

SKIN DEEP, SPIRIT STRONG

**The Black Female Body
in American Culture**



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84. Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, 232.
85. Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, 213.
86. Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, 241.
87. See Shapiro, *Population Control*, 107.
88. Cited in Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, 241.
89. Eeva Ollila, Kristiina Kajesalo, and Elina Hemminki, "Experience of Norplant by Finnish Family Planning Practitioners," in *Norplant: Under Her Skin*, ed. Barbara Mintzes, Anita Hardon, and Jannemieke Hanhart (Amsterdam: Women's Health Action Foundation, 1993), 61.
90. Ollila, Kajesalo, and Hemminki, "Experience of Norplant," 61. Here the authors cite A. Purvis, "A Pill That Gets under the Skin: Norplant Could Spur Birth Control—and Stir Controversy," *Time*, (Dec. 24, 1990), 45.
91. Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights*, 200.
92. *Jane Doe, Amrita Garcia, Mary Roe, and Leticia Walker v. Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories*, 93 L 11096. See Heather M. Little, "No Panacea: Norplant Suit Charges Failure to Educate Patients," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1993.
93. Inadequate counseling and informed consent as well as the practice of inserting Norplant in women who are medically at risk have been well documented within the Native American community. See Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, *Impact of Norplant*. An overview of this study was printed as "Native American Women Uncover Norplant Abuses," *Ms.*, Sept./Oct. 1993, 69.
94. See American Health Consultants, "Too Much or Too Little—Access to Norplant Implants Fuels Ethics Debate," *Contraceptive Technology Update* 14, no. 9 (1993); and "Clinicians, Patients, Medicaid: Is Anyone to Blame for Norplant Removal Dilemma?" *Contraceptive Technology Update* 14, no. 10 (1993).
95. Barker-Benfield, *Horrors of the Half-Known Life*, 95.

Evelynn Hammonds

Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be. Even in an allegedly postmodern era, the not-white woman as well as the not-white man are symbolically and even theoretically excluded from sexual difference. Their function continues to be to cast the difference of white men and white women into sharper relief.

—Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid"

When asked to write on queer theory I must admit I was at first hesitant even to entertain the idea. Though much of what is now called queer theory I find engaging and intellectually stimulating, I still found the idea of writing about it disturbing. When I am asked if I am queer I usually answer yes even though the ways in which I am queer have never been articulated in the *body* of work that is now called queer theory. Where should I begin? I asked myself. Do I have to start by adding another adjective to my already long list of self-chosen identities? I used to be a Black lesbian, feminist, writer, scientist, historian of science, and activist. Now would I be a Black, queer, feminist, writer, scientist, historian of science, and activist? Given the rapidity with which new appellations are

created I wondered if my new list would still be up to date by the time the article came out. More importantly, would this change or any change I might make to my list convey to anyone the ways in which I am queer?

Even a cursory reading of the first issue of the journal *differences*, on queer theory, or a close reading of *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Abelove, Barale, and Halperin)—by now biblical in status—would lead me to answer no. So what would be the point of my writing on queer theory? Well, I could perform that by-now-familiar act taken by Black feminists and offer a critique of every white feminist for her failure to articulate a conception of a racialized sexuality. I could argue that while it has been acknowledged that race is not simply additive to, or derivative of, sexual difference, few white feminists have attempted to move beyond simply stating this point to describe the powerful effect that race has on the construction and representation of gender and sexuality. I could go further and note that even when race is mentioned it is a limited notion devoid of complexities. Sometimes it is reduced to biology and other times referred to as a social construction. Rarely is it used as a “global sign,” a “metalanguage,” as the “ultimate trope of difference, arbitrarily contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination” (Higginbotham 255).

If I were to make this argument, I wonder under what subheading such an article would appear in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*? Assuming, of course, that they would want to include it in the second edition. How about “Politics and Sex”? Well, it would certainly be political, but what would anybody learn about sex from it? As I look at my choices I see that I would want my article to appear in the section “Subjectivity, Discipline, Resistance.” But where would I situate myself in the group of essays that discuss “lesbian experience,” “lesbian identity,” “gender insubordination,” and the “Butch-Femme Aesthetic”? Perhaps they wouldn’t want a reprint after all, and I’d be off the hook. Maybe I’ve just hit one of those “constructed silences” that Teresa de Lauretis writes about as one of the problems in lesbian and gay studies (“Queer” viii).

