

Toward Redefining Erotics through Autocritography

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Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.

— Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” (1971)

This book began in my body.

— Robert Jensen, *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men* (2017)

I have come to believe over and over again that that which is most important to me must be spoken or communicated, made verbal or signed and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood or at some time used against me for injurious purposes. This communication heals me beyond most any other effect because it offers a chance for self-examination, dialogue, polylogue, connection, shelter, and healing. I write now at the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century on the stolen land of a nation-state—undoubtedly the most powerful corporate organization in the history of human civilization on Earth—made possible through genocide and slavery and misogyny. As a white gay and disabled male from the lowest economic class, with radical feminist, Black feminist, Womanist, and anti-capitalist politics, the meaning of all this rests upon the fact that I am still alive and might not be—according to some people and their ideas and actions or, for that matter, the diseases and disorders ravaging my body.

All my life I have had to deal with heterosexism and capitalism and the bigotry therefrom, and for my entire adult life I have lived with disease and illness. Since my late-teenage years, I have endured Crohn’s disease, arthritis, asthma, “benign” positional vertigo, and hypoglycemia. Dating from at least 2013, I have lived with other major gastrointestinal problems, including gastroparesis, biliary stenosis, diverticulitis, pancreas insufficiency syndrome and abnormal pancreas cysts, Lemel’s syndrome, as well as vasovagal syndrome, chronic kidney disease, anemia, chronically low white blood cells and platelets, orthostatic hypotension, an irregular heartbeat, and numerous misdiagnoses—as well as the fear, anxiety, and depression that accompany all these ailments. I have endured countless surgeries to attempt to repair my common bile duct, fix my thyroid, and deal with problematic lymph nodes, and I have endured days and nights of great pain while remaining confined to a bed. I realize while writing this that in other times and places, I would not be able to lie medicated in a bed or undergo any medical treatments. I know that I would not be alive.

During these latest, difficult years, I have been forced (some would say “encouraged”) to scrutinize myself and my own life with a harsh and urgent clarity that has often left me shaken, sometimes depressed and/or anxious, certainly physically ill, and often deeply troubled about the world and my possible non/existence in it. Finally, however, I am much stronger and purposeful. This time has helped me to understand that my own silences must change communication into action.

Audre Lorde’s famous and important essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” is critical to feminist theorizing and praxis and to my own work. In fact, the first three paragraphs of this essay paraphrase Lorde’s first two paragraphs and reconfigure her words for my exploration herein—not to steal her work but to continue her work in the way that I can. Lorde says in her essay that a breast-cancer diagnosis forced her to understand that her “priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what [she] most regretted were [her] silences” (*Sister Outsider* 41). As such, Lorde felt compelled more than before to break silence and to speak and work against multiple oppressions. She felt a deep and abiding need to live her life openly and honestly as a Black lesbian feminist in white, patriarchal, capitalist America and, in so doing, reject heterosexism and white supremacy and misogyny. She writes, “[m]y silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (*Sister Outsider* 42). This last sentence is a clarion call not to accept social configurations and discourses of dominance as they exist and permeate all our lives; instead, one must refuse to internalize the oppressors’ language and not perpetuate their actions. One must work against domination and death-in-life. If one is to live in harmony with the cosmos, one must reject oppressions, hate, and domination whenever and wherever one finds them, including within oneself. One cannot live fully and freely if one carries around the oppressor’s intentions and actions; one simply mimics the Master and refuses all that life can be if one lives or attempts to live in any way like or as a Master. One lives only a half-life, at best, or death-in-life: an existence that is always moribund. If one is to live in a world in which all beings will flourish, one must combat oppressions, hate, and domination wherever one finds them in the world, for living under and/or within oppressions does not allow one and other beings to live fully; living within and/or under oppressions, hate, and/or domination only perpetuates existing discourses and lived realities of destructions, tyranny, and despotism. We cannot live in a just world if some or most beings are degraded or disappeared for the benefit of the few. To live is to flourish freely without existing constraints designed and implemented by those who hold power and/or by those who use power over others for profit and/or sick pleasure. Lorde says, “[w]e can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (*Sister Outsider* 44). The oppressed cannot allow the masters of the universe to kill them, so the oppressed must resist. The way to begin is to speak and work against domination, for “there are so many silences to be broken” (44). To break these silences, one must be thoroughly honest about oneself—whatever the consequences—and work to create a new world for oneself and others.

