

Learning to *love* the wor(l)d *radically*

with *Black Feminist Lyricism*:

contemplating method and theory in the (critical) study of religion

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SUMMARY

The primary purpose of this thesis is to contemplate method and theory in the academic study of religion in terms of its hegemonic discursive wor(l)dmaking strategies, alongside the question: (How) Can Black feminist (radical) love operate as a discursive strategy (or onto-epistemological intra-section) to narrate *self<>other* in the study of religion?

The individual chapters are thought of as individual strains, together forming a constellation of colors. Inspired by the *radical love* shimmering through Black feminist lyrical expressions, the thesis aims to learn from and with these texts and lyricists in order to flesh out the discursive whiteness inherent to contemporary knowledge- and discourse-making in the academic study of religion. (1) My fascination with *radical love*, as a non-reductive onto-epistemological approach, forms the foundation of the work. (2) On the basis of Miller and Driscoll's *Method as Identity* (2019), I contemplate the role of the critical neutral (white) scholar (self) of religion as observer of the less neutral(/black) Other, alongside notions of personhood that make such clear distinction and distance-making possible. (3) This chapter *both* question the binarization between self and Other, *and* explore possibilities of narrating multiplicities and wholeness from an intra-active/relational/co-constitutional perspective of personhood. (4) Drawing inspiration from Lorde's *Poetry is Not a Luxury* (1985), I weave words into worlds, following the pattern of *radical love* offered by Black feminist lyricists. With the intention to show a discursive entanglement of narrating intra-active wor(l)dmaking and navigating non-white discursive cultures (of scholarship), the thesis can be read as a creative contemplation that plays with discursive techniques and notions of constructing *self<>other* in the study of religion. It can be read as an attempt to entangle (past) criticism with the (present) quality of *showing up fully human* for (future) transformation of shared wor(l)ds.

PREFACE

“It is important here to note that this is not an exhaustive list and that I am myself a young scholar with a variety of privileges (I am a white, middle-class woman with an education from Western Universities). The following theories, applications, and examples are influenced by my background and privilege and have to be understood within this context.”¹

“I want to scrub my entire education from my tongue, give only talking drum parties when I speak.”²

In response to the Combahee River Collective³ demand for coalition building I attempt to speak to the matters of my heart in dialogue with those female authors of color that have colored my capacity to love, live and work. The always already existing platform of healing, love and resilience that is foundational for their work brings meaning to my own motivation to fight for a better world on a daily basis. In this world the recognition and rehabilitation of Black women's (inhibited) freedom stands central to the freedom of humankind (in nature and cosmos). With that being said, I am writing this thesis as an expression of solidarity with Black women and the struggle they face.

This appears a good moment to note that, in any part of this work in which I refer to the voice of the narrator as “I,” I do not aim to simulate one coherent author identity. I do in no way question the reality of certain (generational or personal) trauma’s as formative aspects of certain identities and not others. Yet, I do not see this as contrary to a multi-layered, dynamic and

1 Januschka Schmidt. “Who We Cite: A Reflection on the Limits and Potentials of Critical Research Methods.” In A. Day, L. Lee, & J. Spickard (Eds.), *Doing Diversity in Teaching, Writing, and Research*. (Bristol, UK: Policy Press Bristol, forthcoming).

2 Toluwanimi Obiwole. “Amerikkana.” *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic*. eds. Mahogany L. Brown, Idrissa Simmonds and Jamila Woods (Chicago: Heymarket Books, 2018), 148.