When *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* was published, I followed my usual practice and searched for the articles on Black women’s sexuality. This reading practice has become such a commonplace in my life I have forgotten how and when I began it. I never open a book about lesbians or gays with the expectation that I will find some essay that will address the concerns of my life. Given that on the average most collections don’t include writers of color, just the appearance of essays by African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in this volume was welcome. The work of Barbara Smith, Stuart Hall, Phillip Brian Harper,

Gloria Hull, Deborah McDowell, and, of course, Audre Lorde has deeply influenced my intellectual and political work for many years, as has the work of many of the other writers in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*.

Yet, despite the presence of these writers, this text displays the consistently exclusionary practices of lesbian and gay studies in general. In my reading, the canonical terms and categories of the field, *lesbian, gay, butch, femme, sexuality, and subjectivity*, are stripped of context in the works of those theorizing about these very categories, identities, and subject positions. Each of these terms is defined with white as the normative state of existence. This is an obvious criticism that many have expressed since the appearance of this volume. More interesting is the question of whether the essays engaging with the canonical terms have been in any way informed by the work of the writers of color that do appear in the volume. The essays by Hull and McDowell both address the point I am trying to make. 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 points to the submersion of sexuality and same-sex desire among Black women. In addition, Harper’s essay on the death of Max Robinson, one of the most visible African Americans of his generation, foregrounds the silence in Black communities on the issue of sexuality and AIDS. “Silence” is emphasized as well in the essay by Ana Maria Alonso and Maria Teresa Koreck on the AIDS crisis in “Hispanic” communities. But the issue of silence about so-called deviant sexuality in public discourse and its submersion in private spaces for people of color is never addressed in theorizing about the canonical categories of lesbian and gay studies in the reader. More important, public discourse on the sexuality of particular racial and ethnic groups is shaped by processes that pathologize those groups, which in turn produces the submersion of sexuality and the attendant silence(s). Lesbian and gay theory fails to acknowledge that these very processes are connected to the construction of the sexualities of whites, historically and contemporaneously.

Queer Words and Queer Practices

I am not by nature an optimist, although I do believe that change is possible and necessary. Does a shift from lesbian to queer relieve my sense of anxiety over whether the exclusionary practices of lesbian and gay studies can be resolved? If queer theory is, as de Lauretis notes in her

introduction to the first special issue of *differences*, the place where “we [would] be willing to examine, make explicit, compare, or confront the respective histories, assumptions, and conceptual frameworks that have characterized the self-representations of North American lesbians and gay men, of color and white,” and if it is “from there, [that] we could then go on to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual,” then maybe I had found a place to explore the ways in which queer, Black, and female subjectivities are produced (iv–v). Of course, I first had to gather more evidence about this shift before I jumped into the fray.

In her genealogy of queer theory, de Lauretis argues that the term was arrived at in the effort to avoid all the distinctions in the discursive protocols that emerged from the standard usage of the terms *lesbians* and *gay*. The kind of distinctions she notes includes the need to add qualifiers of race or national affiliation to the labels “lesbian” and “gay.” De Lauretis goes on to address my central concern. She writes:

The fact of the matter is, most of us, lesbians and gay men, do not know much about one another's sexual history, experiences, fantasies, desire, or modes of theorizing. And we do not know enough about ourselves, as well, when it comes to differences between and within lesbians, and between and within gay men, in relation to race and its attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and socio-political location. *We do not know enough to theorize those differences.* (viii, emphasis added)

She continues:

Thus an equally troubling question in the burgeoning field of “gay and lesbian studies” concerns the discursive constructions and constructed silences around the relations of race to identity and subjectivity in the practices of homosexualities and the representations of same sex desire. (viii)

In my reading of her essay, de Lauretis then goes on to attribute the problem of the lack of knowledge of the experiences of gays and lesbians of color to gays and lesbians of color. While noting the problems of their restricted access to publishing venues or academic positions, she concludes that “perhaps, to a gay writer and critic of color, defining himself gay is not of the utmost importance; he may have other more pressing

priorities in his work and life” (ix). This is a woefully inadequate characterization of the problem of the visibility of gays and lesbians of color. 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. I have reported de Lauretis's words at length because her work is symptomatic of the disjuncture I see between the stated goals of the volume she edited and what it actually enacts.