With Lorde’s words in mind, I hope that this essay will prove, perhaps even attempt to repay, my serious debt to her writing and activism against oppression and for

social justice and advance the work of fighting domination in all its forms. Lorde's work has been and continues to be a lodestar for me. Thus, I would like to assay one of the most fundamental aspects of human, earthly existence: eroticism and ourselves, and I will do so through autocritography and in the spirit of mutual exchange, comradery, and love.

Autocritography is best described by Michael Awkward, a noted scholar of African American literature and culture who engages Black feminism in his work. In his *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*, Awkward defines autocritography not as autobiography, because the latter "is a genre in which contributors shape their self-representations in response to earlier texts" (7). Instead, according to Awkward, "'autocritography' is a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic art that foregrounds aspects of the genre typically dissolved into authors' always strategic self-portraits" (7). Awkward is worth quoting at length as he explains,

Autocritography, in other words, is an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns. Although the intensity of investigation of any of these conditions may vary widely, their self-consciously interactive presence distinguishes autocritography from other forms of autobiographical recall. (7)

In this essay, I shall attempt not only to engage "texts," or experiences, from my past but to interrogate my own actions, or lived realities, in relation to literal and figurative texts and events, as such texts and events have shaped and reshaped my identity and affected the lives of those around me. Furthermore, I admit that my concerns are not only professional; they are personal and political. Again, Awkward's words are worth contemplating as he writes that in his critical work he

linger[s] primarily on moments that dramatize the tensions between male self-interest and a recognition of women's systemic oppression. I believe that only by exploring such tensions, by remaining both self-interested and cognizant of the myriad costs of misogyny, can the activity that Tom Digby terms "men doing feminism" contribute to this ever-expanding social, intellectual, and philosophical project. (7–8)

I hope to follow this definition as I attempt to redefine erotics for myself and for western/ized gay men in particular, for doing so, I hope, helps not only to situate such men differently as sexual beings in relation to each other and one another but also in relation to other beings—women, in particular—and simultaneously work to destroy—or at least combat seriously—the matrix of domination: to end the oppressions of misogyny, capitalism, heterosexism, ableism, white supremacy, ageism, and environmental destruction, at least. I hope to fashion a narrative that contemplates my subject position vis-à-vis oppressive systems that hurt women, children, men, and the planet—all life.

My development into a being who opposes all systems of power and domination began early in life, during my childhood, with early encounters of patriarchal violence in my biological family's house informing me that something about intimate heterosexual and human interaction was alienating and potentially lethal. My father's treatment of my mother and her children was physically, emotionally, financially, and sexually abusive.

Outside that house, I encountered racist, heterosexist, and ableist violence as I watched poor and working-class, white, heterosexual parents and neighbors freak out about the integration of my elementary school in southwest Chicago in the early 1980s. I witnessed the terrible treatment that African American and Latiné students faced at the hands of white teachers who were good to me—a small, bright, white, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy. I saw the open discrimination against an uncle and his male partner when these two gay men visited my biological family’s neighborhood. I also watched the harassment of a cousin my own age who continues to live with developmental disabilities.

After my biological family’s move from Chicago to rural southwest Missouri because of my father’s job transfer, I grew up through puberty and adolescence to encounter real and symbolic violence in the forms of heterosexism, homophobia, ableism, and the capitalist class and caste system at home and in school. Generally friendless and treated well almost only by teachers who found me to be intelligent (they felt sorry for me, too, I am sure), I found reading to be the real home for which I was searching. I was, indeed, seeking a home; in fact, I am still looking for home and community—or just a room of my own. Reading, however, was never an easy way out of miserable conditions; reading offered, instead, new ways of understanding the world or even confirmations of thoughts I had about the world. My reading, however, in a small town in the U.S. Upland South was limited to that which high school teachers assigned and to that which the small, public library owned: the white-supremacist-patriarchal canon from school or the popular trash found in that library, which encompasses a range of bad writing. It would not be until I read on my own Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Emily Dickinson’s poetry during my first year of undergraduate studies, devoured Toni Morrison’s fiction and Adrienne Rich’s poetry two years later, and then, read Shakespeare’s plays and poems two years later in my MA program, that I would begin to believe that something other than white-supremacist, heterosexist, capitalist, misogynist, ableist, ageist, and environmentally destructive people not only controlled the world but contaminated and contained imagination. Only then did I begin to understand that others might feel as I did and could articulate this well: to assert that violence, power, domination, hierarchy, abuse, objectification, and use with or without consent are simply wrong and contrary to nature, for such practices, behavior, and thoughts begin in conquest and end in death.