3 Pleading for solidarity as the only way to free our society from oppression the CRC was the first collective (led by black women) to gain recognition in the public space for speaking out for the particular oppression black women face. By arguing that only when black women can be free humanity can truly be free, the collective did not aim at exclusivity, but at a politics of community and care for each other. The heritage of Black feminist studies is clearly traceable to the impressive collective effort the CRC. The CRC statement can be accessed online via: <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/the-combahee-river-collective-statement.html>.

complex understanding of *self*<>*other*⁴. When you as a reader engage with this text, this work becomes as much yours, as it is mine, a playground for both of our imaginations to mingle. It is thought of as a collaborative speculative attempt to narrate what is (be) coming. Or as adrienne maree brown puts it: “I don’t want to be the owner of this, just a joyful conduit.”⁵

I often ask myself why I chose the methodological path of discourse analysis for this work. Whereas, I do believe that words create worlds, I also believe that colors and dances and music do, too. For me, they all form(ulate) different textures of creative material, spinning worlds into existence. I therefore see myself as a weaver, a weaver of words and stories⁶. I weave strains of colorful thread. Orchestrated by ancient rhythms my hands weave new forms into wor(l)ds unread. I weave wor(l)ds I do not own. I weave what I see and what I feel. I weave the breeze that flows by. I weave the sheep that give yarn. I weave my mother’s patience and her unstoppable will to fix my mistakes. I weave the first hole the sock will have and the cold feet it will hold. I weave what is not meant to last forever, nor to fit everyone at once.

I weave as creation, as metamorphosis - a memory practice linking the bodies of people who have weaved clothes to provide for their people for centuries and far into the future. I weave as a practice of care and continuation. I weave as a radical practice of love for repetition and change. For giving form to a possibility, whilst leaving knots untied.⁷

Whereas I would love to weave a carpet as an academic dissertation, I here weave words into those of others. Discourses can be understood as the pattern that we (as co-critters) weave in the process of wor(l)d-making.

Alexis P. Gumbs inspired me to write my thoughts in archives. It is particularly her book *M-Archive* and adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy* that both sparked, motivated and guided me through the intuitive process of writing with and from *radical love* in the following work.

4 I use the sign <> to signify the intra-active relationality I see as inherent to the concepts of self and other. Both being defined by the absence of the alternative, they co-constitute each other in reciprocal action (Wechselwirkung).

5 adrienne maree brown. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 7.

6 “for her, weaving sessions were meditation.” Alexis Pauline Gumbs. *M-Archive: After the End of the World*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 135.

7 “and you can feel that the hands that stitched this together stitched it with love and desire, creativity and connection. they laughed sometimes when they were stitching and cried sometimes as the memories came through. they were grateful to transform each moment into love.” Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 167.

The different chapters of this thesis are assigned different colors (of yarn). When meditating upon this concept, each chapter clearly dictated its own color to me:

Red stands for the passionate fires of the south,
 a lions roar, preparing the world for
 loving passion, angry action,
 with bravery it shines light through every crack, creating
 relentless renewal, with a stubborn heart,
 burning down and building up, oh revolutionary flames
 here to guide us home-

The air for me is **yellow**,
 mellow kisses stroking my cheek,
 your winds navigate our thought,
 placing liberation on a scale. Either one of us
 must be equal,
 must win?
 for fairness we rise,
 trans-parent we fall-
 when I think of **blue** I think of fish,
 I think of glittering bodies rubbing against each other,
 with a blink of the eye, the water appears to move
 in the rhythm of the serpent,
 one body, many flippers,
 dreaming, catching the stars'
 reflection in the water
 to swim with the tide,
 we must swim against the current.

Green, luscious, gay, green
 stranded on the shore,
 hugging the deep, dark, feminine,
 earth(ly),
 feeling the feet sink into soil, both seeding

trees, and thoughts and li(v)es,
merging into the shadow of death and
life under
(y)our mother's gardens,
certain, patient, practical, devoted,
the bull awaits the waving of the
red flag,
jumping face first into the
black simultaneity of the universe,

“I wanna rise to love
Rise to love”⁸

8 Oshun. “Sango.” *ASASE YAA*, (Andrew “Nathaniel Geographica” Firestone, 2015) Accessed June 20, 2020 via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1ROfQJXkYg>