Despite the presence of writers of color, the authors of the essays in the *differences* volume avoid interrogating their own practices with respect to the issue of difference—that is to say, to differences of race, ethnicity, and representation in analyzing subjectivity, desire, and the use of the psychoanalytic in gay and lesbian theory. Only Ekuia Omosupe explicitly addresses the issue of Black female subjectivity, and her essay foregrounds the very issue that queer theory ostensibly is committed to addressing. Omosupe still sees the need to announce her skepticism at the use of the term *lesbian* without the qualifier “Black” and addresses the lack of attention to race in gay and lesbian studies in her analysis of Adrienne Rich's work (108). For her, the term *lesbian* without the racial qualifier is simply to be read as “white” lesbian. Despite her criticism, however, she too avoids confronting difference within the category of Black lesbian, speaking of “the” Black lesbian without attention to or acknowledgment of a multiplicity of identities or subject positions for Black women. She notes that the title of Audre Lorde's collected essays is *Sister Outsider*, which she argues is “an apt metaphor for the Black lesbian's position in relation to the white dominant political cultures and to her own Black community as well” (106). But metaphors reveal as much as they conceal, and Omosupe cannot tell us what kind of outsider Lorde is—that is to say, what sexual practices, discourses, and subject positions within her Black community she was rebelling against. As with the Hull and McDowell essays, Omosupe's article acknowledges silence, erasure, and invisibility as crucial issues in the dominant discourses about Black female sexuality, while the essay and the volume as a whole continue to enact this silence.

Thus, queer theory as reflected in the *differences* volume has so far failed to theorize the very questions that de Lauretis announces the term *queer* will address. I disagree with her assertion that we do not know enough about one another's differences to theorize differences between and within gays and lesbians in relation to race. This kind of theorizing of difference, after all, isn't simply a matter of empirical examples. And we do know enough to delineate what queer theorists *should* want to know. For me it is a question of knowing specifically about the production of Black

Black feminist theorists have almost universally described Black women's sexuality, when viewed from the vantage of the dominant discourses, as an absence. In one of the earliest and most compelling discussions of Black women's sexuality, the literary critic Hortense Spillers wrote, "Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their verb*" ("Interstices" 74). For writer Toni Morrison, Black women's sexuality is one of the "unspeakable things unspoken" of the African American experience. Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a "void" or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where Black women's bodies are always already colonized. In addition, this always already colonized Black female body has so much sexual potential that it has none at all (Spillers, "Interstices" 85). Historically, Black women have reacted to this repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility.

Black feminist theorists, historians, literary critics, sociologists, lawyers, and cultural critics have drawn upon a specific historical narrative that purportedly describes the factors that have produced and maintained perceptions of Black women's sexuality (including their own). Three themes emerge in this history: first, the construction of the Black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of Black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white; second, the resistance of Black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and to the material effects of those stereotypes on their lives; and, finally, the evolution of a "culture of dissemblance" and a "politics of silence" by Black women on the issue of their sexuality. The historical narrative begins with the production of the image of a pathologized Black female "other" in the eighteenth century by European colonial elites and the new biological scientists. By the nineteenth century, with the increasing exploitation and abuse of Black women during and after slavery, U.S. Black women reformers began to develop strategies to counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality and their use as a justification for the rape, lynching, and other abuses of Black women by whites. Although some of the strategies used by Black women reformers might have initially been characterized as resistance to dominant and increasingly hegemonic constructions of their sexuality, by the early twentieth century Black women reformers promoted a public silence about sexuality that, it could be argued, continues to the present.² This "politics of silence," as described by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, emerged as a political strategy by Black women reformers who hoped by

