. The biomythography was a genre of literature that Lorde created in order to write her memoir. She coined this word in order "to encompass the complexity of her intentions" (Gomez 1).

In "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," Cheryl Clark situates the black community in relation to the homophobic white society in which it exists in the United States. Clark opens by stating "that homophobia among black people in America is largely reflective of the homophobic culture in which we live... yet, we cannot rationalize the disease of homophobia among black people as the white man's fault, for to do so is to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to transform ourselves (197)." This statement summarizes the stance that Clarke advances in this piece. She wants to make it clear that although you cannot divorce homophobia in black communities from its larger white American homophobic context, but black communities cannot simply blame context for its homophobic developments because to do so is to avoid personal liability and deny room from transformative action and positive social change.

The two texts that I have chosen support the anthology's claim to black feminist knowledge stemming from black women's personal experiences. These two texts include black lesbians feminists under the category of black feminist thought, once again expanding the once narrow borders of feminist theory. For instance, in a course entitled "The Histories of Feminist Thought", I read an anthology entitled *The*

Feminist Papers edited by Alice S. Rossi; every woman included in the work was white, heterosexual, middle-upper class, and had a high level of education. The message conveyed was that the feminist canon is only composed of white, middle-upper class, heterosexual women and their thoughts. Barbra Smith's specification that *Home Girls* is a "black feminist anthology" was not only accurate but also a possible response to the idea that feminist thought is reserved for white middle class, heterosexual women. In her introduction, Barbara Smith states the following:

One of the greatest gifts of Black feminism to ourselves has been to make it a little easier simply to be Black and female. A Black feminist analysis has enabled us to understand that we are not hated and abused because there is something wrong with us, but because our status and treatment is absolutely prescribed by the racist, misogynistic system under which we live.

(Smith xxxiv)

The above statement speaks to the canonical and societal exclusion that black women experience. Through this anthology, this exclusion has been challenged and confronted by black lesbian and feminist understandings of feminism. Intersectional black feminist analysis has illuminated the flawed nature of this blatant discrimination while attributing it to racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. The cover art for the first edition *Home Girls* is a black and white maze with the title in the middle. On the back, is a large photograph of Barbara Smith and the names of the other contributors to the anthology surrounding her on either side. For me, this photograph, and the inclusion of the names on the back are important in identifying that these women exist too. This is black feminist thought and these women are not going to remain on the margins, they are going to be published and recognized for their black feminist production. Similarly, the photographs in the center of book create a context for the reader about the women who have contributed to the anthology. "Black feminism deals in home truths, both in analysis and in action. Far from being

irrelevant or peripheral to Black people, the issues we have focused in touch the basic core of our community's survival" (Smith xxxv). This type of visibility serves to give black feminist writers and thinkers a concrete identity. For me, the simple act of seeing their photographs on the cover and in the pages of *Home Girls* confirms that they were/are alive. In a society that prioritizes the production of images and writing by white, heterosexual individuals, most notably men, it is difficult for me to inscribe these women into my consciousness as having lived, written, and produced black feminist thought. Consequently, the urgency and need for *Home Girls* to be published cannot be stressed enough. As one of the cornerstone anthologies in black feminist thought, *Home Girls* serves as medicinal property that helps fill the space between feminism and black women's experiences and brings theory *home*.

Audre Lorde on questions of Silence and Difference

In her book of essays and speeches *Sister Outside*, Audre Lorde discusses topics ranging from racism, sexism, and homophobia to parenting and social movements through a black lesbian feminist lens. As an invaluable voice in the feminist movement, Audre Lorde has been extremely vocal about the importance of "transforming silence into language and action" (Lorde 40). Speaking from a black lesbian perspective, Lorde urges women to speak and write about the oppression they experience because internalizing this oppression is an act of self-destruction. In her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Lorde shares the following meditations on silence:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been.

(Lorde 40)

A strong advocate of self-expression and proclamation of self, Lorde addresses an important issue for black lesbian women, the question of silence. For me, as a black lesbian woman living in a predominantly white, heterosexual culture, the question of silence is a very important one. I believe that we are all deeply influenced by the environments in which we live. As a black lesbian who has internalized racism, sexism, and homophobia, there are many aspects of my life, my identity, my feelings and my thoughts that I repress on a daily basis. Oftentimes I do not feel safe divulging information about myself having to do with my identity as a black lesbian. I feel apprehensive about discussing my sexuality within the context of my immediate and extended family, many of my acquaintances at school, and in my interactions with some men and women I meet on a daily basis. Consequently, I feel as though I constantly exist in a liminal space where I am passing as a normal, non-deviant subject. According to Audre Lorde, this type of internalized repression is extremely dangerous and detrimental to black lesbians' physical and mental health.