Entering graduate school and still searching for home and meaning, I would discover, desperate at twenty-two years old, the reason that I was always at odds with most people; I found Lorde’s poetry and, a bit later, her essays in *Sister Outsider*. When I took from a shelf a slim, multicolored volume entitled *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* by a poet of whom I had never heard and whose work I had certainly not been taught in a classroom, and read the first stanza of “Echoes,” the cosmos opened and welcomed me:

There is a timbre of voice
that comes from not being heard
and knowing you are not being
heard noticed only
by others not heard
for the same reason. (7)

At last, here was a voice, a person who could articulate in accessible language that which I understood: isolation can kill, and a consciousness that is contrary to dominant discourse can be repressed, silenced, and annihilated. Moreover, one lives connected to others laboring under similar and differing oppressions. Finally, one must find one's voice and use it; the only other option is silence, which is death.

Once this poem fell into my hands, ears, and mouth, connecting to others seemed possible. A linking that might end moribund behavior and thoughts could end domination and hierarchy. This single poem and this particular stanza were my starting place, both intellectually and emotionally, for a raising and confirmation of my contrary consciousness—one that is now informed by difference, or an intersectional feminist ethic of decolonized mutuality, care, and love, for as Rudolph P. Byrd says, “feminism is a means of liberating women and men from the ideological trap of patriarchy through the choice of a politics that nurtures a vision of mutuality, equality, democracy, and nonviolence” (214). And, as Beth Brant says, “Feminism is the saving grace for peoples—women, men, children, and those beings of the air, the land, the sea, and the cosmos” (79).

To proceed: While reading Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) in a feminist theory class during my second year in an English language and literature doctoral program, around 1999, I discovered that academic theorists could make mistakes when formulating ways out of domination. I did not know that one could disagree openly with important scholars. Collins claims in this first edition of her important book that race, class, and gender constitute the main categories through which oppressions operate (221). This idea seemed immediately wrong to me—long before I had heard the word “intersectionality” or read anything by Kimberlé Crenshaw—because I had read Lorde, Rich, and Walker and knew that other differences—sexuality and disability, at least—must be equal to these other categories when creating ways of understanding and fighting oppression. (I would come to understand other identities, such as age, region, religion, nation, a bit later.) Furthermore, I knew the truth from my own living.

I need to interrupt this story about a graduate class to explain how I think I understood that sexuality and disability must be considered simultaneously when thinking about and working against the matrix of domination by discussing “my own living.” Simply, I had grown up gay and ill and poor, and this was my immediate objection: I knew that being a sexual other and not being physically normal and having few resources to survive affected the possibilities of my own life and the lives of those to whom I was (am) related in ways that many people of color (both women and men), virtually all poor people, and white women have written about, fought against, and described forever. The equivalency is rough, but it is present in that sexuality and disability work simultaneously with class in my own life to this very moment; all these factors work in dis/harmony to destroy me. While I may receive some benefits because of white skin and being male, other factors of identity can erode or erase those privileges, or at least dent them seriously.

For many years of my life, up to the moment of this class discussion and beyond, I had and have been denied apartments and harassed at jobs. Some landlords and employers were open about their refusal to rent to me or to treat me equally. One

apartment manager in Missouri was direct: “I won’t let a faggot live here.” This admission was stunning, painful, and frightening—and, at that time and place, not illegal. Furthermore, this was not the only time that this had or has happened to me while looking for an affordable apartment in which to live—in Missouri or Illinois, and throughout my entire life. I felt more than rejected at that moment; I had been degraded, viewed as less than human, and asked to leave at once. Sure, I found an apartment a few days later, but I was emotionally and physically terrified by that man’s menacing demeanor and language, and I worried that I would not be able to find a place to live. I was totally alone in the world and had no one upon whom I might call for help. Heterosexism and homophobia, along with lack of money, worked in a dissonant concert to deny me immediate shelter. I could easily have been homeless because of this man’s bigotry, and I have endured this treatment—with less harsh language—more than once since that time. I still fear the time when the yearly lease is finished because I cannot know if it will be renewed or if I must search and find money for a new apartment, yet again. This constant terror pairs sexuality and class. Furthermore, many people of color have endured similar and worse experiences—albeit with different language and physical violence used to injure and reject them.