female queer sexualities: if the sexualities of Black women have been shaped by silence, erasure, and invisibility in dominant discourses, then are Black lesbian sexualities doubly silenced? What methodologies are available to read and understand this perceived void and gauge its direct and indirect effects on that which is visible? Conversely, how does the structure of what is visible, namely white female sexualities, shape those not-absent-but-not-present Black female sexualities that, as O'Grady argues, cannot be separated or understood in isolation from one another? And, finally, how do these racialized sexualities shaped by silence, erasure, and invisibility coexist with other sexualities, the closeted sexualities of white queers, for example? It seems to me that there are two projects here that need to be worked out. White feminists must refigure (white) female sexualities so that they are not theoretically dependent upon an absent-yet-ever-present pathologized Black female sexuality. I am not arguing that this figuration of (white) female sexuality must try to encompass completely the experiences of Black women but that it must include a conception of the power relations between white and Black women as expressed in the representations of sexuality (Higginbotham 252).¹ This model of power, as Judith Butler has argued, must avoid setting up "racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations," while recognizing that "what has to be thought through, is the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation" (18). Black feminist theorists must reclaim sexuality through the creation of a counternarrative that can reconstitute a present Black female subjectivity and that includes an analysis of power relations between white and Black women and among different groups of Black women. In both cases I am arguing for the development of a complex, relational, but not necessarily analogous conception of racialized sexualities (JanMohamed 94). In order to describe more fully what I see as the project for Black feminist theorists, I want to turn now to a review of some of the current discussions of Black women's sexuality.

The Problematic of Silence

To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look. Nevertheless, we can't theorize in a void; we must have evidence.

—Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid"

their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral Black woman (262). Historian Darlene Clark Hine argues that the "culture of dissemblance" that this politics engendered was seen as a way for Black women to "protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives" (915). She defines this culture as "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (915). "Only with secrecy," Hine argues, "thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own" (915). And by the projection of the image of a "super-moral" Black woman, they hoped to garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity for all Black Americans (915). Of course, as Higginbotham notes, there were problems with this strategy. First, it did not achieve its goal of ending the negative stereotyping of Black women. And second, some middle-class Black women engaged in policing the behavior of poor and working-class women and any who deviated from a Victorian norm in the name of protecting the "race."³ My interpretation of the conservatizing and policing aspect of the "politics of silence" is that Black women reformers were responding to the ways in which any Black woman could find herself "exposed" and characterized in racist sexual terms no matter what the truth of her individual life and that they saw this so-called deviant individual behavior as a threat to the race as a whole. Finally, one of the most enduring and problematic aspects of the "politics of silence" is that in choosing silence Black women also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality.

Without more detailed historical studies we will not know the extent of this "culture of dissemblance," and many questions will remain to be answered.⁴ Was it expressed differently in rural and in urban areas, in the North, West, or South? How was it maintained? Where and how was it resisted? How was it shaped by class? And, furthermore, how did it change over time? How did something that was initially adopted as a political strategy in a specific historical period become so ingrained in Black life as to be recognizable as a culture? Or did it? What emerges from the very incomplete history we have is a situation in which Black women's sexuality is ideologically located in a nexus between race and gender, where the Black female subject is not seen and has no voice. Methodologically, Black feminists have found it difficult even to fully characterize this juncture, this point of erasure where African American women are located. As legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw puts it, "Existing within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and the

empty spaces between, it is a location whose very nature resists telling" (403). And this silence about sexuality is enacted individually and collectively by Black women and by Black feminist theorists writing about Black women.

It should not surprise us that Black women are silent about sexuality. The imposed production of silence and the removal of any alternatives to the production of silence reflect the deployment of power against racialized subjects, "wherein those who could speak did not want to and those who did want to speak were prevented from doing so" (JanMohamed 105). It is this deployment of power at the level of the social and the individual that has to be historicized. It seems clear that we need a methodology that allows us to contest rather than reproduce the ideological system that has up to now defined the terrain of Black women's sexuality. Spillers made this point over a decade ago when she wrote: "Because black American women do not participate, as a category of social and cultural agents, in the legacies of symbolic power, they maintain no allegiances to a strategic formation of texts, or ways of talking about sexual experience, that even remotely resemble the paradigm of symbolic domination, except that such a paradigm has been their concrete disaster" ("Interstices" 80). To date, through the work of Black feminist literary critics, we know more about the elision of sexuality by Black women than we do about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire.⁵ Thus what we have is a very narrow view of Black women's sexuality. Certainly it is true, as Crenshaw notes, that "in feminist contexts, sexuality represents a central site of the oppression of women; rape and the rape trial are its dominant narrative trope. In antiracist discourse, sexuality is also a central site upon which the repression of blacks has been premised; the lynching narrative is embodied as its trope" (405). Sexuality is also, as Carol Vance defines it, "simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency" (1). The restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of Black female sexuality have been emphasized by Black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed.