In an essay entitled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," Lorde unearths some of the tensions surrounding being a black lesbian in the United States. The nuances she discusses range from black men's perspectives on black lesbianism to black heterosexual women's fears of being associated with lesbianism. Black lesbian women have many elements to navigate when attempting to form group identification and create community. When discussing white lesbian and black lesbian identity, Lorde states the following:

Although elements of these attitudes exist for all women, there are particular resonances of heterosexism and homophobia among Black women. Despite the fact that women-bonding has a long and honorable history in the African and African-American communities, and despite the knowledge and accomplishments of many strong and creative women-identified Black women

in the political, social and cultural fields, heterosexual Black women often tend to ignore or discount the existence and work of Black lesbians.

(Lorde 121)

Lorde identifies an important area of analysis that has been addressed by many theorists. She discusses the specific “resonances of heterosexism and homophobia” that black women experience. This is important because homophobia is constructed as a monolithic, race-less, classless experience that all queer people experience in the exact same manner. Lorde complicates this concept and calls for a raced understanding of homophobia in America as it relates to black lesbian experiences. Lorde’s discussion of intra-racial politics in the black community is important because while U.S. black lesbian women inhabit a white-dominated society, there are nevertheless important bonds, allegiances, and tensions that exist among individuals who identify with the black community. Black lesbians are often seen as anomalies who do not fit into the heterosexual black family paradigm. “To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is woman-identified ... and who is (however illogically) against men” (Pharr 18). I think it is important to remember that black lesbian women are usually born to heterosexual parents, raised in heterosexual family contexts, and end up having families of their own. The narrative that is constructed about black lesbians negates these factors. For this reason, I think it is important that Lorde unearths very real tensions that exist surrounding black lesbian existence in the black community. Lorde claims that black heterosexual women have been conditioned to fear black lesbian existence. This conditioning presents itself in the forms of heterosexism and homophobia. According to Lorde, “A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying

against themselves. It has led some of us into destructive alliances, and others into despair and isolation” (Lorde 121). In this passage, Lorde points to the use of fear as a mechanism of control. Fear is utilized to divide and conquer heterosexual and queer identified black women. The threat of this fear for heterosexual black women traces itself back to the potential rejection of black heterosexual men.

In her book *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, Susanne Pharr discusses a theory about homophobia and sexism that derives from her personal life (Pharr xi). In defining this theory, Pharr explains that her methodology is subjective as it derives from her lived experiences. Pharr states that “the theory presented here is about homophobia in general which includes its effect on both lesbians and gay men, but the discussion centers primarily on its effects on heterosexual women and lesbians,” the aspect she knows most intimately (Pharr xi). Pharr explains her personal encounters with homophobia “through rejections by friends, threats of loss of employment, and threats upon [her] life. (Pharr 1). Pharr’s theories linking homophobia and sexism are directly applicable in attempting to understand black lesbian isolation that Audre Lorde discusses in *Sister Outsider*. In *Sister Outsider* Lorde points to the fact that merely being called a lesbian is a fear that many black women have internalized. This internalization has created a hostile environment between black heterosexual and lesbian women. Pharr states the following hypothesis:

If lesbians are established as threats to the status quo, as outcasts who must be punished, homophobia can wield its power over all women through lesbian baiting. Lesbian baiting is an attempt to control women by labeling us as lesbians because our behavior is not acceptable, that is ... because we resist male dominance and control ... To be named as a lesbian threatens all women, not just lesbians ... any woman who steps out of role risks being called a lesbian.

(Pharr 19)

In the above passage, Pharr does an excellent job of dissecting the nuances of “lesbian baiting” (Pharr 19). She defines homophobia as “the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex” (Pharr 1). While positioning lesbian baiting in the context of power, Pharr emphasizes that this phenomenon is an attempt to control women’s identity and sexuality. Suzanne Pharr’s theories on sexism and homophobia are enriched by Lorde’s analysis of how race intersects with lesbian baiting in a black lesbian context. As Lorde argues, “there are particular resonances of heterosexism and homophobia among black women” (Lorde 121). Lorde asserts that:

Black lesbians are a threat to Black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, are basically un-Black. These accusations coming from the very women to whom we look for deep and real understanding, have served to keep many black lesbians in hiding, caught between the racism of white women and the homophobia of their sisters.