Another example: As a teaching assistant at (Southwest) Missouri State University and Northern Illinois University, and as an Instructor elsewhere, I have been called all manner of hideous names by students, “colleagues,” professors, and managers/administrators. The usual anti-gay names were and are common, and insidious remarks about disability fly from the mouths of even the most well-meaning persons. On one occasion, I was teaching an English 101 class that met each day from 8:00 a.m. to 11:10 a.m. during an interim session. A young white woman came to class around 9. She was late, obviously, but I handed her the syllabus and continued to conduct the class. She sat in the front row and did not appear interested. At the break, around 9:30, the students dispersed to the bathrooms and vending machines or stood in the hallway talking on their cell phones. As I walked toward the bathroom, I heard the aforementioned student say into her phone, “I don’t know if I’m gonna stay. There are too many Mexicans, and the teacher’s a fag.” I have heard this idea or some version of it frequently during my teaching career—both the racism and the heterosexism and homophobia. Alas, it is inescapable. This student had not meant for me to hear her hateful speech, I think, but she knew that I had overheard her when she looked up and saw me as I walked by her on my way to the bathroom.

The students and I returned to the classroom after the break and finished the first day’s activities. Once the class was over for the day and the students had left the room, I gathered my books and papers and started to leave when I noticed a syllabus on one of the desks. I assumed that someone had accidentally left her, his, or their copy behind, so I went to retrieve it, place it in my folder, and return it to the student the next day. What I found on the desk was, indeed, the syllabus, and at the top of it, in pencil, was scrawled “FAGIT.” It was obvious at once to me that this copy of the syllabus had belonged to the white supremacist-heterosexist-homophobe of the break-time phone call. What could I do? At once, I went to the computer to look up her name; I found that she had, rather quickly, dropped the class.

I returned to my office and called my supervisor who told me to pursue action against the student with the Student Conduct Board. I declined. Why? I believe in fighting

oppression, so I should have pursued this gross, discriminatory and harassing behavior, right? I should have turned her in for her racism, heterosexism, and homophobia—all occurring simultaneously and equally. No. I did not do so because I knew—from so many past experiences—that if I attempted to cite her hateful language, to bring her to that which passes for justice in an academic context, that violence against me and perhaps the other students could occur, and I had and have had enough of violence and do not want others to endure it. She seemed the type of person capable of anything. Her words on her phone and her illiterate attempt to call me out of my name prove that white-supremacy, heterosexism, and homophobia work in sync. Certainly, I was not victimized by her racism, but other students in the class were and would be, and I would need to protect them. I was victimized by her anti-gay language, and this language undermines any sort of authority that I can have as a teacher. How can I, then, protect students-of-color from her vicious white supremacy? I cannot. The students-of-color and I are linked by racist and heterosexist oppression in this context. “Race” and sexuality are both facets of identity that matter simultaneously for social justice.

Another example: One of my first supervisors and a former acquaintance who remains a co-worker both said to me, at different times while casually discussing my illnesses, that they were happy and relieved not to be like me—a hypochondriac, they claimed—and to be in dominant groups who are free of oppression. “I’m so glad that I’m not sick or poor or gay or colored,” one of them said. I was appalled, of course, and I told him so, but my words meant nothing. He continues to live his life believing this and living very well financially, and I am left to wonder how he works with students and co-workers whom he is so extremely glad not to be or be like. The reality of being oppressed—and unable to live a life free of bigotry—not only petrified this straight white American man but allowed and granted and grants him a sigh of relief—daily—and permission to express his gratitude to multiple oppressions. He was and is delighted to be straight, white, male, middle-class, and fully abled, and he takes advantage of what we glibly call these “privileges.” They are not privileges; they are oppressions that must be dismantled if we are to live in a world that foregrounds social justice over oppression. Feeling good about not being the other presents a mind thoroughly inculcated with domination’s insidious hatred, and saying so to someone who is such constitutes a gross abuse of language, at least.

To return to the story about the graduate class: A class discussion ensued about this problem, and, as usual, I was not universally persuasive in my claim that other categories of difference matter equally. Only one other graduate student agreed with me; the rest of the class agreed with Collins. Simply, I wanted to discuss the ways in which all intersecting oppressions are created within subjugating and subjugated differences, and that sexuality and disability are two among them that must be considered simultaneously and not additionally. We all suffer under the oppressions of the constructed natures of sexuality, sex and gender, and disability, at least.

The very next year, the second edition (2000) of the text would appear, and Collins would indeed list sexuality along with race, class, and gender in her formulation of understanding the matrix of domination (227). Collins, however, did not include disability or age. While she avoids imperialism by including an understanding of difference across the world as transnational, her inability to enlarge the list still leaves a gap in this particular version of Black Feminist Theory. Happily, Collins’s next book,

Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and The New Racism enhances and expands upon her ideas in both editions of *Black Feminist Thought* as it analyzes racism, misogyny, heterosexism, ableism, and ageism simultaneously and understands the intersections of all oppressions in the lives of African Americans. If I had not found Collins's next book, I simply would have had to return to the older sources or to other sources, to discover and/or recreate a more comprehensive understanding of intersecting oppressions that allows feminists and others to combat domination: race, ethnicity, class, caste, gender, sex, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, region, nation, species, and ecosystem. One immediately thinks of Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) and anything written or spoken by Arundhati Roy and María Lugones.