I want to suggest that Black feminist theorists have not taken up this project in part because of their own status in the academy. Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a process that Black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory. Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body—the maimed immoral Black female body—which can be and still is used by others to

discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects. Legal scholar Patricia Williams illuminates my point: "No matter what degree of professional I am, people will greet and dismiss my black femaleness as unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational, and probably destitute" (95). When reading student evaluations, she finds comments about her teaching and her body: "I marvel, in a moment of genuine bitterness, that anonymous student evaluations speculating on dimensions of my anatomy are nevertheless counted into the statistical measurement of my teaching proficiency" (95). The hypervisibility of Black women academics and the contemporary fascination with what bell hooks calls the "commodification of Otherness" (21) mean that Black women today find themselves precariously perched in the academy. Ann duCille notes:

Mass culture, as hooks argues, produces, promotes, and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness through the exploitation of the black female body. In the 1990s, however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community. (592)

In tandem with the notion of silence, Black women writers have repeatedly drawn on the notion of the "invisible" to describe aspects of Black women's lives in general and sexuality in particular. Lorde writes that "within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (91). The hypervisibility of Black women academics means that visibility too can be used to control the intellectual issues that Black women can and cannot speak about. With Black women already threatened with being sexualized and rendered inauthentic as knowledge producers in the academy by students and colleagues alike, this avoidance of theorizing about sexuality can be read as one contemporary manifestation of their structured silence. I want to stress here that the silence about sexuality on the part of Black women academics is no more a "choice" than was the silence practiced by early twentieth-century Black women. This production of *silence* instead of *speech* is an effect of the institutions such as the academy that are engaged in the commodification of Otherness. While hypervisibility can be used to silence Black women academics, it can also

serve them. Lorde has argued that the "visibility which makes us most vulnerable," that of being Black, "is that which is the source of our greatest strength." Patricia Hill Collins's interpretation of Lorde's comment is that "paradoxically, being treated as an invisible Other gives black women a peculiar angle of vision, the outsider-within stance that has served so many African-American women intellectuals as a source of tremendous strength" (94).

Yet, while invisibility may be somewhat useful for academicians, the practice of a politics of silence belies the power of such a stance for social change. 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. Spillers confirms this point when she notes that "the sexual realities of black American women across the spectrum of sexual preference and widened sexual styles tend to be a missing dialectical feature of the entire discussion" ("Interstices" 91).

At this juncture, then, I cannot cast blame for a lack of attention to Black lesbian sexuality solely on white feminist theorists. De Lauretis argues that female homosexualities may be conceptualized as social and cultural forms in their own right, which are undercoded or discursively dependent upon more established forms. They (and male homosexualities) therefore act as "an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference, and demanding political and historical representation while insisting on its material and historical specificity" ("Queer" iii). If this is true, then theorizing about Black lesbian sexuality is crucially dependent upon the existence of a conception of Black women's sexuality in general. I am not arguing that Black lesbian sexualities are derivative of Black female heterosexualities but only that we cannot understand the latter without understanding it in relation to the former. In particular, since discussions of Black female sexuality often turn to the issue of the devastating effects of rape, incest, and sexual abuse, I want to argue that Black queer female sexualities should be seen as one of the sites where Black female desire is expressed.