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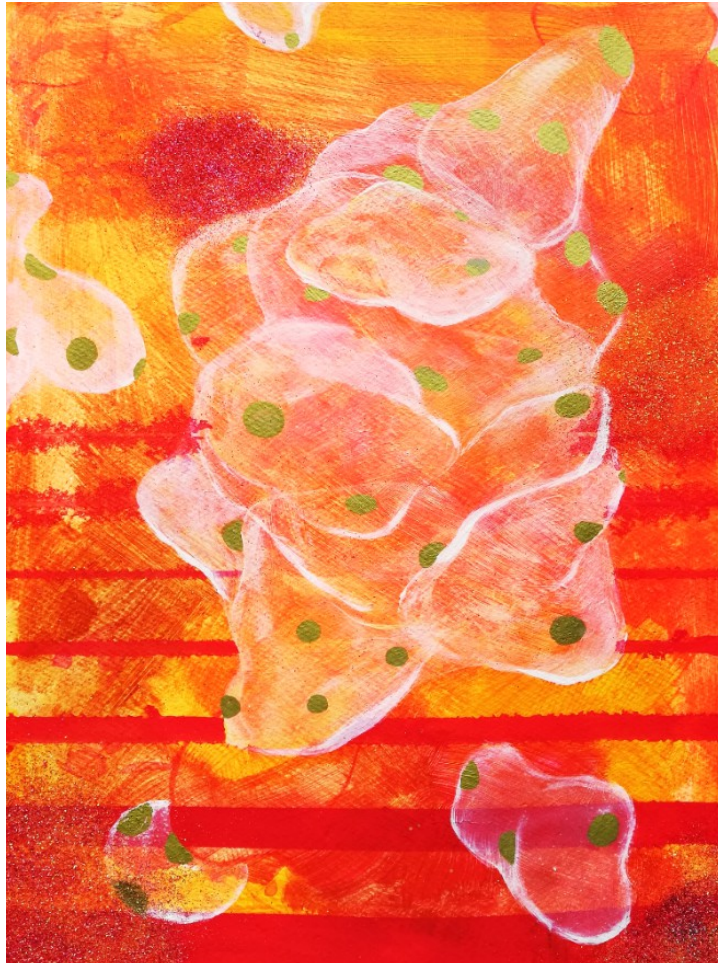
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THE RED CHAPTER OF FIRE (AND LOVE)⁹



“Where is the love?”¹⁰

9 All images created by the author for the purpose of this thesis.

10 June Jordan. *Some of Us Did Not Die* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 268.

*mother sun,
 you give us warmth
 -to be-
 without you,
 we are not
 we think we can escape
 into squares
 of white light
 but*

- *I vow to distribute the love that you give to me
 to collect -- to catalyze*
 - *Everyone that is, is love. To be means to
 love is what creates
 through signals of care we pulse your
 light through our loving spider
 web*
 - *it can only lead to an increase in/of love
 if in every fibre of being is love*
 - *warmth and love are one. In face of sorrow
 love can shine. She can look at sorrow
 and she can be with him,
 because sorrow exists only through her
 love. & love can embrace sorrow and
 pull him to their chest and tell them
 that it is
 okay to only be
 given by mother sun*

*we want to weave love with light beams, we do not do without it and I shall dedicate all my
 forms of being to love. For love is-*

“sunshine=love=connection=energy”

BE:

Where am I?

In an old diary, I found these notes, jotted down in an early morning trance. They hold the record of a dreamscape I had been deeply immersed in just a few moments earlier, now years ago. I still remember the dream: the strings of light joining from the sun to my heart, to your heart, around the globe, spinning networks of light and love. I remember my body like a vessel illuminated by the sun’s warmth—an embrace I had been longing for. I remember waking up that morning with a burning feeling of love in my heart and an eager mind to spread it.

