



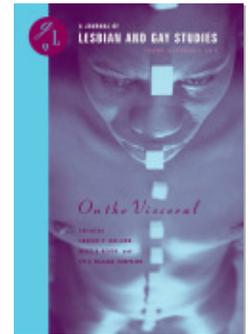
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FEELING HER WAY

Audre Lorde and the Power of Touch

Sarah E. Chinn

The Problem of Skin

How can we talk about how lesbians have sex with each other? This is no trivial question: if sexual connection with other women is at the core of lesbian identity, then accurately representing our sexuality in some way is as close to a culture-making activity as we can get.¹ That is not to say that there are not pages and pages of descriptions of lesbian sex, from the “wave upon wave” vanilla of Naiad paperbacks to the hardcore daddy fantasies of S/M.² But little of it is compelling, not because it is not sufficiently explicit but because it rarely gets under the reader’s skin.

Perhaps the skin itself is the problem, or perhaps how to describe what sexuality does to it is. In a related vein Elaine Scarry argues that there is no language for pain, no way of representing it. In language that strongly resembles the way we might think about sexuality, she argues that in the description of physical pain, “the events happening within the interior of [another] person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth.”³ Sexual desire and the sensation of sexual contact seem part of that subterranean world, outside our abilities to express ourselves. After all, how do we describe the electricity of lovemaking, the loss of self in concert with (indeed, dependent on) an intense sensory awareness of self? As Elizabeth Grosz points out, “The most intense moments of pleasure and the force of their materiality cannot be reduced to terms that capture their force and intensity.”⁴

Needless to say, this problem is hardly unique to lesbian sexuality; it is characteristic of sexual experience between people of any gender, or alone. In this essay I tackle this conundrum by working with Audre Lorde’s representations of

lesbian sexuality, both in her “biomythography” *Zami* and in some of her theoretical work. While I do not think that Lorde gives us all the answers (or even that “answers” are necessarily what we need to explore how sexuality shapes us and our approach to the world), I do think that *Zami* comprises a series of experiments in representing lesbian sexuality and human interconnection from which we as readers, lesbian or not, can learn. Consequently, my focus on lesbian sexuality here does not preclude analogy to other kinds of sexual practice; indeed, my larger argument is that Lorde’s representations of lesbianism can provide a key to thinking about sexuality and bodily experience more generally.

The sense on which most people primarily rely for information about the world around them—vision—is virtually useless when it comes to figuring out and describing the experience of sexual pleasure. Despite innumerable attempts to the contrary (as the well-stocked shelves of “adult films” in video stores attest), visual representations of sexual pleasure inevitably fall short of showing what desire feels like *inside* our bodies.⁵ Indeed, the sighted often block out the visual during sexual intimacy: we turn off lights or close our eyes, both to connect with our partner(s) and to retreat from the regime of the visible. In fact, a representative schema that imagined the visible as only one source among many (and not necessarily the most informative), that relied more heavily on other senses, might get closer to communicating the textures of sexuality.⁶

For this reason, S/M pornography comes the closest to capturing what sex feels like, since it so often works outside the limits of what is in front of the participants’ eyes and instead heavily depends on sensation and the sublimity of sensory extremes. Writing about S/M means paying minute, exquisite attention to the maelstrom of experiences that play along the surfaces of the body but are so often invisible (the feeling of restraint, the exchange of energy from arm to whip to back).⁷

S/M writing is more successful on its own terms than most lesbian representations of our sexuality because it takes for granted that the visible can often be an obstacle to the realities of desire.⁸ S/M requires that the participants ignore the seemingly inescapable fact that they are, perhaps, secretaries or bus drivers or college professors; it asks them to locate their fantasy lives in the sensual world, disregarding what might otherwise be obvious.⁹ That is not to say that those fantasies are truer than the visible evidence of their bodies, or that secretaries or bus drivers or college professors might not constitute someone else’s fantasy; it is instead to imagine that sensation can reveal a truth otherwise inaccessible to the regime of the visible, a truth that is all about inhabiting a narrative very different from our own (i.e., that we are not just cogs in the service economy but governess and child, marine sergeant and recruit, man and boy).¹⁰

S/M recognizes that sexuality is an activity, not an ontology—indeed, that “somasochism, or any kind of ‘perverse’ sex, is about *doing*.”¹¹ It does not pretend to be “real” except to the extent that it accurately plays out fantasy. But at the same time, the fantasy is always understood as such, as being brought into material existence by the efforts of two or more people, as a collaborative process that can exist only through discussion, analysis, trust. “Reality” is beside the point: what matters is the world that the lovers create together, however temporarily.

This may seem like a strange way to begin a discussion of sexuality in Lorde’s writing. Lorde herself was a contributor, as an interview subject, to the classic anti-S/M text, *Against Sodomasochism*, and has long been championed as the embodiment of a sexuality far removed from the nastiness of S/M: earthy, physical, and resolutely natural, the ur/earth mother of lesbian sexuality.¹² Lorde herself offered a canny critique of S/M, arguing that sexual fantasy could not be disarticulated from the “larger economic and social issues surrounding our communities” and that there is a political reason that people get a kick out of the intensification of power difference that cannot simply be romanticized or explained away through sexual libertarianism (67). At the same time, Lorde emphasized that “*I speak not about condemnation but about recognizing what is happening and questioning what it means*” (67).¹³

Lorde and her interviewer, Susan Leigh Star, often seem to be talking at cross-purposes. Star wants Lorde to condemn S/M as unwomanly, unfeminist, and unlesbian, and Lorde wants to talk about the structural inequalities in U.S. culture that shape our imaginations, sexual and otherwise: a deep critique that does not exactly serve the purposes Star clearly had for this discussion. As Anna Wilson argues, white feminists in particular have used Lorde as the figure of a nonthreatening black and lesbian presence, despite Lorde’s own best efforts to unseat them from that comfortable position: her open letter to Mary Daly, a sharp, still fresh example of that project, climaxes in the arresting question “Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women?”¹⁴ But Lorde’s deep explorations of lesbian sexuality render impossible the liberal feminist fantasy of her as dyke mammy. Indeed, her persistent focus on the embodiedness of lesbian sex, and her attempts to represent in language the world-making (and breaking) power of that sex, is inextricable from her latter-day persona as griot to the lesbian nation.