Discussions of Black lesbian sexuality have most often focused on differences from or equivalencies with white lesbian sexualities, with "Black" added to delimit the fact that Black lesbians share a history with

other Black women. However, this addition tends to obfuscate rather than illuminate the subject position of Black lesbians. One obvious example of distortion is that Black lesbians do not experience homophobia in the same way as do white lesbians. Here, as with other oppressions, the homophobia experienced by Black women is always shaped by racism. What has to be explored and historicized is the specificity of Black lesbian experience. I want to understand in what way Black lesbians are "outsiders" within Black communities. This, I think, would force us to examine the construction of the "closet" by Black lesbians. Although this is the topic for another essay, I want to argue here that if we accept the existence of the "politics of silence" as a historical legacy shared by all Black women, then certain expressions of Black female sexuality will be rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the collectivity. From this it follows then that the culture of dissemblance makes it acceptable for some heterosexual Black women to cast Black lesbians as proverbial traitors to the race.⁶ And this in turn explains why Black lesbians who would announce or act out desire for women—whose deviant sexuality exists within an already preexisting deviant sexuality—have been wary of embracing the status of "traitor" and the attendant loss of community such an embrace engenders.⁷ Of course, while some Black lesbians have hidden the truth of their lives, there have been many forms of resistance to the conception of lesbian as traitor within Black communities. Audre Lorde is one obvious example. Lorde's claiming of her Black and lesbian difference "forced both her white and Black lesbian friends to contend with her historical agency in the face of [this] larger racial/sexual history that would reinvent her as dead" (Karla Scott, qtd. in de Lauretis, *Practice* 36). I would also argue that Lorde's writing, with its focus on the erotic, on passion and desire, suggests that Black lesbian sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised Black female body. Therefore, the works of Lorde and other Black lesbian writers, because they foreground the very aspects of Black female sexuality that are submerged—that is, female desire and agency—are critical to our theorizing of Black female sexualities. Since silence about sexuality is being produced by Black women and Black feminist theorists, that silence itself suggests that Black women do have some degree of agency. A focus on Black lesbian sexualities, I suggest, implies that another discourse—other than silence—can be produced.

I also suggest that the project of theorizing Black female sexualities must confront psychoanalysis. Given that the Freudian paradigm is the dominant discourse that defines how sexuality is understood in this post-modern time, Black feminist theorists have to answer the question posed

by Michele Wallace: "Is the Freudian drama transformed by race in a way that would render it altered but usable?" (*Invisibility* 231) While some Black feminists have called the psychoanalytic approach racist, others, such as Spillers, Mae Henderson, and Valerie Smith, have shown its usefulness in analyzing the texts of Black women writers. As I am not a student of psychoanalytic theory, my suggested responses to Wallace's question can only be tentative at best. Though I do not accept all aspects of the Freudian paradigm, I do see the need for exploring its strengths and limitations in developing a theory of Black female sexualities.

It can readily be acknowledged that the collective history of Black women has in some ways put them in a different relationship to the canonical categories of the Freudian paradigm, that is, to the father, the maternal body, to the female-sexed body (Spillers, "Mama's"). On the level of the symbolic, however, Black women have created whole worlds of sexual signs and signifiers, some of which align with those of whites and some of which do not. Nonetheless, they are worlds that always have to contend with the power that the white world has to invade, pathologize, and disrupt those worlds. In many ways the Freudian paradigm implicitly depends on the presence of the Black female other. One of its more problematic aspects is that in doing so it relegates Black women's sexuality to the irreducibly abnormal category in which there are no distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual women. By virtue of this lack of distinction, there is a need for Black women, both lesbian and heterosexual, to, as de Lauretis describes it, "reconstitute a female-sexed body as a body for the subject and for her desire" (*Practice* 200). This is a need that is perhaps expressed differently by Black women than by white women, whose sexualities have not been subjected to the *same* forces of repression and domination. And this seems to me to be a critical place where the work of articulating Black female sexualities must begin. Disavowing the designation of Black female sexualities as inherently abnormal, while acknowledging the material and symbolic effects of the appellation, we could begin the project of understanding how differently located Black women engage in reclaiming the body and expressing desire.