Over the years, life continued to swim (by), the warmth in my heart receded and advanced like the ocean, shaken by the wind, burnt up in flames. In her doctoral thesis Alexis Pauline Gumbs alludes to the movement of shorelines¹¹. The image-in-motion stuck with me. “This is for us, living at the shoreline,”¹² she writes, “this dissertation is located at the point of a desired rendezvous, the desire for our differently named and positioned analytics of each other.”¹³ Describing her position or situation as a desire for “meeting points,” standing at the ever changing edge of the water. In my own life I kept feeling like I was either standing too far inside the water or at the shore, the desired rendezvous missed. In every attempt of rigidity (or control) I was pulled further away from attending to the shoreline, the shape-shifting epicenter of love and care. I was not moving with, but against, finding dual points of criticism and despair, rather than meeting points of hope and love. Once I had uncovered them, I forgot to take them for what they were: “a place that helps us learn about survival,” a place where out of the radical act of surviving against the odds, love grows into emergent strategies that accept that “Change is constant. (Be like water.)”¹⁴

11 This is a direct reference to Gumbs’ dissertation prologue “For Those of Us Who Live at The Shorelines.” Alexis Pauline Gumbs. “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996.” (PhD Diss., Duke University, 2010).

12 Gumbs. “We Can Learn.” 1. It is important to note that Gumbs responds to Audre Lorde’s notion of shoreline, rather than coining the term herself. To be found in: Audre Lorde. “A Litany for Survival,” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 255.

13 Gumbs. “We Can Learn.” 2.

14 brown. *Emergent Strategy* (2017), 41.

Then, I met the works, words and worlds of Sa-Roc, OSHUN and Joan Morgan. I heard lectures by bell hooks and Eboni Marshall-Thurman. I read poetry by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jasmine Gibson, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni. I cried and danced with Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde, I found hope and honesty with Nnedi Okorafor and Octavia Butler. The sensation I felt when I dove into the world *Black Feminist Lyricists*,¹⁵ felt (and still feels) like a hot shower, starting with a tingle in my toes and moving into an energetic wave up my spine where it burns straight into my heart. A meeting point, a place where pain and love embrace. A place where my body, mind and soul could meet at the shoreline, a place of (radical) love,

“Mother love, sister love
 Daughter love, all the love
 Conjure love and give me love
 God's love, super love
 Yeah, Gaia love, all love
 Yeah, we holding all the love”¹⁶

I am sure that the following piece will leave much space for criticism, as it is as imperfect and situational as I am. I am here to write about love and the way in which *radical love* as a narration (and therefore life) practice might just bring the transformation we all need. The following thesis is written about/with&from (that place of) love.

HERE:

What exactly am I doing here?

15 I use this term as an octopus-term, its is thought of as a way to create a fluidity between Black Feminist expression forms ranging from HipHop lyrics, over poetry to short prose, essay's to sci-fi novels that make use of a lyrical format (see [the green chapter](#)).

16 Princess Nokia, Onyx Collective and OSHUN. “Sunday Best.” *Everything is Beautiful*, (Proda & Onyx Collective, Joe La Porta, Andy Park, Princess Nokia Records, 2020).

In this thesis I think with a concern raised by Monica Miller and Christopher Driscoll in their recent work *Method as Identity*¹⁷ that the contemporary “critical” study of religion is defined by a deep seated habit of illusionary distinction making. A mechanism that utilizes the category of “the empirical other” for the formation of a neutral and critical scholarly self by producing the illusion that the category of “religion” were created not by the theorist’s imagination itself, but by its “objective” comparison to what it is not (= Other). The Other, then, is coded and categorized by the measure how it is not self.

I want to challenge this particular notion that the discursive formation of static self-, or person-hood (in form of distinction from “the empirical other”) could ever be regarded as a neutral starting point for gathering knowledge about “religion”. Rather than assuming an always already given distinction, I want to inspect possibilities for narrating *self* <> *other* as a fragile moment of intra-action. If I regard the shoreline as that delicate place in which the distinction between *self* and *other* blurs in an infinite dance of re-emergence, I wonder when we can drop our swords and meet the (always already) fragmented “empirical other” (here embodied Black female) at the epi-center of *radical love*. I therefore turn to *Black Feminist Lyricism* to learn how hegemonic (white male) wor(l)d- and distinction-making impacts spaces of Euro-American scholarship in general and the study of religion in particular. Moreover, proposing their framework of *radical love* as an ethico-onto-epistemological¹⁸ standpoint to re-imagine method and theory in the critical study of religion.