(Lorde 121,122)

Lorde’s analysis of “lesbian baiting” in the black lesbian context links homophobia and sexism to understandings of black nationalism and identity. She points to an illogical contradiction that places black lesbians as an enemy of the black nation because of their sexual orientation. According to Lorde, black lesbians threaten black patriarchy and disrupt the heteronormative black order. It seems as though any vision of black love that does not involve a man and a woman is an unacceptable undertaking and an immediate threat to the black nuclear family structure. Audre Lorde discusses how black lesbians are caught in a difficult search for sisterhood and community building with other women. Having to deal with white women’s racism and black women’s homophobia deeply contributes to the countless black lesbians who do not feel comfortable living their lives openly as lesbians. In her essay “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities,” Lorde reminds the reader

of the countless gay and lesbian activists, artists, and writers who have been politicized and deeply involved in liberation movements. Lorde states the following: “Today, Lesbians and Gay men are some of the most active and engaged members” of political movements (Lorde 61). This essay is particularly powerful because Lorde reminds her public that “black lesbians are not apolitical” (Lorde 62). When Lorde was an activist, a scholar, a mother, a volunteer, she reminds us that she was a lesbian and that her identity cannot be compartmentalized (Lorde 58, 59).

As a reflection on these texts, I can say that my entire life I have been searching for women like me, although I did not always have a clear idea of who these women were. Although I am very comfortable associating with different people, I have spent the majority of my life feeling like I never fit into any community. Although I have white lesbian friends there are often certain things pertaining to race, sexuality, and identity that I am not comfortable discussing. Similarly, I feel as though I have to hide or minimize my lesbian identity with my black heterosexual female and male friends. I do not have many black lesbian friends. When I do meet a queer identified black woman, I am usually excited and hopeful that some sort of connection will develop between us.

Both Rich and Lorde’s theories help to further investigate the complexities of black lesbian existence. Audre Lorde’s discussion of black lesbians in the context of the black community is a conversation that does not often occur in the black community or in the queer community. Adrienne Rich’s theories are also important because they derive from her experiences as a white lesbian. From her experience, Rich realizes that homophobia is another component of sexism and patriarchy. In a heterosexist world, homophobia fuels heteronormative social relations between women and men and constructs these relationships as the only acceptable lifestyle.

Together, these two theorists, who are also good friends, help me to deconstruct my personal feelings of liminality as a black lesbian while also encouraging me to evaluate and problematize the heterosexist society I live in.

CHAPTER 4: Undoing Ethnocentrism: Investigating Transnational Understandings of Black Lesbian Identity

This chapter investigates personal, political, and social issues pertaining to black lesbian women of the African Diaspora, specifically focusing on women who live outside of United States borders. This chapter seeks to understand the experiences of black lesbian women in the social and cultural contexts in which they live, illustrating that black lesbian experiences are not universal, but dependent on a myriad of intersecting factors. The majority of the case studies examined in this chapter are from two anthologies: *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out* edited by Valerie Mason-John and *Piece of my Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* edited by Makeda Silvera. In this chapter I extract examples from these anthologies while delving in depth into Annette Clough's personal narrative, published in *Pieces of my Heart*. In this narrative, Clough discusses how her childhood experiences in Jamaica have shaped her identity as an Afro-Caribbean lesbian immigrating to Canada. Before delving into Annette Clough's narrative, I would like to introduce the two anthologies that have helped me to gain a better understanding of black lesbian identity in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Caribbean.

Born and raised in Jamaica, Makeda Silvera emigrated to Canada when she was twelve years old. Silvera is the author of several novels and co-founder and editor of Sister Vision Press, which "publishes innovative, challenging and provocative works by Canadian women of colour."⁴ When Silvera compiled *Piece of my Heart*, she had a vision of combining voices from a myriad of Canadian and United States women of color communities. A rich anthology, *Piece of my Heart*

⁴ <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/002026-291-e.html>

joins the voices of lesbian women of Afro-Caribbean, Asian, African American, Afro-Canadian, Caribbean-Canada, Asian-Canadian, and first nation descent. This groundbreaking anthology touches upon important themes such as coming out, memory, invisibility, power and pain. It is primarily from the pages of this anthology that I will focus on a variety of themes related to black lesbian identity. This chapter focuses on but is not limited to the following topics: The politics of coming out, immigration as a means of personal survival, the act of living double lives, and the politics of interracial dating. The majority of the women who have contributed to *Piece of my Heart* are writers, poets, activists, and mothers.