So the analogy between the writings of Lorde and writings on S/M is not as far-fetched as it might appear. Both recognize sexual desire as constitutive of meaningful lesbian identity—as “a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation”—an assumption that was hardly commonplace as Lorde wrote her most celebrated work.¹⁵ Indeed, Ti-Grace Atkinson’s

declaration that “I do not know of any feminist worthy of that name who, if forced to choose between freedom and sex, would choose sex” has been much critiqued both explicitly and implicitly (as though freedom did not include sexual freedom), but it is a potent reminder that too often anti-S/M feminists explicitly or implicitly have separated feminist or lesbian identity from sexuality.¹⁶ By contrast, both S/M participants and Lorde understand sexuality as a full-body experience, and as an experience that can embrace bodies of various sizes, shapes, colors, and abilities. Both represent sexuality as a palette of desire enacted through activities in which bodies engage alone and together. Both push the limits of the representation of sexuality, trying to get onto and inside the skin, while recognizing the impossibility of total representability.

I would like to argue here that Lorde reimagines and represents lesbian sexuality in ways that profoundly challenge her readers, as something situated on the surfaces and in the crannies of the body, as floating up into nostrils and ears, as myrrh: a fragrant, viscous scent absorbed into the skin. Moreover, for her, sexual connection between women is always in process, always under negotiation, much like sadomasochistic sexual exchange, which “is an acting out of commitment, a willingness to be transformed through the recognition of the other.”¹⁷ Bypassing the debate over “feminist” sexuality that dominated the period in which she wrote *Zami*, Lorde replaces struggles over “objectification” and “sexual freedom” with a sexual language that represents lesbian bodies as sacred, communicative, instrumental, textured, difficult. Her theory of sexuality does not reject the visual but instead reformulates it as one way of knowing another person, and a poor way at that. Ultimately, Lorde represents lesbian sexuality as a conduit for entering into some kind of communion with an other, a way authentically to love others and oneself.

“There Is Power in Looking”

Lorde achieves this reformulation largely by reorienting lesbian sexuality away from the realm of the visual. The challenge of representing female sexuality, let alone lesbian sexuality, has long been a matter of concern for feminists, as the appearance of a volume like *Against Sadomasochism* suggests, and the visual is a central problematic. In the mid-1970s, as Laura Mulvey formulated her psychoanalytic theory of “the gaze”—that is, the psychic mechanism that reshapes male fear of castration by objectifying women on the screen—a conceptual tool that would be deeply influential in film theory and feminist theorizing more generally, feminist activists analyzed and attacked the objectification of women through the

visual representation of their bodies and sexual pleasures. The “pleasure in looking” offered by the intensely visual medium of film, combined with male control of the means of film production, constructed for Mulvey a world in which “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film [and, by extension, that of the camera itself] are neatly combined” to fix women on the screen as objects of male visual pleasure.¹⁸ Women are to be looked at, and men get to look.¹⁹ Or, as Linda Williams succinctly puts it, “to see is to desire.”²⁰ Moreover, as Georgina Kleege acerbically shows in her survey of films featuring blind women, to be looked at but not to be able to see may be a recipe for idealized female movie characters, but it also accentuates the male/sighted viewer’s pleasure in women’s helplessness that is ancillary to the power of the gaze.²¹

In the more than twenty-five years since the publication of Mulvey’s groundbreaking work, the debates over the visual and the role of real sexual autonomy have not abated, particularly given the (slight) increase in the number of women producing images of women in film, on television, in pornography, and so on. The focus of the debates has only occasionally shifted. That is, the idea that control over women’s sexuality is wielded through visual representation has remained a centerpiece.²²

Moreover, visual power as a theoretical construct has pervaded the intellectual landscape in the United States, from Michel Foucault’s statement that “our society is one . . . of surveillance”; to Jonathan Crary’s observation that in the mid-nineteenth century vision was separated from the other senses, particularly touch; to bell hooks’s asseveration that “there is power in looking.”²³ The converse argument, that privilege empowers one to look, is made by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her critique of colonialist anthropology, which she sees as shading imperceptibly into voyeurism, the rawest expression of the sexualized desire for visual mastery.²⁴

Visibility is more vexed in theories around sexuality. For example, the goal of “gay/lesbian visibility” that has been intrinsic to the liberal gay rights movement takes it for granted that to be seen by the dominant power structure is a cultural and political advantage. At the same time, queer theory has worked with the gaze, often playfully, moving between a belief in the policing, disciplining power of the gaze and a belief in the liberatory potential of making oneself visible. Informed by psychoanalytic, particularly Lacanian, theories of the gaze, queer theorists have punned on looking with book titles such as *How Do I Look?* (a collection of essays on film) and *Novel Gazing* (an anthology of queer readings of modern fiction), even as projects informed more by liberalism have imagined queerness as “hidden from history,” according to the title of one collection. Sally R. Munt writes with moving eloquence of the double-edged sword of lesbian visibil-

ity vis-à-vis the gaze, identifying the lesbian flaneur and the butch in relation to looking and being looked at.²⁵

In disability studies, too, the gaze—or, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reformulates it, “the stare”—has been theorized as a vehicle of able-bodied mastery and, when reversed, of liberatory potential.²⁶ Freaks, crips, and gimps are objects in the able-bodied world, forced to endure the silent (and, occasionally, vocalized) stares of the normate majority; indeed, the stare was not so long ago a reliable source of income for those visibly disabled people who were recruited into freak shows and carnivals.²⁷ The “spectacle of the extraordinary body” extended to the visibly disabled; to racial and ethnic others; to the very tall, short, thin, or fat; even to the body out of control (which Ellen Hickey Grayson explores in her analysis of laughing-gas demonstrations) as normates measured themselves against and (dis)identified with the people on display.²⁸

Moreover, sexuality has often been folded into this process of objectification. The display of Saartje (or Sarah) Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” in the 1810s focused on her buttocks and genitalia and extended beyond her death, as her labia were preserved for “scientific study.”²⁹ Similarly, if more benignly, in 1863 P. T. Barnum arranged a wedding between midget performer Charles Stratton, who became “General” Tom Thumb, and Lavinia Warren (with equally small best man and maid of honor). Stratton’s sexuality was both downplayed by a “wedding that looked like children imitating adults” and foregrounded by the baby produced as the supposed issue of the marriage (although Warren was, in fact, infertile) as proof of Stratton’s sexual potency.³⁰ Barnum’s display of “Circassian Beauties,” on the one hand, and of Julia Pastrana, a hirsute Mexican woman dubbed “the Ugliest Woman in the World,” on the other, linked a freak identity with the (putatively male) viewer’s sexual desire and standards of female pulchritude.³¹