With all this in mind, I propose a re-conception of eroticism—life's energy—for gay men with/in a radical feminist context—so that we may all flourish. And, I must begin with myself and, as Lorde says “reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside [myself] and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears” (*Sister Outsider* 113). To do so, I must define the erotic, perform a self-reflexive and self-conscious analysis of my own erotic life, and give credit to radical feminists and their ideas for helping me to re-understand myself, my body, my connections to other gay men, and my mistakes and future actions.

While the erotic has been defined variously, the most compelling, radical, and revolutionary concept of the erotic comes from Lorde in her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978). She writes,

The erotic is a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we require no less of ourselves. (*Sister Outsider* 54)

This profound configuration of the erotic reimagines the possibilities of all relations; specifically, Lorde's erotic offers a radical Black Lesbian Feminist understanding of the ways in which one might begin to define oneself by acknowledging one's authentic power—a power that refuses domination and creates a space for one to flourish authentically with mutuality at the center of existence. Lorde believes that “[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (*Sister Outsider* 53). Lorde is speaking here to a group of women about the ways in which the erotic as power can function and flourish in their lives once it is uncovered, felt, and experienced authentically. I believe that without simply trying to steal Lorde's idea for myself, I attempt to honor her brilliance by wanting to emulate that which she offers and posit her formulation as a guide for myself and other gay men to follow so that we, too, can flourish and negate the insidiousness of patriarchy as it takes root within gay-male consciousness, connections, and libidinal economies, discourses, and actions. To be sure, men have stolen from women forever, but I hope that my writing here refuses theft and instead takes seriously Lorde's call and applies this necessary knowledge with humble care and acknowledgement and without self-indulgence and the old, racist manner of white men stealing from people of color for their own profit.

Lorde continues to define the erotic and its possibilities by stating how the erotic is and can be undone: “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information without our lives” (*Sister Outsider* 53). Thus, women are not allowed to love each other in sexual or non-sexual ways if patriarchal oppression continues to define them and operate within their consciousness and bodies. Women must break with patriarchal and other oppressions to begin to love themselves and each other sexually and non-sexually and to recognize their true power to act out-of-concert with male- and white-supremacist control because “the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (54). Drinking from this well spring of fresh water can renew the body and mind. Lorde continues at length:

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

Andrea Dworkin traces the roots of the word pornography to “the ancient Greek *pornē* and *graphos*, meaning ‘writing about whores’” (297). Dworkin continues to prove the brutality of pornography by defining it when she writes, “The word pornography does not mean ‘writing about sex’ or ‘depictions of the erotic’ or ‘depictions of sexual acts’ or depictions of naked bodies’ or ‘sexual representations’ or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores” (297). Furthermore, “Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores [...]. The only change in the meaning of the word is with respect to its second part, *graphos*: now there are cameras—there is still photography, film, video” (297). Women are not people with feelings, ideas, and needs; they are objects to be used and abused by the men who objectify them as body parts and use them for their own sick-self-gratification—for men’s, and, alas, women’s “sensation without feeling.” And, contemporary forms of technology—webcams, cell phones, and the internet—only worsen the problem. For Dworkin and radical feminists: “[T]he content is the same; the meaning is the same; the purpose is the same; the status of the women is the same; the sexuality of the women depicted is the same; the value of the women depicted is the same” (297–298). Ultimately, for women, according to Dworkin “[b]eing her means being pornography” (299). Thus, under patriarchy, women are pornography.

What has this to do with gay men if pornography, in Dworkin’s formulation at least, is so obviously heterosexual? Frankly, it has everything to do with gay men, for gay men are men, and as men they are not immune to the dictates of patriarchy; men are patriarchy’s best consumers and purveyors. Gay men, too, can objectify women and reduce them to non-human objects or things of ridicule. Drag; the use of straight women as “fag hags”; the “ick” factor that gay men claim about women’s bodies and, in particular, lesbian sexuality; crude “jokes” with other men about women’s bodies, ideas,

and lives; the dismissal of women as competent and equally capable of performance in athletics, personal defense, and business; and the outright misogyny that one can hear from individual gay men about women, and lesbians in particular, in conversation, in any gay bar or on any gay chat or dating app demonstrate only a few of the ways in which gay men objectify women. If male homosociality is exclusive for both gay and straight men, separately, the talk within spaces created by homosociality for men can too easily recreate misogyny.