I ask: What would be the consequences of truly facing the illusion that the “neutral” category of “religion” could never have been defined without the “empirical other” as a contrast point? What could be the implications of such an inseparability of “religion” from the mirror image of its (white male) makers for discourse in the study of religion? And how can we begin to overcome the

My central research question therefore reads:

17 Christopher M. Driscoll and Monica R. Miller. *Method As Identity: Manufacturing Distance in the Academic Study of Religion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

18 “What we need is something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology*; an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being-since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter.” Barad. *Meeting the Universe* (2007), 185.

(How) Can Black feminist *radical love* operate as a discursive strategy (of shoreline thinking) to narrate *self* <> *other* in the study of religion?

In order to study this question, I will disassemble it into three elements. I hope to spotlight the question in each chapter from a different angle and would like to add that the angles I have chosen are representative of my own particular standpoint as a scholar and person, and should not be regarded as fixed guiding principles. For me, all the chapters following the present one stand in a non-linear constellation¹⁹ to the first and each other. The order of their appearance can be altered to liking and cross-reading is not just encouraged, but thought as necessary for a thorough understanding of this work. I see the individual chapters as mutable elements of a whole. I therefore encourage you to read the following sections as a general map for navigating the, at times abstract and dense, waters.

(1: aka here and now) What is “radical love”? Where does it come from and what is its power?

(2) EITHER/OR: Dualistic discursive strategies: How do dualistic frameworks narrate *self* <> *other* in the “critical” study of religion? At what costs does this distinction operate?

(3) BOTH/AND: “Love as transformative force”: Is there a “possibility of wholeness”? How do wholeness and multiplicity contribute to a relational framework for wor(l)dmaking? How does whiteness disrupt such a framework?

(4) THE BOTH/AND SPACE: *Black Feminist Lyricism as Non-Linear Wor(l)dmaking*: What is *Black Feminist Lyricism*? (How) does (radical) love narrate a “possibility of wholeness” and multiplicity in BFL?

(5) Speculative Fabulation/Reflection (as Birthing togetherness): Can the revolutionary act of loving (or “m/othering”) serve as a monistic narration practice in the study of religion? What good does it do? (A creative contemplation)

Whereas this chapter builds a foundation by outlining the concept of *radical love* that serves as the backdrop of this thesis, **the yellow chapter** dissects the either/or framework that

19 The concept of constellation is thought of in a twofold manner. Firstly, I think of constellations from an astrological angle where they are dynamic ever- changing forms in which the universe reorganizes its energetic fields to produce differently situated events of probability. Secondly, I draw on Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): “A constellation, on my reading, is also one way the remains of the past and present are used and recognized to create and prepare for a different kind of future” (23).

undergirds critical meaning making in the study of religion. By means of exposing the “logic of the One” as always already exclusionary mechanism, the either/or logic that keeps it in place is questioned by exploring its direct lifeline to whiteness as the center of such philosophical metaphysics. In [the blue chapter](#) contradiction, community and multiplicity are identified not as a choice, but the fragmented reality the “empirical other”/Womanist scholar has been living all along. *M/othering* as a Black feminist practice of narrating multiplicity is introduced as an alternative discursive standard. Exploring the both/and²⁰ space as a discursive shoreline, [the green chapter](#) situates *Black Feminist Lyricism* at its core and analyzes how discourse can be formulated from this platform.

NOW:

What concepts and methods am I working with now?

In the present work I draw on a (material-)discursive approach, because I believe the notion of “discourse” to offer a notable advantage for engaging in research from the angle of relationality. Rather than pointing to a specific method, discourse analysis is often understood as a *research perspective*, “that applies a spectrum of possible methods in order to answer its guiding research question.”²¹ More than “just” a method, discourse (analysis) appears to be interested in mapping (power) structures, charting relations and discerning the relationality of (societal) structures, concepts and people by focusing *how* we make wor(l)ds. Following Kocku von Stuckrad²², I define “discourse” as that which coordinates and regulates knowledge in a given context, community or environment. Meaning that it is that which establishes and upholds collective orders, legitimizes (social) structures and institutions, and dictates systems of meaning making. Furthermore, I regard discourse as a sort of infra-structure that is not limited to what is