Black British author, conflict resolution specialist, and performance artist Valerie Mason-John edited *Talking Black: African and Asian Lesbians Speak Out* in 1994. In 1993, before the emergence of this anthology, Mason-John co-authored the book *Lesbians Talk: Making Black Waves* with Ann Khambatta. The contributing writers in *Talking Black* come from an array of racial and ethnic backgrounds including British women of African, Asian, Afro-Asian, and Afro-Caribbean descent. Reading this anthology was particularly interesting to me because it challenges hegemonic, U.S. based understandings of “race” and the way it is socially constructed. In chapter two of this anthology, *A Retrospective: Black Together Under One Banner*, Sri Lankan born author Savitri Hensman states that “some Asians regard themselves as Black, although others may strongly reject this identity. Black is sometimes taken to include everyone descended, through one or both parents, from Africa, Asia and Latin America and the original people of North American and Australasia” (Hensman 23). Hensman states that some individuals in the United Kingdom prefer to use the US adapted term “women of colo(u)r” as they feel it is more comprehensive and inclusive (Hensman 23). On the other hand, Hensman

explains that while this terms “has become popular among some Black lesbians in Britain, there are many who dislike it because it is reminiscent of the label ‘coloured,’ which was once used to categorize Black people in Britain” (Hensman 23). These nuances in language and social identification demonstrate the complexities and politics of language as it intersect with the social construction of identity categories. This reinforces the fact that black lesbian experiences cannot and should not be lumped into one universal theme or category of analysis. Comprehensive examination needs to be done on black lesbian women in the specific context in which they live and conceptualize their lives.

Voices from the African Diaspora: Conditions of Black Lesbian Exile

A common occurrence among Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-British lesbian women is the “condition of exile” (Chancy 1). The “condition of exile” can manifest itself in many different forms including both emotional and geographical exile. In Myriam Chancy’s article “Productive Contradictions: Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Feminism and the Question of Exile,” she discusses the “condition of exile” at length. She states:

The condition of exile is the condition of consistent, continual displacement; it is the radical uproot of all that one is and stands for, in a communal context, without loss of knowledge of those roots. It is, in fact, this knowledge that renders the experience of exile so cruelly painful, for what one has lost is carried in this forced nomadism from one geographical space to another; all that one has lost remains “over there,” in that place once known as home, now a distant vague shape on the world map, no longer the place in which we, the exiles, find ourselves.

(Chancy 1,2)

For Myriam Chancy, the “condition of exile” is a state of being and consciousness that is fraught with rich contradictions (Chancy 1). Chancy emphasizes that “the condition of exile” has no beginning and no ending point. The “condition of exile”

does not end with the physical act of geographical relocation. In addition, it is important to emphasize that many black lesbian women are physically and emotionally exiled in the countries in which they are born and consider their homes. An individual does not have to move away from their home country in order to be exiled. As such, I assert that “the condition of exile” is a liminal, in-between space, one that “crosses the boundaries of self and other, of citizenship and nationality, of home and homeland” (Chancy 1).

When looking at Miriam Chancy’s “condition of exile” from a Haitian-American lesbian standpoint, it is important for me to extend “the condition of exile” and explore its relevance to black lesbian subjects. In my analysis of Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-British lesbian women’s personal narratives, I am interested in exploring how lesbian identity creates and influences the “condition of exile” (Chancy 1). I am also interested in understanding how black lesbian identity is linked to notions of exile. How do geographic, emotional, and sexual exile intersect and influence black lesbian standpoints and experiences?

Immigration as a means of personal survival

In the anthology *Pieces of my Heart*, countless black lesbian women discuss their personal immigration stories to Canada through poetry, fiction and non-fiction short stories, and essays. Some black lesbians have immigrated to Canada with their families in order to seek a better life, while other black lesbians have immigrated to Canada on their own to seek refuge, personal safety, and freedom. It is important to look at immigration through a Human Rights framework in the later cases. Articles 14 and 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) state the following: “Everyone has the right to a nationality,” “No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his

nationality,” “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” Despite these rights that are presumed to be universal, black lesbian women are driven out of their birth countries on a daily basis due to violent, homophobic threats to their lives. Nevertheless, when these women immigrate to the United States, Canada, Europe, and other “progressive” nations they still encounter violence, racism, and homophobia on a daily basis. After reading these women’s words, it is clear to me that homophobia robs many black lesbian women of their homeland and nationality. Homophobia forces black lesbians to be displaced and to move to lands that are not their own. Homophobia forces these women to restructure the fabric of their lives in unfamiliar territory all the while knowing that this new place will never truly be their home. In order to look at these intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality, I will examine the following short story.