What I want to propose requires me to don one of my other hats, that of a student of physics. As I struggled with the ideas I cover in this essay, over and over again I found myself wrestling with the juxtaposed images of "white" (read normal) and "Black" (read not white and abnormal) sexuality. In her essay "Variations on Negation," Michele Wallace invokes the idea of the black hole as a trope that can be used to describe the invisibility of Black creativity in general and Black female creativity

specifically (*Invisibility* 218). As a former physics student, I was immediately drawn to this image. Yet it also troubled me.⁸ As Wallace rightfully notes, the observer outside of the hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space. There seemed to me to be two problems: first, the astrophysics of black holes, in other words, how do you deduce the presence of a black hole? And second, what is it like inside of a black hole? I don't want to stretch this analogy too far, so here are my responses. To the first question, I suggest that we can detect the presence of a black hole by its effects on the region of space where it is located. One way that physicists do this is by observing binary star systems. A binary star system is one that contains two bodies that orbit around each other under mutual gravitational attraction. Typically, in these systems one finds a visible apparently "normal" star in close orbit with another body such as a black hole, which is not seen optically. The existence of the black hole is inferred from the fact that the visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way, or it is detected by the energy emanating from the region in space around the visible star that could not be produced by the visible star alone.⁹ Therefore, the identification of a black hole requires the use of sensitive detectors of energy and distortion. In the case of Black female sexualities, this implies that we need to develop reading strategies that allow us to make visible the distorting and productive effects these sexualities produce in relation to more visible sexualities. To the second question—what is it like inside of a black hole?—the answer is that we must think in terms of a different geometry. Rather than assuming that Black female sexualities are structured along an axis of normal and perverse paralleling that of white women, we might find that for Black women a different geometry operates. For example, acknowledging this difference I could read the relationship between Shug, Celie, and Mister in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as one that depicts desire between women and desire between women and men simultaneously, in dynamic relationship rather than in opposition. This mapping of the geometry of Black female sexualities will perhaps require Black feminist theorists to engage the Freudian paradigm more rigorously, or it may cause us to disrupt it.

Can I Get Home from Here?

I see my lesbian poetics as a way of entering into a dialogue—from the margins—with Black feminist critics, theorists and writers. My work has been to imagine an

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historical Black woman-to-woman eroticism and living—overt, discrete, coded, or latent as it might be. To imagine Black women's sexuality as a polymorphous erotic that does not exclude desire for men but also does not privilege it. To imagine, without apology, voluptuous Black women's sexualities.

—Cheryl Clarke, "Living the Texts Out"

So where has my search taken me? And why does the journey matter? I want to give a partial answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter. At this juncture queer theory has allowed me to break open the category of gay and lesbian and begin to question how sexualities and sexual subjects are produced by dominant discourses and then to interrogate the reactions and resistances to those discourses. However, interrogating sites of resistance and reaction did not take me beyond what is generally done in gay and lesbian studies. The turn to queer should allow me to explore, in Clarke's words, the "overt, discrete, coded, or latent" and "polymorphous" eroticism of differently located Black women. It is still not clear to me, however, that other queer theorists will resist the urge to engage in a reranking, erasure, or appropriation of sexual subjects who are at the margins of dominant discourses.

Why does my search for Black women's sexuality matter? Wallace once wrote that she feared being called elitist when she acted as though cultural criticism was as crucial to the condition of Black women as health, the law, politics, economics, and the family. "But," she continued, "I am convinced that the major battle for the 'other' of the 'other' [Black women] will be to find voice, transforming the construction of dominant discourse in the process" (*Invisibility* 236). It is my belief that what is desperately needed is more rigorous cultural criticism detailing how power is deployed through issues like sexuality and the alternative forms that even an oppressed subject's power can take. Since 1987, a major part of my intellectual work as a historian of U.S. science and medicine has addressed the AIDS crisis in African American communities. The AIDS epidemic is being used, as Simon Watney has said, to "inflect, condense and rearticulate the ideological meanings of race, sexuality, gender, childhood, privacy, morality and nationalism" (ix). The position of Black women in this epidemic was dire from the beginning and worsens with each passing day. Silence, erasure, and the use of images of immoral sexuality abound in narratives about the experiences of Black women with AIDS. Their voices are not heard in discussions of AIDS, while intimate details of their lives are exposed to justify their victimization. In the "war