The equation of freakery and sexual difference, however, works in both directions. As Joshua Gamson eloquently shows, today’s “freaks” are embodied by sexual and/or racial and/or class difference: the poor and working-class lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people, both white and of color, who are the objects of the gaze on television talk shows. Although Gamson argues forcefully that these “freaks” “talk back” to their audiences, to authority figures, and to each other, he acknowledges that the power of the medium to “freakify” often overwhelms the desire of objectified others to transform themselves into speaking subjects.³²

It can seem, then, that the gaze is, if not omnipotent, then certainly omnipresent. Its power works either affirmatively, to render an other hypervisi-

ble, or negatively, to ignore the other, as though she were invisible. The desire in U.S. liberation movements to construct new images is grounded in this double bind of the hypervisible or invisible other and in the belief that the only way to escape the imperious gaze of the mainstream is to create new audiences and new ways of looking: a visual economy controlled from the grassroots.³³ In the discussion that follows, however, I would like to unseat the visual from its perceptual throne. Rather than imagine a utopia in which the oppressed get to create ourselves “in our own image,” I want to explore, through my reading of Lorde, a sense of self outside visual imagery, an eyes-free sexual vocabulary, a literally blind desire.

Blind Girl, Lesbian Woman

Audre, the narrator and protagonist of *Zami* and a version of Lorde herself, is “legally blind” for the first five years of her life and functionally so until she gets glasses at the age of three.³⁴ Through Audre’s eyes, the visible world is refracted and nonspecific to the point of incomprehensibility: it is full of “strange lights and fascinating shapes”; even the brightest, most direct light is transformed into diffuse “starburst patterns” (31). So Audre’s earliest and most immediate childhood memories are organized around feel, sound, taste, and smell. Certainly, her formative experiences of her mother, Linda, are about extravisual sensations: the pain from her mother’s fingers pinching her upper arm, the “warm milky smell” of her mother’s sleeping body (34), her mother’s combing of her hair—all occur outside the visible. Consequently, her memory, too, is dominated by the extravisual, which extends into the universal: hair combing is defined by “the radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her [mother’s] knees, and my stinging scalp,” which “all fall into—the *rhythms of a litany*, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters’ hair” (33).

In *Zami* the mythical place of home itself is understood not by sight, since neither Audre nor her sisters have ever seen Linda’s home island of Carriacou, but by taste, touch, and smell: “the fruit smell of Noel’s Hill” and “the heavy smell of limes,” the taste of guava jelly and of “chalky brown nuggets of pressed chocolate,” the “sweet-smelling tonka bean” (13, 14). In fact, the visible world fails Audre again and again during her search for Linda’s homeland. Although she has heard about it, touched its fruit and artifacts, smelled and tasted it, Audre does not *see* Carriacou, on a map, until her mid-twenties. Ironically, the cultural marginalization of the Caribbean by the mapmakers of the United States, the social marginalization of Caribbean Americans in this country, and the perceptual marginaliza-

tion of the nonvisual senses (can you prove that a place exists just because you have smelled and tasted it?) all come together in this moment of invisibility.

Audre's childhood nearsightedness shapes her relationship to the world even after she gets glasses. In her first encounter with the written word, her eyes, rather than subordinating the other senses, must depend on them to make sense of it. Audre learns to read "at the same time I learned to talk," establishing an equivalence between written and oral language (21). More tellingly, in her first encounter with a book, Audre boldly "traced the large black letters with my fingers," absorbing written language as much through touch as through sight (in contrast, she could only "peer" at the "beautiful bright colors of the pictures" [23]).

Reality itself is measured through touch, as in the brief encounter between the four-year-old Audre and the evanescent little girl Toni. Encased in a wool snowsuit, Audre experiences her own body as sweaty and itchy—all too real. But Toni is a vision, in every sense of the word. Lorde describes in loving detail every stitch of Toni's outfit, from the "wine-red velvet coat" to the "white cotton knickers" (40). But it is Toni's visualness that makes her seem incorporeal, like a vision indeed. Sight must be confirmed by touch, so Audre "reached out my hands and lightly rubbed the soft velvet of her frock-coat up and down" (38). She feels the "soft silky warmth" of Toni's fur muff and begins to "finger the small shiny gold buttons on the front of her coat" (38). This erotically charged foreplay almost gives way to the main event. "I wanted," Audre says, "to take off all of her clothes, and touch her live little brown body and make sure she was real" (40). Touch is the guarantor of the real, since eyes cannot necessarily tell the difference between a "real and warm" fleshy bottom and the "hard rubber, molded into a little crease," of a doll (40).

All of these moments are, following Lorde's definition, erotic. That is, they exist in that space between "the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings." They speak to a role the body plays that is larger than function but that does not participate in a fantasy of transcendence from the body. Moreover, they are about a sensory connection with others, "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual," that embraces the entire body, that "flows through and colors . . . life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all . . . experience."³⁵ The erotic infuses and intensifies the experience of the body, linking the sensory with the spiritual.

This is a far cry from the usual language about representations of the sexuality of women, particularly of black women. As numerous black feminist critics have observed, black women have long been in a precarious space in discussing and describing their sexuality.³⁶ More often than not, women of African descent

have been objectified as sexual playthings, Jezebels, or scarlet women, or desexualized as Topsyies and mummies. Only very rarely have they been given cultural space in which to express themselves as the authors of their own desire, and even then it has been too often within narrow, male-defined sexual parameters. Critiques of this rough treatment have rightly looked to theories of the gaze as a way to understand the representation of black women's sexuality.

In her descriptions of lovemaking in *Zami* Lorde opens up to us the erotic world of the extravizual that connects to Audre's formative sensory experiences. I am not arguing here that lesbian sexuality is linked to childhood and the connection to the mother, although that argument certainly was made by theoreticians writing at the same time that Lorde was producing *Zami*.³⁷ In her profoundly influential study *The Reproduction of Mothering* Nancy Chodorow convincingly argued that women's primary role in rearing children meant that girls learned emotional connection as a female bond. Although Chodorow's thesis dealt almost exclusively with heterosexual women, her single mention of lesbianism affirmed that "lesbian relationships do tend to recreate mother-daughter emotions and connections."³⁸

Taking this logic one step further, Adrienne Rich speculated that women's role as "the earliest sources of emotional caring and physical nurture for both female and male children" raised the question of "whether the search for love and tenderness in both sexes does not originally lead toward women [and] *why in fact women would ever redirect that search.*" For Rich, women's "emotional and erotic energies" must be "wrench[ed]" away from other women to serve patriarchy.³⁹

But rather than idealize the mother-daughter bond as the ground of the lesbian self, Lorde problematizes Audre's relationship with Linda. Far from the stereotypical mother of the middle-class nuclear family, Linda is tough, "different from other women"; this difference is something of which young Audre is proud, but it also "gave me pain and I fancied it the reason for so many of my childhood sorrows" (16). Audre does not learn how to love from her mother; instead, she learns how to fight, a skill that is certainly useful but that hardly ensures a harmonious home life. Indeed, Lorde characterizes Audre's teen years as "resembl[ing] nothing so much as a West Indian version of the Second World War. . . . Blitzkrieg became my favorite symbol for home" (82–83). The feelings of nurturance and tenderness that Chodorow and Rich associate with motherhood are not absent from Linda's mothering, but they exist in a complex admixture with helplessness in the face of racism, with rage at her powerlessness in the white American world, with harsh protectiveness over her children, and with fierce loyalty to and love for her husband.