In the personal narrative “Leaving Home, Coming Home” Annette Clough writes about her experiences emigrating from Jamaica to Vancouver, Canada when she was nineteen years old. Her story thoughtfully examines intersections of race, class, geography, and legacies of colonialism that informed her experiences. Clough begins the narrative by discussing the concept of home. “What is home? How does one define home? Which factors make up an individual’s home?” Clough states: “If home means place of origin, then home is Jamaica. I was born there, I grew up there, I am the product of that history, that climate, that landscape, and twenty five years in Canada does not change what that means to me (Clough 28).” Clough complicates this concept by stating possible qualifiers that define her personal understandings of home. Through her utilization of the ‘if-then’ construct, Clough indicates that she herself does not have a clear understanding of what home constitutes. As an individual who was born and raised in Jamaica but who has spent the majority of her

adult life in Canada, Clough seems to operate within a liminal space. She defines herself in the following statement:

Now I am legally a Canadian and emotionally a Jamaican. I am also a lesbian, and that means I won't be going home, not to that country, that place. To live in Jamaica now would mean isolation, ostracism and fear. Living openly as a lesbian in Canada has its risks and dangers, but to be as "out" in Jamaica as I am here would be virtually impossible. There would be no lesbian community for support; I would face the possibility of gossip, innuendo and threats of violence almost alone.

(Clough 8)

In the above passage, Clough illustrates that she is at once divided between her legal status as a Canadian citizen and her emotional status as a Jamaican woman. This binary is further complicated by her identity as a lesbian woman. Clough's sexuality adds yet another dimension to the liminal space that she occupies. Clough also alludes to the importance of community and shared experience. With a lack of a visible lesbian community in Jamaica, Clough expresses the risks and difficulties of living as an open lesbian in Jamaica. Without a community to turn to for safety and identification, being a lesbian or gay individual in Jamaica can be extremely isolating. As Miriam Chancy has written in her important essay:

Because Afro-Caribbean women are not only forced to strike a balance between the land of their exile, which is usually also that of a colonizing force, and their homeland, any number of Caribbean islands, they must also overcome the negation of their identities as women in a world that defines itself as male... It is in exile that such awareness of the limitations imposed upon the body becomes much clearer; for "out there" women have opportunities to speak out against their marginalization in a culture which is not theirs and which is not likely to punish for speaking out against the emigrants' culture that it feels the less threatened by.

(Chancy 5)

Miriam Chancy's astute analysis of Afro-Caribbean women's identity is directly applicable to Anette Clough's personal narrative. Chancy's discussion on navigating

the “condition of exile” is important because she moves beyond androcentric, geographical understandings of exile to the gendered experience of Afro-Caribbean women (Chancy 1). To further Chancy’s analysis, I think it is important to look at the specificity of Afro-Caribbean lesbian women living in a heteronormative culture. In addition to navigating being a foreigner in a xenophobic society, Afro-Caribbean lesbians navigate living as women in a male dominated society, lesbians in a country where heterosexuals are privileged, and being black in a society where whiteness is highly valued. These intersecting factors complicate my understanding of Afro-Caribbean women’s exile. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of their “condition of exile,” it is imperative to evaluate all of the factors that affect this condition. In addition to the factors listed above, there are many other aspects of Afro-Caribbean women’s exile that are important to address. Issues such as socio-economic class, religion, and societal customs culturally specific and depend on the individual woman in question.

In the above quote, Miriam Chancy also discusses how exile arouses a sense of awareness and consciousness in Afro-Caribbean women. It is in exile that many Afro-Caribbean women become politicized and speak out against injustices occurring in their home countries. As Chancy discusses in her article, some Afro-Caribbean women in exile are able to create a call and response like dialogue with their home countries. This discussion sometimes focuses on problems in their home countries while also echoing problematic aspects of the host country in which they live. In his documentary “Darker Shades of Black,” Isac Julien demonstrates how “the homosexual act is illegal in Jamaica,” while pointing to different socio-cultural apparatuses such as religion, music, and social practices that openly condemn homosexuality. Today, in Jamaica, “the churches take a strong stance against any

suggestion that homophobia be criminalized.” In this documentary, Buju Banton, writer and singer of “Boom bye bye” is interviewed at length. After its release in 2004, this song caused an international outcry because of its homophobic lyrics encouraging the murder of gay me. Cornell West comments on this song and the larger culture of reggae and hip-hop by stating the following:

Black nationalist politics actually is a mirroring of that same type of patriarchal perspective, why because gays and lesbians set a certain type of alternative to the patriarchal identity that is reinforced by a black nationalist politic so that in hip-hop ... you are hearing something positive, black identity, black self-love, black self-affirmation and something negative, patriarchal identity reinforced, homophobia promoted, and an attempt to provide ways of policing black folk into one homogeneous blob. And this follows from the very worse of white supremacy.