of representation" that is being waged through this epidemic, Black women are victims that are once again the "other" of the "other," the deviants of the deviants, regardless of their sexual identities or practices. While white gay male activists are using the ideological space framed by this epidemic to contest the notion that homosexuality is "abnormal" and to preserve the right to live out their homosexual desires, Black women are rendered silent. The gains made by queer activists will do nothing for Black women if the stigma continues to be attached to their sexuality. The work of Black feminist critics is to find ways to contest the historical construction of Black female sexualities by illuminating how the dominant view was established and maintained and how it can be disrupted. This work might very well save some Black women's lives. I want this epidemic to be used to foment the sexual revolution that Black Americans never had (Giddings 462). I want it to be used to make visible Black women's self-defined sexualities.

Visibility in and of itself, however, is not my only goal. Several writers, including bell hooks, have argued that one answer to the silence now being produced on the issue of Black female sexuality is for Black women to see themselves, to mirror themselves (61). The appeal to the visual and the visible is deployed as an answer to the legacy of silence and repression. As theorists, we have to ask what we assume such reflections would show. Would the mirror Black women hold up to themselves and to each other provide access to the alternative sexual universe within the metaphorical black hole? Mirroring as a way of negating a legacy of silence needs to be explored in much greater depth than it has been to date by Black feminist theorists. An appeal to the visual is not uncomplicated or innocent. As theorists we have to ask how vision is structured, and, following that, we have to explore how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who *see* and *speak* in the world (Haraway, "Promises" 313). This we must apply to the ways in which Black women are seen and not seen by the dominant society and to how they see themselves in a different landscape. But in overturning the "politics of silence" the goal cannot be merely to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence, nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a "politics of articulation." This politics would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for Black women to speak and act.

Finally, my search for Black women's sexuality through queer theory has taught me that I need not simply add the label queer to my list

as another naturalized identity. As I have argued, there is no need to reproduce Black women's sexualities as a silent void. Nor are Black queer female sexualities simply identities. Rather, they represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency.

NOTES

My thanks to Joan Scott, Mary Poovey, Donna Penn, and Geeta Patel for their support and for their thoughtful and incisive critiques of the ideas in this essay.

1. Here I am referring to the work of Stuart Hall and especially Hazel Carby: "We need to recognize that we live in a society in which dominance and subordination are structured through processes of racialization that continuously interact with other forces of socialization. . . . But processes of racialization, when they are mentioned at all in multicultural debates are discussed as if they were the sole concern of those particular groups perceived to be racialized subjects. Because the politics of difference work with concepts of individual identity, rather than structures of inequality and exploitation, processes of racialization are marginalized and given symbolic meaning only when subjects are black" (Carby, "Multicultural" 193).

2. See Higginbotham, Hine, Giddings, Carby (*Reconstructing*), and Brown ("What").

3. See Carby, "Policing." Elsa Barkley Brown argues that the desexualization of Black women was not just a middle-class phenomenon imposed on working-class women. Though many working-class women resisted Victorian notions of womanhood and developed their own notions of sexuality and respectability, some also, from their own experiences, embraced a desexualized image ("Negotiating" 144).

4. The historical narrative discussed here is very incomplete. To date there are no detailed historical studies of Black women's sexuality.

5. See analyses of novels by Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset in Carby (*Reconstructing*), McDowell, and others.

6. I participated in a group discussion of two novels written by Black women, Jill Nelson's *Volunteer Slavery* and Audre Lorde's *Zami*, where one Black woman remarked that while she thought Lorde's book was better written than Nelson's, she was disturbed that Lorde spoke so much about sex and "aired all of her dirty linen in public." She held to this even after it was pointed out to her that Nelson's book also included descriptions of her sexual encounters.

7. I am reminded of my mother's response when I "came out" to her. She asked me why, given that I was already Black and that I had a nontraditional profession for a woman, I would want to take on one more thing that would make my life difficult. My mother's point, which is echoed by many Black women, is that in announcing my homosexuality I was choosing to alienate myself from the Black community.

8. I was disturbed by the fact that the use of the image of a black hole could

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CONCLUSION