Audre comes to understand (indeed, authentically to experience) her love

for her mother when she embraces lesbian sexuality. The power of touching other women erotically allows her to connect with her mother, to empathize with her. Lorde reverses Rich's and Chodorow's logic, eroticizing Audre's relationship with Linda as though it were another of her loving relationships as an adult woman. Audre's deep and enraged connection to her mother can be understood through her later lesbian consciousness, which can make sense of the sensory. The memories of smells, sounds, tastes, and touches all fall into place as part of a larger lesbian sensorium, an array of stimuli that the prelesbian Audre could experience only as unrelated and episodic. For Lorde, then, lesbian (erotic) identity makes sense of the world both present and past.

An excellent example is the narrative of Audre's first period. Pounding garlic, onion, salt, and pepper for a family meal, Audre feels "a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach" (78). Connecting for the first time with the complexity of her sexuality (the smell of garlic combined with her sweat, the "jarring shocks of the velvet lined pestle," the thunk of the pestle striking the bowl, and her own humming [79]), Audre does not understand the implications of these feelings—invoked, in a very different context, during her affair with Kitty—or of her encroaching adulthood, in her pre- or protolesbian identity. It is only as a lesbian adult that Audre can form a narrative around her experience that weaves the spicy fragrances of the mortar's contents and her own sexed blood into a deeper understanding of how her sense of herself as a woman came into being.

All of the representations of sex between women in *Zami* exclude the visual as a primary way of knowing the other. Audre's first sexual experience with a woman, her first night with Ginger, is almost wholly about smells, tastes, and feelings. As Audre puts her arm around Ginger, "through the scents of powder and soap and hand cream I could smell the rising flush of her own spicy heat." Ginger tastes like "a winter pear" and like "myrrh"; her body "fill[ed] my mouth, my hands, wherever I touched" (139). Ginger's skin and hair are described by touch as "silky" and "crispy." Indeed, the darkness of the night, rather than closing a connection through invisibility, opens the exchange of energy between the two women, achieved as it is through the shifting touch of mouths, hands, and cunts.

Even when the visible seems to be at a premium, when Eudora, Audre's lover in Mexico, reveals the scar from her excised breast, Lorde interlaces the visual and the tactile. Eudora is now visually alienated from her body: about her scars she says, "I don't much like to look at them myself" (164). Audre responds to this logic, looking hard at Eudora's chest, "with its rosy nipple erect to her scarred chest. The pale keloids of radiation burn lay in the hollow under her shoulder and arm down across her ribs" (167). But Audre's focus is not on how

Eudora's body looks; rather, "I had wondered so often how it would feel under my hands, my lips, this different part of her." Her desire for Eudora resembles the sunbursts of her life before glasses, "like a shower of light surrounding me and this woman before me" (167).

Audre falls back on the tactile to understand this new experience: "I bent and kissed her softly upon the scar where our hands had rested. I felt her heart strong and fast against my lips" (167). But she also acknowledges the crucial role of visibility in Eudora's being able to integrate her own body into her sense of self. By transferring the focus of their connection beyond the visual, on the one hand, and refusing to turn the light off, on the other, Audre gives Eudora both the opportunity to understand her body on her own terms and a new set of terms in which to experience herself as a sexual actor.

Later in life (although in a text written before *Zami*), as a survivor of a mastectomy herself, Lorde thinks back to her time with Eudora in similar terms: "I remember the hesitation and tenderness I felt as I touched the deeply scarred hollow under her right shoulder and across her chest." More significantly, Lorde's anxieties about her own mastectomy deal primarily with questions of touch, as she imagines how her lover will approach her body and how their bodies will feel together: "What is it like to be making love to a woman and have only one breast brushing against her? . . . What will it be like making love to me? Will she still find my body delicious?"⁴⁰

This explicitly lesbian concern contrasts markedly with the anxieties that the dominant culture, as represented by the woman from the American Cancer Society's Reach for Recovery, imagines mastectomy survivors experience. Wielding a pink "flesh colored" prosthesis, the woman focuses on breast cancer survivors' appearance: "Her message was, you are just as good as you were before because you can look exactly the same. . . . 'Look at me,' she said. . . . 'Now can you tell which is which?'" Lorde rejects the prosthesis not only because it does not look the same (especially with its racially inflected pinkness) but, more important, because "not even the most skillful prosthesis in the world could . . . feel the way my breast had felt, and either I would love my body one-breasted now, or remain forever alien to myself."⁴¹

Moreover, the physical and psychic pain that Lorde experiences seems to bear little relation to the apparent severity of her wound. She looks down at her chest, "expecting it to look like the ravaged and pitted battlefield of some major catastrophic war. But all I saw was my same soft brown skin, a little tender looking and puffy from the middle of my chest up into my armpit. . . . The skin looked smooth and tender and untroubled." That same night, Lorde reports, "I hurt deep

down in my chest and couldn't sleep, because it felt like someone was stepping on my breast that wasn't there with hobnailed boots."⁴² From this experience, seemingly opposite to the erotic pleasures chronicled in *Zami*, Lorde learns the same lesson: our bodies feel and are felt outside solely visual perception; the dimensions of pleasure and pain are experienced through a complex of the senses.

It is in her relationship with Kitty that Audre becomes deeply immersed in an erotic vocabulary extending beyond the visual and into the "biomythographical." Afrekete, the goddess to whom Lorde entrusts herself and all of us, is translated into Kitty, a singer, sometime supermarket clerk, southern migrant, mother, lesbian, and "tough and crazy" protolesbian feminist (250). The text moves in and out of narrative and dream, New York City reality and pan-Africanist myth, roman and italic fonts, just as the plantains, avocados, bananas, cocoyams, and cassava Kitty buys under a bridge move over, around, in, and out of their bodies. The sexual and edible become inseparable; scent and taste and touch intertwine: the "deep undulations and tidal motions of [Kitty's] body slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of [her] electric flesh" (249).