Furthermore, gay men imitate straight men in pornography—only they abuse each other and one another rather than women. In 2005, Dwight A. McBride, discussing gay pornography in general, said that “[j]ust about everything you ever wanted to know about the mores or variables regulating the gay marketplace of desire and how it works can be gleaned from a casual stroll through the gay pornography section at your local video store” (101). Tops and bottoms; actives and passives; Daddys and boys; Masters and slaves; “masc” and “femme” positions are methods of imitating and transmitting male domination of women from heterosexual pornography in(to) gay pornography, and, sadly, much of gay-male desire in real life. Moreover, McBride does not leave out that which was then, and certainly is now, the main place to find pornography: the internet. He says,

Some conservative estimates put worldwide revenues in the pornography industry at \$57 billion, with estimates of U.S. revenues coming in at \$12 billion. There are 4.2 billion pornographic Web sites on the internet; this accounts for 12 percent of all Web sites. Some 68 million daily pornographic searches are initiated on various search engines; this accounts for 25 percent of all daily searches. (106)

Gail Dines, sociologist and radical feminist, supports this claim by saying that “[t]he size of the porn industry is staggering. Though reliable numbers are hard to find, the global industry has been estimated to be worth around \$96 billion in 2006, with the U.S. market worth approximately \$13 billion. Each year, over 13,000 films are released, and despite their modest budgets, pornography revenues rival those of all the major Hollywood studios combined” (47). Pornography is big, brutal, and lethal business, and it affects everyone. Dines makes a bold and arresting claim when she writes that “[t]he scale of the pornography business has important implications. In a profound sense, the entertainment industries do not just influence us; they are our culture, constituting our identities, our conceptions of the world and our norms of acceptable behavior” (47–48). How, then, can pornography and patriarchal constructions of the erotic not be ubiquitously murderous for all women and many groups of men—in particular gay men—if the hegemonic entertainment industry not only fashions but creates our culture—and, in this case, our sexuality? How can gay men access the true power of the erotic if pornography not only shapes but potentially dictates their identities? If pornography is the guide, where does the road lead? It leads to nowhere I want to travel.

Sadly, however, McBride is not opposed to pornography. He writes, “Quite the contrary, pornography has a place in my version of a liberal society. An honest place” (105). This is a positively astonishing sentiment after he has been discussing at length anti-Black racism in gay pornography. In fact, after discussing the insidiousness of the ways in which black men are fetishized in gay male pornography—as insatiable beasts with large penises prepared to penetrate any willing or unwilling white anus—McBride

asserts, “Indeed, I see no reason that pornography representing sex that is consensual and takes place between adults should not be enjoyed by whomever chooses to partake. Like it or not, that is already the case in the United States” (105–106). Such enjoyment was the case in 2005, and it is certainly the case today; one must recognize, however, that the ways in which gay pornography imitates heterosexual pornography promulgate the very same violence against gay men that is perpetuated against women—then and now. And, the problem may just be “liberal society” itself.

As feminist icon and attorney Catharine A. MacKinnon cogently argues: “Where feminism was collective, liberalism is individualistic. We have been reduced to that. Where feminism is socially based and critical, liberalism is naturalistic, attributing the product of women’s oppression to women’s natural sexuality, making it ‘ours’” (12). MacKinnon continues, “[w]here feminism is based on material reality, liberalism is based on some ideal realm in the head. And where feminism is relentlessly political, about power and powerlessness, the best that can be mustered by this nouveau movement is a watered-down form of moralism: this is good, this is bad, no analysis of power or powerlessness at all” (12). In imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, which are fundamental to classical and neo-liberal liberalism, no one is free of oppression that the very system requires for its perpetuation. Moreover, those who are oppressed cannot afford to participate in this system unless they live with/in false consciousness. Social justice can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve or even to strive for under such conditions.

Christopher Kendall, scholar and attorney, makes the explicit connection between heterosexual pornography and gay pornography—and straight male sexual desire and gay male sexual desire, neither of which approaches the feminist erotic. After a long discussion of the Canadian Supreme Court Case of *Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium* (2000)¹ that “found lesbian and gay male pornography violates the sex equality test for pornographic harm” (110), Kendall explains that the court disagreed with pro-pornography arguments, “finding that gay male pornography, like heterosexual pornography, results in the types of physical and social harms that make racism, homophobia, male supremacy, and misogyny normal and a violation of the right to equality that all citizens have the right to enjoy” (110). Gay men, too, must enjoy said rights, but pornography and the acceptance and, indeed, celebration and even worship of patriarchy not only hinder but destroy the chance for gay men to reject the oppressive and, instead, favor “sensation without feeling.” The love and embrace of patriarchy alienate/s gay men from themselves and each other and one another.