(West 2004)

In this passage, West points to the complex and contradictory nature of hip-hop and reggae music. While powerful and affirming in some respect, patriarchy and homophobia are reinforced as well. While songs like “Boom by bye” are released far too commonly, important activist and scholarly work is being produced in response to these violent homophobic movements.

One public example of a call and response dialogue is contemporary poet Staceyann Chin’s poetry and writings on homophobia in Jamaica. Born in Jamaica and residing in New York, Staceyann Chin travels around the world performing poetry and doing one-woman shows. In her performances, she discusses the pervasive nature of homophobia in Jamaican culture. Due to blatant and violent homophobic threats, Staceyann Chin decided that she could not live in Jamaica, although she considers it her home.

Staceyann Chin’s social location in the United States gives her the ability and power to speak about homophobia in Jamaica and voice her opinions on an international scale. Staceyann Chin “can ironically politicize [her] discourse and be

heard in more than one culture simultaneously” (Chancy 5). In doing so, she “resists assimilation” while being critical of her homeland (Chancy 5). In an article appearing in Atlanta’s Southern Voice newspaper on April 16th, 2009, Chin states the following: “I am an activist first and then everything else after, and of course there is always an agenda when one writes one’s story-especially a woman of color, a lesbian and an immigrant” (Chin 33). In the article, Chin discusses an instance where she was sexually assaulted and almost raped in Jamaica because she was a lesbian as well as the competing allegiances that black lesbians encounter “based on sexual orientation, gender, race or class” (Chin 33). Chin’s ability to be critical and nostalgic of Jamaica, all the while addressing homophobia in the United States speaks to the rich contradictions of the “condition of exile” (Chancy 1). Chin closes the article with an open call to marginalized individuals to “Pick up a camera, pick up a pen, pick up a guitar-lift your voice and begin to craft your own history, so that when we are gone the cannon will reflect that we were here” (Chin 33). This important plea speaks to the importance of the articulation and re-articulation of a black lesbian standpoint as a means to document historical presence and make a critical intervention into the present cannon.

Staceyann Chin’s public discourse derives from her “condition of exile” (Chancy 1). Like Chin, Annette Clough’s lesbian identity is one of the major deciding factors of her geographic home. For both Staceyann Chin and Annette Clough, their lesbian identities clash with their ability to live peacefully, safely, or openly in Jamaica. Clough and Chin’s lesbian identities strip them of their “right to nationality” because violence is a very real threat to their lives in Jamaica, their birth countries. Unfortunately, these two women are not the only lesbians of Jamaican

descent who have openly spoken out about the brutal violence directly targeted at lesbian and gay communities in Jamaica.

In “Leaving Home, Coming Home,” Annette Clough discusses her educational and social upbringing in an all girls school in Jamaica. As Clough describes it, the girls at her school had very intimate relationships with each other, although they did not describe these relationships as sexual in nature. Clough states that there was “no shame in touches, in the love letters and tête-à-têtes and days and even nights spent together” (Clough 9). Clough describes these relationships as “tender friendships” and pure love (Clough 9). Clough explains a theoretical distinction between their behavior and sexual behavior. Theoretically, sexual behavior consisted of a series of acts that involved men, therefore, since no boys or men were involved in these equations, the young women did not interpret their relationships with each other as sexual in nature. Clough relays that she never heard the word “lesbian” when she was growing up at her all girls school (Clough 9).

Because the term “lesbian” is arguably a western construct, it is important to conceptualize various forms of same gender love without placing the geographic and temporal constraints that the word “lesbian” holds. Although I use the term “lesbian” in this thesis as the primary point of reference and identification, many black “women identified women” around the world do not self-identify as “lesbians.” To me, “lesbian” is a racialized and geographically specific term. When I visualize lesbians, I think of white women in the United States. Yet, when I search for language to define myself, language seems to fall short and in order to gain visibility and form community identification, I call myself a lesbian. Every time I vocally refer to myself as a “lesbian,” I know that it is a lie. Immediately, I know that this is not what I am. I have a hard time defining myself as a “lesbian” for some of the same reasons I

struggle defining myself as “Black,” “African American,” and “Woman.” These socially constructed categories are loaded with meaning, histories, and narratives that existed before I ever step foot on this earth. The idea of being born into an identity is extremely unsettling to me. To delve further, it can be especially problematic when you are born into an identity that is seen as negative and is completely devalued in the world in which you live. In this world, being a black, lesbian, woman is not seen or understood as a positive thing by many people.