Indeed, Kitty herself is in part the source of Audre's ability to recognize these intersections of the senses, since "Afrekete taught me roots, new definitions of our women's bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before" (250). The sensual and the visual combine in a moment of sacred synesthesia as "I remember the moon rising against the tilted planes of her [Kitty's] upthrust thighs, and my tongue caught the streak of silver reflected in the curly bush of her dappled-dark maiden hair" (252). Light itself, the sine qua non of the visible, has become a solid (liquid? ethereal?) substance to be tasted and swallowed, like the guavas and tonka beans of Carriacou. Audre's and Kitty's bodies are reduced and amplified into "elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching" (253), most abstracted where they are most embodied.

The culmination of Lorde's meditation on how we might reimagine lesbian sexuality both represents and has been made representable by Afrekete through the sensorium of the body. It is imprinted on the skin itself, just as Afrekete's "print remains on my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo," just as "every woman I have ever loved has left her print on me" (253, 255). Kitty herself disappears—indeed, it is never clear whether she actually existed or, rather, how much of Audre and Kitty's encounter was autobio- and how much mythographical—but her touch has a half-life that endures beyond her visible presence.

It is no coincidence that the encounter with Kitty is the last episode in

Zami, for the text as a whole seems to lead up to this life-changing interchange of power. Audre's initiation into lesbian sexuality (and a tentative black consciousness) with Ginger; the lesson she learns partly from Eudora, partly from Muriel, with whom she lives after her return to New York (a lesson whose groundwork was laid, however, by Audre's intense teenage friendship with her schoolmate Gennie, whose suicide was shattering), that sexual love might palliate but cannot heal a profoundly damaged person; her intense, improvisatory, ultimately disastrous relationship with Muriel, consummated in meals of "strange succulent vegetables and peculiar fragrant pieces of dried meat" (201): all of these connections contain the seeds of Audre's transformation through her intersection with Kitty.

These lessons serve Audre well. A crucial part of Lorde's recovery from her mastectomy years later is being able to reconnect with herself through erotic feeling, through feeling herself, in every sense of the phrase. As Jay Prosser observes, "Feeling one's body as one's own . . . is a core component of subjectivity, perhaps its very basis."⁴³ Once Lorde can feel herself, both transitively and intransitively, through masturbation and the self-recognition that both issues from and accompanies it, she feels a reigniting of herself, "dim and flickering, but . . . a welcome relief to the long coldness." Ultimately, her appearance as a one-breasted woman is less significant than her ability to *feel* that one-breasted woman as herself: "I did not have to look down at the bandages on my chest to know that I did not feel the same as before surgery. But I still felt *like myself*, like Audre, and that encompassed so much more than simply the way my chest appeared" (emphasis added).⁴⁴

Feeling Our Way: New Vocabularies

What understandings about representing lesbian sexuality does Lorde offer her readers in *Zami*? Certainly, it is not a narrative of lesbian exceptionalism of the kind typical when she wrote *Zami*, in which a sense of moral superiority issues from marginalization.⁴⁵ Indeed, *Zami* itself is a testament to the fact that the experience of subordination can warp and distort the lives of the marginalized in direct proportion to the critical distance it provides from the mainstream: oppression can cut people off from each other, lead them to destroy each other and themselves, and lead them to internalize dominant cultural assumptions about themselves and other subordinated people.

Zami is not a testament to Lorde's overcoming the adversity presented by her visual impairment; it does not exalt blindness as the key to the other senses. As Naomi Schor eloquently points out, Western literature and culture have long

been organized around sight as a master metaphor for comprehension and perception. At the same time, Western culture has leaned on the “myth of the moral blindness of the sighted . . . [and] the moral superiority of the physically blind upon the sighted,” a myth that turns disability into a convenient metaphor for the sighted and refuses the complex meanings (let alone the day-to-day ramifications) of blindness for blind people themselves.⁴⁶ Lorde was nobody’s token, as she showed in her blistering critiques of the “academic arrogance” of white feminists who singled her out as “the” black woman to have on their panels and feature at their conferences. Nor did she allow what Garland-Thomson terms the “benevolent maternalism” of more privileged women to deny her the right to her rage or to her own methods of healing herself and others.⁴⁷ As Elizabeth Alexander observes, in *Zami* Lorde lays out her ethical and philosophical belief that “making love, how the body acts, is a counterpart or antidote to what has been done to it.”⁴⁸ For Lorde, lovemaking is not just about how the body acts but about how it perceives, how it sorts through a welter of sensory information to construct a sense of self based on plenitude.

This sense of self is not strictly phenomenological or psychoanalytic; it is also experiential, what Didier Anzieu calls the “skin ego,” the self constructed through touch and interaction. The skin ego, formed in early childhood, requires and contributes to “the construction of an envelope of well-being.”⁴⁹ According to Anzieu, a child’s first sense of safety is the belief that she shares a skin with her mother; she can separate from the mother when she realizes that she inhabits her own skin—a very different narrative from the heterosexualized trauma of the oedipal crisis.⁵⁰

More important, unlike the binarized gendering of Freudian psychoanalysis, Anzieu’s theory of the skin ego acknowledges that identity is constructed through multiple differences, since “the human skin presents a considerable range of differences as regards grain, color, texture, and smell. . . . They allow one to identify others as objects of attachment and love and to assert oneself as an individual having one’s own skin.”⁵¹ This is remarkably similar to Lorde’s approach to difference: “There are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them.” Difference is not destructive but constitutive; a meaningful feminism, a meaningful humanity, can “devise ways to use each other’s difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles,” that is, ways to “identify others as objects of attachment and love.”⁵²

The source of this connection is the skin, the organ of touch and feeling,

“an envelope which emits and receives signals in interaction with the environment; it ‘vibrates’ in resonance with it; it is animated and alive inside, clear and luminous.”⁵³ In *Zami* Lorde shows us what it means truly to live inside one’s skin—a skin marked by race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age, to name only a few ways that the body interfaces with the world. As Lorde observes at the end of *The Cancer Journals*: “I alone own my feelings. I can never lose that feeling because I own it, because it comes out of myself. I can attach it anywhere I want to, because my feelings are a part of me, my sorrow and my joy.”⁵⁴

Anzieu’s theory of the skin ego also dovetails with Lorde’s understanding of touch in *Zami*. The skin touches and is touched simultaneously; even when I touch myself, I am both actor and recipient, reminded of the mutuality of human interaction. This sense of the individual as a collection of self-determined feelings that exist to *attach*, to feel another person, is at the core of Lorde’s definition of self, and it is a core perception of disability studies as well. Understanding the contributions of disabled people and perspectives means validating the interconnection and interdependence of all people; Lorde’s definition of “zami” as “a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (255) echoes a central principle of disability activism: human identity is a phenomenon of self-with-others, not of atomized individuals existing only for their own advancement. The ability to see without being seen, to exist removed from and acting on rather than with others, is one of Western culture’s (masculinist and imperialist) fascinations. By contrast, Lorde is interested not in the patriarchal separating power of the gaze but in the lesbian, feminist, and disabled conjoining power of touch.