When I was a young boy, aged eight or nine, I encountered heterosexual pornography for the first time while looking for gardening tools in the shed behind the family’s house. Rummaging around the wheelbarrow and rakes, I found a *Playboy*. I had no idea what it was, so I opened it and found the “centerfold”—a woman wearing a good deal of makeup and lying completely naked, her breasts exposed and her legs open. Her wide eyes were looking directly at me. Without the language then to speak about what I was seeing, my body had a physical reaction of terror, and I ran out of the shed and back

¹For a brief discussion of *Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium v. Canada (Minister of Justice)*, please see the second full paragraph under “Customs and Excise”: <https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1835/index.do>.

into the house. Wondering where I had gone, my father came after me and inquired about what was wrong. I told him about what I had found, and he proceeded to explain heterosexual sex rather crudely by saying: “When it gets hard, you want to stick it in a woman. This picture will help you.” I had no idea what he meant by these words; I was too young to have had any sort of sexual feelings, and I knew only that something was wrong. I was not disgusted or ashamed; I simply possessed no language to decry what I had seen: a woman exposed. I knew that naked bodies were somehow “wrong,” and that seeing a person’s “private parts”—as we were taught to name genitals—was also somehow wrong.

My father, concerned with my reaction, began that summer to train me for heterosexuality; no doubt, he feared what he saw me becoming: a gay boy. He purchased more heterosexual pornographic magazines and rented heterosexual pornographic films from a local video store for me to watch. I found myself increasingly alarmed by what he was requiring me to view because it reminded me so clearly of the first instance that I witnessed my parents having sex.

One night, when I was about five years old, I awoke quite suddenly to what I thought was my mother’s screaming. I went into the living room to see my father on top of my mother; they were both naked and having sex. She was naked and moaning, and he was thrusting himself into her and groaning. The site was horrific, and I was petrified. I just stood there until my mother saw me and yelled at me to return to my room; I did so at once, of course. Beyond this, I have no memory of how my parents handled this incident; I assume they were both drunk and had forgotten my appearance—but I was traumatized by the sight of such action. The person I loved most in the world—my mother—seemed to be in pain; her moans sounded like anguish to my young ears, and her contorted face burned my eyes. My father—always cruel or remote—seemed to be abusing her. I was frozen at the moment of seeing this scene, and nothing was ever explained. The next day, we all went about our routines, but I was concerned—and remained so for an extraordinarily long time—that something terrible had happened that night. The magazines and videos that I was being forced to watch later portrayed the same thing that I had seen at age five—a man dominating a woman—and this act felt wrong to me. It has felt wrong to me since that moment.

Entering puberty and beginning to understand sexuality in general and my own nascent gay sexuality, I began to feel that human sexual relations were wrong, or at least not a positive action. They always seemed violent. Always. The way boys at school talked about sex disturbed me because the act was always about using girls and women—classmates, teachers, someone’s mother or sister, a neighbor lady or girl—for easy gratification—“to get off.” This not only failed to appeal to me; it also troubled me and made no sense. These women were my friends and authority figures and people I loved—people I knew in the world. I did not want them to be treated as my father treated my mother, and I had no interest in replicating that which I had been forced to view in heterosexual pornographic magazines and movies. Furthermore, and obviously, I was interested in knowing boys and, later, men intimately and romantically. Nothing that I had seen or heard could prepare me for gay sexuality, so I had to imagine it, and when I did so, I always imagined two men together in mutual pleasure and sharing love. I did not imagine, and my body did not want, violence or domination; this feeling of mutuality was instinctual. Of course, I had no language for it, but my body knew what I wanted,

and my mind could follow that desire. Even so young and without having read any kind of feminist theory, I wanted Lorde's erotic as a way of being for myself and others. I still want this way of being to be the way that we all interact.

Sadly, finding the erotic as mutual and loving in a sexual or romantic context was not and has not been possible for me at almost any time in my life. It remains an ideal for me, and one for which I continue to work—if no longer for myself then certainly in talking with other gay men about sex, sexuality, and how to live ethically. As I aged and “came out” and began to date men, I seemed mostly to meet potential partners who would always want to replicate what I had already understood as sex: dominance and submission—only this time it would be two men and not one man and one woman. I had no interest in this, and I often ended relationships quickly because my body and my mind would not allow me to participate in such an activity—until a painful breakup in my late twenties.