In critically acclaimed author Alice Walker’s book *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, she advances the term “womanism” as a refreshing alternative to feminism that reflects the experiences of black women. Walker defines womanism in the following manner:

The black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e. like a woman ... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one ... [A womanist is also] a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture ... and women's strength ... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist ... Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

(Walker xi–xii)

According to Walker, womanism provides an alternative space for black women who, for a multitude of reasons, do not identify with feminism and/or lesbianism. Rooted in the experiences of Southern black women, Walker’s pronouncement of womanism creates a space for black women who identify with women in both sexual and nonsexual relationships to openly identify with one another’s experiences. When it comes to sexual fluidity, womanism parallels Adrienne Rich’s theory of the lesbian continuum, which is a social and political ideology that bridges women together across sexualities. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum,” Rich defines the lesbian continuum in the following manner:

Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range- through each woman's life and throughout history-of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.

(Rich 51)

In this essay, Rich asserts that lesbian women have always existed, from the beginning of time. In the above excerpt, Rich makes space for women-identified relationships that are not necessarily sexual in nature. Many of the interactions between the women and girls in Annette Clough's childhood would be recognized by Rich's "lesbian continuum" (Rich 51) and Walker's pronouncement of "womanism" (Walker xi-xii). For many black women, womanism has opened up a space where they can explore feminist ideologies that are relevant to their lived experiences while also cultivating the important and complex relationships they have with the women in their lives. As Walker emphasizes in the above quote, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker xi-xii). This statement emphasizes the connection between womanism and feminism while also recognizing that geographical and cultural strength and significance that womanism holds for black women.

Interestingly enough, although Clough did not have a solid concept of what lesbianism was, she distinctly remembers "the passionate crushes on school friends and young teachers, and the innocence in which [she] walked around school holding hands with [her] best friends" (Clough 9). It is in the spirit of these thoughts and memories that Annette Clough wonders if Jamaica had anything to do with her becoming a lesbian (Clough 9). Whether or not there is a clear-cut answer to that question is left uncertain. Nevertheless, Clough states that she knows "her reliance on women for friendship and support started there" (Clough 9). Clough asserts that she

became use to living in a “society of women,” where she saw women in positions of power at every level that her education was concerned. Without the presence of boys, Clough embraced the ability to concentrate on her studies without “worrying about being threatening to boys” (Clough 9). This type of female dominated environment where women were able to express their love, affection, and desire for one another affirms what feminist theorist Adrienne Rich calls “lesbian existence” and is an example of what she calls the “lesbian continuum.”

When Annette Clough recalls her schoolgirl days, she remembers a number of “older unmarried teachers” who wore “slacks all the time and smoked all the time at a time when ladies did not smoke” (Clough 10). As these women inhabited a space without men, in retrospect, Clough wonders whether or not some of her professors practiced “the love which in those days did not dare to speak its name” (Clough 9,10). Clough claims that she is indebted to these women who did not follow society’s expectations of them and who “hinted at unacknowledged possibilities” (Clough 10). Clough believes that “their subtle form of rebellion would in time reinforce [her] own” (Clough 10). Clough’s memories of her schoolgirl experiences speak to the importance of black lesbian visibility as a liberatory and empowering force for other black queer identified women. The mere presence of non-conforming black women in a heteronormative space is important to the survival and development of queer and questioning black women.

In her narrative, Annette Clough discusses how her ethnicity and socio-economic class informed her experiences growing up in Jamaica and immigrating to Canada. Clough recalls “with a more mature experience growing up middle class and light skinned in an ex-colony,” she now understands the many layers of privilege she

occupied as a result of these identities. In retrospect, Clough analyzes her upbringing and acknowledges her past denial. Clough states the following:

I am aware that I was brought up on many levels of denial: denial of my mixed race heritage, or the meaning of being the product of slavery and colonialism, of the significance of Africa in Jamaican culture. The more I understand about where I came from, the more I identify with that history and culture, the less I feel a part of this society.

(Clough 9)

In the above statement, Clough identifies traces of colonialism that affected her upbringing in Jamaica. As a light skinned, middle class girl, Clough was sheltered from many aspects of Jamaican culture, its colonial legacy in particular. Clough notes that she experienced a Jamaica that was somewhat removed from African cultural roots and that having light skin granted her a certain amount of privilege and social status. Clough recalls that it was after she moved to Canada that she became more aware of and attached to her Jamaican ancestry and the country's rich history. Clough's experience of reconnecting to her Jamaican roots after emigrating from there intersects and coexists with her inability to return to Jamaica, her emotional home. These realizations were able to occur in part because Clough left Jamaica and was able to "redefine [herself], away from the strictures of class and family name" (Clough 10). Clough explains the following in regard to her ability to grow outside of a Jamaican context. "Freedom from those institutions allowed me to understand the limitations this society puts on women, people of colour and gays and lesbians" (Clough 10). Clough claims that the women's movement has given her the strength and the context to live as an out lesbian in Canada. Women of colour coming together and organizing have given Clough a community to relate to and a context to explore the multiple facets of her identity.