For these reasons, I am wary of Garland-Thomson’s conclusion, in *Extraordinary Bodies*, that disabled figures in black women’s writing such as *Zami* (as well as Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* and Toni Morrison’s novels) “enable their authors to represent a particularized self who both embodies and transcends cultural subjugation, claiming physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior.”⁵⁵ This idea of difference as exceptional makes me uneasy. I read Lorde, both in *Zami* and in her theoretical work, as arguing that difference is itself the human condition: this, as Anzieu points out, is the lesson our skin teaches us. Garland-Thomson’s analysis also steps dangerously close to the philosophy of lesbian superiority that Lorde explicitly rejects and to the trope of the moral insight of blind people about which Schor so eloquently warns us. It does not take into account the powerful narrative of mutuality that *Zami* lays out through its exploration of the sensual.

It is certainly true that “*Zami* denaturalizes the normate viewpoint and protests its dominance,” giving its reader an alternative history of the 1950s from

the margins of hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, Lorde consciously challenges and reverses the often unspoken value judgments of a racist, misogynist, and homophobic world: one arresting example concerns U.S. citizens who moved to Mexico when they were “whitelisted out of work” by McCarthyism (159). But where Garland-Thomson understands the work of *Zami* as transposing the power of the gaze and maintains that “Lorde invites the freak show viewer to leave the audience and stand beside the freak on the platform so that they can gaze together at the normates below with amused superiority and faint contempt,” I would argue that the text dips beneath, above, beyond, and through the radar of the visual.⁵⁶ Far from encouraging “amused superiority and faint contempt,” *Zami* acts as a guidebook with which all of its willing readers—lesbian or not, black or not, disabled or not, female or not, working-class or not—can feel their own way out of the punishing strictures of heterosexuality, white supremacy, male dominance, and visual primacy.⁵⁷

Rather than reverse the gaze, or parodically appropriate it, as Garland-Thomson suggests, Lorde brings to it a central wisdom of disability studies: we are all potentially disabled; if we live long enough, we will all lose our hold on the able-bodiedness of normate youth. Once we acknowledge that vision itself, able-bodiedness itself, is fungible, the world is radically transformed, and so are we. Given this insight, how must our assumptions about the world and our mobility in it be shaken up, redistributed, reordered? What would happen if we abandoned our prostheses of vision (glasses, contact lenses, magnifying glasses, etc.), our prostheses of identity, and moved beyond the visual as a way of organizing not just experience but our sense of self?

This insight is inextricable from the meanings Lorde garners from lesbian experience and identification. The lessons Audre learns from her body and the bodies of other women allow her to reach back into her childhood, back to her mother, through the language of lesbian desire, which must recognize, for example, her mother’s difference from her (Linda would “rather have died” than call herself a dyke, but Audre identifies her as such [15]) even as it reclaims her mother for her own explicitly lesbian purposes. And she meditates on an epic question: “As a deep lode of our erotic lives and knowledge, how does our sexuality enrich us and empower our actions?” (71).

This is not to say that Lorde believes that, to quote Pat Califia in a different idiom but a quite similar spirit, “pleasure is always an anarchic force for good. I do not believe that we can fuck our way to freedom”; indeed, Lorde and Califia share this skepticism about the liberatory power of sex.⁵⁸ Lesbian bodies are not the sources of knowledge and power; they are a conduit to them. In other

words, Lorde's project in *Zami* and in her other writings is not utopian but reparative; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick phrases it in another context, Lorde reminds us that "hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader"—the reader Lorde hopes to construct—"tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates."⁵⁹ The power of a politically conscious, socially ethical hope is to re-adjust the balance among the senses, rework the relationship between body and consciousness, and reforge the links shattered by fear of difference. Our work should be not to "cure" difference but to recognize the multiple subjectivities difference brings into being. As deaf activists have argued, what the mainstream sees as disability, marginalized people often understand as a parallel and valuable culture that can expand the definitions and parameters of human experience and interaction.

At the end of "Blindness As Metaphor," Schor tells her readers that "the time has come for a new body language, one which would emanate from a sensorium that is grasped in its de-idealized reality, in its full range of complexity."⁶⁰ *Zami* gives us that language. It teaches us how to recognize ourselves in relation to others, how to feel our bodies ethically, as actors in a profound human drama. More important, in *Zami* Lorde posits lesbian sexuality as a place to start thinking about how to understand such a language, a source of a new ethics of interconnection from which we can all learn a new spelling of all our names.

Notes

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1. That is a big if: the debate, occasionally quite vitriolic, over what makes someone a lesbian has been going on for decades. Terry Castle lists the myriad questions facing anyone who tries to pin it down: "Was a lesbian simply any woman who had sex with women? What then of the woman who had sex with women but denied she was a lesbian? What about women who had sex with women but also had sex with men? What about women who wanted to have sex with women but didn't?" (*The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], 14). These questions have a lengthy feminist pedigree. For the radical feminists of the 1960s and early 1970s, for example, lesbian identity had little to do with sexuality. Monique Wittig declared that lesbianism was constituted by a resis-

tance to heteropatriarchy, a refusal to be a “woman,” “the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man” (*The Straight Mind and Other Essays* [Boston: Beacon, 1992], 13). Similarly, for the political group Radicalesbians, lesbianism was both a rejection of male dominance and the ultimate expression of “woman-identification” (“The Woman-Identified Woman,” in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young, 20th anniv. ed. [New York: New York University Press, 1992], 172–77). As Castle argues, however, the identification of lesbianism as a solely political stance participates in the “ghosting” of lesbians that is a characteristic of Anglo-American modernity. Moreover, theorists have taken the concept of identity itself to task. Judith Butler’s simultaneous claiming and disavowing of the identity “lesbian” is paradigmatic. In asking “what or who is it that is ‘out,’ made manifest and fully disclosed when I reveal myself as a lesbian?” Butler questions the transparency of the meaning of the identity therein revealed: “For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss [New York: Routledge, 1991], 15).