I wanted the breakup with this person because, simply, we were not well-matched, but I should not have gone on to do what I did after the end of that relationship. I met another young man a few months later, and this new person and I engaged in a “consensual” dominance-submission sexual relationship. This young man wanted me to dominate him in sexual encounters, and I did so. For the few months that we interacted, I did to him all that he asked me to do sexually, degrading him with misogynist and anti-gay language, and slapping and spitting in his face. He claimed to be able to enjoy sex—to climax—only in this way.

My body—something instinctual and pre-linguistic—alerted me to the danger in which I was participating. In fact, my own body has always told me when something is wrong emotionally. After each encounter with this young man, I left his apartment shaking and often crying because I could not believe that I had betrayed my deepest convictions and feminist intellectual and activist work; I could not believe that I had betrayed my body and my mind. I could not believe all that I had just done—and that my body reacted to it with pleasure. It was, indeed, “sensation without feeling.” I had read Lorde and radical feminists; I knew better! Furthermore, I wanted more for myself and for him than simple genital “pleasure”; I wanted loving intimacy. The uncontrollable anxiety and feeling of despair simply presented themselves within my physical reaction and in my conscious being; I was immediately aware of the psychic pain without having the language to speak of it. I had betrayed myself in every way imaginable with these actions and experiences. I had betrayed all the women I knew by calling myself a feminist. I had betrayed all the feminist theorists and activists I had read and believed. I had betrayed imagination and possibility and love.

The scholar and radical feminist activist Robert Jensen offers his personal understanding of gay sexuality in the contemporary world: “For me, being gay not only acknowledges sexual desire for men but also resisting the norms and practices of patriarchy” (Jensen, “Getting It Up for Politics” 152). He says that “[g]ayness is not only about what I do, with whom, with my body. It also is about a set of political choices involving a conscious attempt to disconnect from heterosexual norms and patriarchy” (152). To be gay, then, should be to refuse—to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu—masculine domination. As such, I take Lorde's words to heart when she says, “To be sure, there are gay men who do not view their oppression as isolated, and who work for a future” (*A*

Burst of Light 16). I am one of these men, so my interactions with that man are a stain that I cannot remove. Nevertheless, I concur with and borrow from Nett Hart and seek to adapt her lesbian separatist ideas as she writes “I believe it is the body’s own truth and wholeness that must be allowed to emerge” (70).

As such, I believe that we must engage radically—go to the root—and bring forth a creative regeneration of and for our minds and our bodies, a life-force, or erotics of equality, mutuality, and cooperation (or, dare I write, a new hegemony and ideology, its truth effects) to begin to achieve social justice. We must reject all forms of domination and reclaim our bodies from the Masters/Monsters who would rather we kill ourselves through the eroticization of inequality through sex or any other interaction. We must reject misogyny, heterosexism, homophobia, white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, and ageism. Sex acts are connected to every facet of identity and action, and to participate in domination in the sex act is to embrace all forms of oppression. No oppressions operate without connection to other oppressions; oppressions are intersectional. For two gay men to role-play with dominance and subordination is for them to replicate master narratives of heterosexuality and all other oppressions. As Hart says, “[w]e can both be Subjects, actively attentive” (74).

Therefore, I conclude with Jensen, who says “[t]he future—if it is to be a decent one—lies in a consistent rejection of a world structured on domination, from the most intimate parts of our lives to the largest questions of global justice” (“The Relevance of Radical Feminism for Gay Men” 25). We cannot be a species on a planet that is dying unless we do the difficult work of expurgating from ourselves the implanted hate that domination requires and, then, begin to work together to create a world in which all beings great and small come together in trust and mutuality for the survival and thriving of all. This work is social justice. We can “have sex,” “make love,” “interact intimately” without needing to hurt each other and one another. We can eroticize equality. We can and we must come together as equals beyond equals and love without inflicting any sort of pain upon each other, ourselves, and/or one another. We must care mutually and enact tenderness, care, and love in both intimate and political situations, which are never separate. The personal is political; the political is personal. Really, to begin to create this world, we must simply refuse the master’s tools and create our own internal and worldly places of safety and togetherness. Furthermore, without taking these radical ideas of the erotic and sexuality seriously and acting with and upon them, humans and the earth are doomed. We cannot accept what is offered from imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; we must reconstitute eroticism immediately so that we may all live in decolonized mutuality, care, and love—true intersectionality. We have no other choice.



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