Through reading and analyzing the writings of lesbian women from the African Diaspora, I have come to understand the importance of writing as a mechanism to understand and process the “condition of exile” (Chancy 1). The writers in *Talking Black* and *Pieces of my Heart* use their words to give voice to their experiences while speaking back to the different ways they have been oppressed and the cultures that have played a role in this oppression. By bearing witness to their experiences in a public manner, black lesbian women of the African Diaspora are creating a powerful, public conversation about what it means to be a black lesbian immigrant in a land that is not your own. The cultural and social specificity of their narratives helps to contextualize the specific nature of their experiences. Through these narratives, I have come to understand how tensions existing between these women’s emotional homes and host countries are fraught with powerful contradictions. In my analysis of Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-British lesbian women’s personal narratives, it is painstakingly clear that an intersectional analysis is essential to unearthing the many complexities that define these women’s lives. It is impossible to separate race, class, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. All of these factors combined create the richness and the powerful framework that defines black lesbian women’s lives.

Conclusion

Investigating black lesbian history, epistemology, and lived experiences broadens people's understanding of human difference and diversity. In writing this thesis, my main goal was to inspire discussion about black lesbians on a global scale. From my perspective, black lesbian existence and experience is an under-researched and under-theorized area. This can possibly be attributed to the value that the world places on black lesbians. This being said, the goal of my thesis was to understand black lesbian existence from a black lesbian perspective. In addition to articulating a black lesbian perspective, this thesis unearths and explores some of the narratives about black lesbians.

Through my research, I have found that while black lesbian women do share some common experiences, it is impossible to generalize about the black lesbian experience. There is no monolithic black lesbian experience. Factors like ethnicity, class, age, time, and geography play a significant role in different black lesbian lives. Even if we were to speak with two black lesbians who have lived parallel lives, their perspectives and experiences will still differ greatly. With this research, it is my hope to give black lesbian women a sense of historical significance and continuity. Until I discovered Audre Lorde's work, I believed that black lesbians had no history. Black lesbian history was never presented to me in school or in any other area of my life. With an increasing acceptance of queer individuals, it is my hope that black lesbian narratives, theories, and visibility will increase as well.

In Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she states the following: "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other

effect” (Lorde 40). Similarly, I feel as though black lesbian voices and histories need to be heard, even though they might be misunderstood. By writing this thesis engaging black lesbian history and thought, I am ultimately giving voice to my own history and the history of many black lesbians who might not be aware of this powerful tradition of women.

In conducting this research, I have learned that one of the most important tenets of black lesbian epistemology is transforming “silence into language and action” (Lorde 40). Black lesbians like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke have inspired women to embrace their voices and understand the power of their individual agency. In *Home Girls*, Barbara Smith reminds us that “many of the most committed and outspoken feminists have been and are lesbians (xxx Smith). Black lesbians have started importance advocacy organizations, organized groundbreaking conferences, published their writings and encouraged one another to speak out against the grain. Contemporary examples of this activism include Spelman College’s Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA) and LGBT group, Afrekete. These student run organizations have weekly planning meetings in which they discuss radical black feminist ideals and plan transformative events. The women in these groups write articles published on a national level and boycott events such as the Nelly Boycott,⁵ that raise awareness about misogyny and violence against women. Spelman college’s Women’s Research and Resource Center also hosts annual Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bombara conferences, which attract black feminists and lesbians from across the country and around the world. These powerful women also created the Zami project, a one year initiative to raise awareness regarding issues of

⁵ Nelly Boycott. More information can be found at the following link:
http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_1380.shtml

intolerance on campus particularly homophobia and sexism.⁶ The first time that I attended a conference at the Women's Research and Resource Center, it was one of the most transformative experiences that I had had to date. I had never before in my life been in a space with such open minded, radical, and compassionate black women. I immediately understood Barbara Smith conceptualization of black feminist space as home. It is in this tradition of black feminism and lesbianism that so many black women have been validated and inspired to produce substantial social change. Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld-Grimke, Nella Larsen, and Mabel Hampton were so brave to leave traces behind for the women who would trace their footsteps and follow them. These heroines inspired and sustained women like Lorde, hooks, Smith, and Clarke on their searches for sisterhood and community identification. These black lesbians' collective strength, life's work, and existence have given power and voice to black lesbians who have come after them and to black lesbians who have yet to come.

⁶ The Zami Project. Information obtained from Spelman college website.

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