But this unsureness is yoked by other theorists to the decision to forge ahead anyway. As Lynda Hart points out: “Identities are necessary to function in ‘reality. . . .’ [They are] prosthetic devices, which is not to say that they are any less ‘real’ than anything else” (*Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadosochism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 2). Similarly, after working through her own doubts as to the meaning of “lesbian,” Judith Roof returns to lesbian identity as the pull of sexual desire, acknowledging that a large part of her own sense of lesbian identity is her search for that identity in others and in texts, a search “for what happens rhetorically to eroticized relations between women, because reading, even academic reading, is stimulated, at least for me, by a libidinous urge connected both to a sexual practice and to the shape of my own desire” (*A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 120). Sally R. Munt links this primacy of sexual desire to a cultural imperative: “Desire is implicated in all aspects of living a lesbian life; it is the fuel of our existence, a movement of promise” (*Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* [New York: New York University Press, 1998], 10). Ultimately, I find Audre Lordé’s own certainty about her lesbian identity as grounded in the erotic, her own intense sexual connection to women and to herself as a woman, a convincing index of what “lesbian” means: “a woman whose primary emotional and erotic allegiance is to [her] own sex” (Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, 15).

2. For a terrific, still current analysis of the mediocrity of representations of sex in lesbian novels see Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969–1989* (Boston: Beacon, 1990). Zimmerman was surprised to find that although “lesbian novelists describe sex in greater detail than do most heterosexual female novelists,” this description is “repetitive, predictable, unimaginative, and dull” (99).

3. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.
4. Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies and Pleasures in Queer Theory," in *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 226.
5. For a discussion of what pornography does represent (i.e., its attempts to represent the "truth" of sex through generic conventions) see Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
6. Taking a similar approach, Laura U. Marks argues that films made by marginalized people show the insufficiency of visuality for representing experience, either because that experience has been excised from the visual record (e.g., the assassination of Patrice Lumumba) or because the represented culture foregrounds other senses (e.g., to the people of the Indian subcontinent, taste and smell are central). These filmmakers manipulate filmic conventions, play with texture, sound, and time, to make films that Marks terms "haptic": films that shrink the gap between vision and touch (*The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2000]).
7. In Pat Califia's story "Jessie," the narrator is blindfolded and chained by her rock-star idol, the Jessie of the title. Unable to see, the narrator depends wholly on her other senses; she is able to tell Jessie's proximity only by "some imperceptible heating of my skin, an oh-so-slight stirring of the hairs on my forearms and the back of my neck" (*Macho Sluts: Erotic Fiction* [Boston: Alyson, 1988], 54). Similarly, in a long story by Califia, "The Calyx of Isis," one character reminds another: "You must remember how good it makes you feel to whip her yourself. . . . How good it feels in the muscles of your arm" (126).
8. "On its own terms" is the operative phrase here. I am not arguing that S/M pornography is the only site on which fantasy and sexuality are at work, or that it is the only explanatory schema for an extravisual representation of sex. S/M stands out for its clarity rather than for its uniqueness. Moreover, because of the intense battles waged over S/M and "feminist sex" in the 1970s and 1980s, a broad and deep array of written engagements with S/M by practitioners and theoreticians (and by some who bridge that gap) exists, making the example of S/M available for more general theoretical work, such as this essay.
9. To talk about the senses without reference to vision is a sleight of hand, but that is what I hope to do here. So the issue of vocabulary can be tricky. I am using the term *sensual* not only to describe "sensation" (i.e., physical touch) but also as part of a larger collection of sensory experiences—of taste, smell, and even hearing—that lie outside the visual domain. While the word is not necessarily stretchy enough to embrace all the nonvisual senses, it seems the best choice, in that it invokes an experience in which "feeling" in its most complex meanings might be understood.

10. This imaginative process is quite similar to the psychic work that, Jay Prosser argues, transsexuals go through to integrate postoperative bodies into a sense of self. Prosser maintains that transsexuals have already imagined themselves with postop primary and secondary sexual characteristics, despite all visible evidence to the contrary, and that the postop physical body is simply confirmation of what they believed about themselves all along, that “reassignment is the restoration of the body” they always felt themselves having (*Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 88).
11. Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, 148.
12. In her commentary before the text of the interview with Lorde, Susan Leigh Star comments on the “idyllic” beauty of the Vermont countryside in which the two women met and “suddenly imagined what it would be like to see someone dressed in black leather and chains, trotting through the meadow, as I am accustomed to seeing in my urban neighborhood in San Francisco.” Connecting “radiant Audre” with the “radiant sunshine” of the Vermont summer, Star aligns S/M with the “created culture” of urban life, “sustained by a particularly urban technology,” in direct contrast with the bucolic innocence of Vermont and, by association, of Lorde herself (“Interview with Audre Lorde,” in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. Robin Linden et al. [East Palo Alto, Calif.: Frog in the Well, 1982], 66).
13. Lorde also implicitly questioned the motives behind the foregrounding of S/M as a conflict in feminism, when other, for her more pressing, conflicts such as those around race, class, and sexuality fell into the background: “When sadomasochism gets presented on center stage as a conflict in the feminist movement, I ask, what conflicts are *not* being presented?” This is a critique that Star picks up on not at all (*ibid.*, 68).
14. Anna Wilson, “Audre Lorde and the African-American Tradition: When the Family Is Not Enough,” in *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*, ed. Sally R. Munt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 75–93; Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1984), 68.
15. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power,” in *Sister Outsider*, 54.
16. Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Why I’m against S/M Liberation,” in Linden et al., *Against Sadomasochism*, 91. For a discussion of the intense debate over the role of sexuality in women’s liberation among radical feminists see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). For documents of the “sex wars,” in which Atkinson lobbed one of the first grenades, see Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); and Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Essays on Sexual Dissent and American Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995). For criticisms of Atkin-

- son's position see Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country: Essays and Short Stories* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand, 1987); the oeuvre of Susie Bright, including *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World* (Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1990); and Cherríe Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," in Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, *Powers of Desire*, 394–405.
17. Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, 80.
 18. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19.
 19. In a later essay Mulvey addresses "the 'women in the audience' issue," as well as films in which women are clearly active (such as melodrama). While acknowledging her own pleasure in "women's pictures" like *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *Stella Dallas* (1937), Mulvey concludes on a melancholy note, seeing the "female spectator's fantasy of masculinization at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" ("Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 37).
 20. Williams also argues that the gaze cannot easily be appropriated by women in film: when women *are* the gazers rather than the gazed on, as in horror films, their fate is usually death (and grisly, gory death at that) so as "to demonstrate how monstrous female desire can be" (*Hard Core*, 97). In her later work Williams has moved away from theories of the gaze to focus on the meaning of hard-core pornography, often characterized as the genre most obsessed with the gaze and with fetishizing women as objects. In *Hard Core*, however, she argues that film pornography is a complex product of cultural change, a genre shaped as much by material conditions as by oedipal desires—an analysis surprisingly close to Lorde's.
 21. Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
 22. In *Hard Core* Williams's analysis of women-owned porn studios, like Candida Royalle's Femme Productions, explores how (and how effectively) "woman-centered" pornography takes on the question of visual representation and power.
 23. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 217; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 115.
 24. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
 25. Munt, *Heroic Desire*, 30–94.
 26. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 26.
 27. For a rich selection of essays on the mainstream cultural uses of nonnormate bodies see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

28. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 55; Ellen Hickey Grayson, "Social Order and Psychological Disorder: Laughing Gas Demonstrations, 1800–1850," in Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 108–20.
29. For a discussion of the meanings of Baartman's displaying see Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 83–92.
30. Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," in Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 193.
31. For a full discussion of the history and meanings of the "Circassian Beauties" see Linda Frost, "The Circassian Beauty and the Circassian Slave: Gender, Imperialism, and American Popular Entertainment," in Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 248–62. For an analysis of Julia Pastrana see Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, esp. 70–78.
32. Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
33. The feminist art of Judy Chicago boots the phallus out of its place of primacy, replacing it with vulvas (*The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1979]). In a considerably more postmodern vein, the art of the Dyke Action Machine creates lesbian-centered appropriations of media images, from Gap print advertising to fake movie posters to self-help Web sites (www.dykeactionmachine.com).
34. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1982), *passim*.
35. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54, 56–57.
36. See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1990), 238–49; Deborah E. McDowell, introduction to "Quicksand" and "Passing," by Nella Larsen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), ix–xxxiii; bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in *Black Looks*, 61–77; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, *Powers of Desire*, 328–49. These critics come at the representation of black women's sexuality from quite different perspectives. Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and McDowell both discuss the perceived need of middle-class black women to distance themselves from the myth of hypersexualization, while in "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime" Carby celebrates the sexual openness of female blues singers like Bessie Smith and Gladys Bentley, who rejected what they saw as bourgeois pretension. Hall's essay takes on the holocaust of lynching and its ramifications for black women, who were constructed as opposites to virtuous white

- southern women and hence were available to the sexual violence that white men projected onto black men. These perspectives show us how complex the question of reading heterosexual black women's sexuality is, let alone representations of black lesbians, who have been covered by a "shadow of repression . . . in literature in direct proportion to [their] invisibility in American society" (Jewelle Gomez, "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith [New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color, 1983], 110).
37. Following a similar line of analysis in her discussion of *Zami*, Zimmerman argues that its "female-orientation may be so deeply erotic that in loving the mother, the daughter learns to look for love from other women" (*Safe Sea of Women*, 193).
 38. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 200.
 39. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 35.
 40. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, 2d ed. (Argyle, N.Y.: Spinsters, Ink, 1980), 35, 43.
 41. *Ibid.*, 42, 44.
 42. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
 43. Prosser, *Second Skins*, 78.
 44. Lorde, *Cancer Journals*, 25, 57.
 45. Audre traces the roots of this sense of lesbian political and material superiority back to the denial of racism among her group of "gay girls" in the 1950s: "Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. 'We're all niggers,' she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false" (*Zami*, 203). In the early 1970s the belief that lesbians were inevitably in the vanguard of the feminist revolution was powerful. The assertion by Radicalesbians that "a lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion . . . , the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and [a] freer human being than her society—perhaps then but certainly later—cares to allow her" encapsulates the sense that lesbians were more able and more likely to cast off the shackles of heteropatriarchy ("Woman-Identified Woman," 172). Certainly, the battles over "feminist" sexuality were motivated in part by the assumption that lesbian sexuality should be "above" (or at least beyond) issues of power and control. More recently, Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (a fairly reliable barometer of politically conscious, self-identified, middle-class lesbian culture) has featured a discussion between two characters on changes in lesbian political mores that culminates with Lois, the resident bad girl, analyzing the shift away from

- the “lesbian-feminist monoculture” of political superiority and resistance to the mainstream. “After all,” she declares, “lesbians aren’t all androgynous, vegetarian radicals. Some of us *like* dresses and makeup! Some of us even voted for Bush!” (*Dykes to Watch Out For: The Sequel* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand, 1992], 17).
46. Naomi Schor, “Blindness As Metaphor,” *Differences* 11 (1999): 85.
 47. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider*, 110; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 81–102.
 48. Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Coming Out Blackened and Whole’: Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*,” *American Literary History* 6 (1994): 709.
 49. Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 44.
 50. Anzieu also sets himself in opposition to Lacan: “I myself would oppose the formula: ‘the unconscious is structured like a language’ with a formulation that is implicit in Freud: ‘the unconscious is structured like the body’” (*A Skin for Thought: Interviews with Gilbert Tarrab on Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Daphne Nash Briggs [London: Karnac, 1990], 43).
 51. Anzieu, *Skin Ego*, 103.
 52. Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider*, 115, 122–23.
 53. Anzieu, *Skin Ego*, 230.
 54. Lorde, *Cancer Journals*, 77.
 55. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 105.
 56. *Ibid.*, 133.
 57. I would argue that Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* plays a similar role. In my experience in teaching both texts, I have found that white students can react quite negatively to the critique of white supremacy, particularly in Anzaldúa’s work. However, I see in both texts a desire to show readers alternative modes of perceiving and acting in the world. For Anzaldúa, the key is a connection to the unconscious or supernatural “Coatlicue state,” the liminal realm in which a person must relinquish control over self and others (*Borderlands: The New Mestiza* [San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987], 41–52). For Lorde, the key is trust in the language of the body in connection with others. Both writers emphasize the power of interconnection outside (but acutely conscious of) hierarchy as a place to begin healing the self and a damaged, damaging culture.
 58. Califia, *Macho Sluts*, 15.
 59. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ed., *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 24.
 60. Schor, “Blindness As Metaphor,” 103.