20 Anthropologist Michael Lambek proposes to embrace the uncertainty that a both/and- framework provides, in order to supersede the limited “safety” of binary either/or constellations. He believes that scholarship cannot falter when confronted with paradox, irony or doubt, but must face them in order to acknowledge its limitations. To welcome insights that do not fit within the already constructed binary-framework means an honest confrontation with BOTH that which falls within these categories AND that which does not, in like manner. Michael Jackson. “Both/And.” In *What is Existential Anthropology?* Eds Michael Jackson and Albert Piette, (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 58-84.

21 Kocku von Stuckrad. “Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications.” *MTSR* 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 14.

22 Whose academic oeuvre, supervision, and support has made this thesis possible.

said or written, but regulates the structures of co-existence in social settings. It holds the parameters for togetherness. As such, I see discourse as a co-constitutive element to the category of *self* \diamond *other* discussed in the following dissertation.

What does Religion have to do with it?

In an attempt to grapple with this question, I take a closer look at the epistemological assumptions undergirding the contemporary approach to a critical study of religion, following in the footsteps of *Method as Identity* in the yellow chapter. However, here I will map out a working definition of religion to provide an insight into why the particular lens of religion is helpful for this thesis.

“We simply mean to understand religion as a conceptual and taxonomical 'placeholder' of sorts, a way by means of which humans parse out and explore the social world, the self, and human experience in relationship to a desire for a wide variety of things from 'unity' of experience, framework of meaning, or strategic acts of identification.”²³

Here, Pinn and Miller describe the category of “religion” as the prism through which multiple forms of meeting and merging with (self, other, and) social reality are projected. Describing religion as a placeholder, they define it as a momentum of (im)possibility: a (p)re-configuration or coding that always already precedes the data it produces. Data that subsequently is tainted by the “desire for strategic acts of identification” of those who author(ize) its taxonomic categorization. “Religion” is neither true, nor false, but shapes and is shaped by how scholars meet themselves, the human experience and the world in its becoming. “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization,”²⁴ writes Jonathan Z. Smith. It is precisely this precarious position of “religion” at the (secretly pre-determined) shoreline between the scholastic self and the “empirical other”²⁵ that moves me, as a scholar of the field, to examine the discursive modalities invoked to keep the water (aka “empirical other”) at sea, by our discipline’s false

23 Anthony Pinn, Monica Miller and Bernard 'B Bun' Freeman. *Religion in Hip Hop* (London: Bloombury, 2015), 3.

24 Jonathan Z. Smith. *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi. (I owe gratitude to Monica Miller for introducing me to this quote and contextualizing its signification for me.)

25 A concept Charles H. Long describes as the cultural occurrence in which the unique self image of one culture (co-)constitutes itself by negatively contrasting itself towards what it is not. E.g. defining the category of “religion” as organized, or neutral because of its assumed absence of immature and primitive behaviors observed elsewhere, in the “wild” and “savage” Other. Charles H. Long. *Significations : Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. (Aurora: Davies Group, 1999), 91-94.

pretense that this serveth the purpose of (scientific) comparison. Comparison that has, so far, served to justify either/or thinking, exclusion and supremacy, under the disguise of objectivity and neutrality. Maybe if we could learn to radically love ourselves and each other enough to embrace and survive the necessary self-reflexivity and -transformation, could the study of religion become a place that serves as a meeting point for orientations, guidances and meaning making networks.

What's love got to do with it?

When the AAR (American Academy for Religion) under the supervision of its president, theologian Serene Jones, revealed its 2016 theme to be “Revolutionary Love”, the vehemence of kickbacks from scholars of the AAR was astonishing. Heiled as confessional, unprofessional, absurd and disheartening, the theme brought up the fear that “any sense of the academic study of religion as being a credible part of the human sciences has now been lost,”²⁶ (so Russell McCutcheon). “Revolutionary Love,” the theologian(s) who proposed it (and the statements’s reference to Baldwin?), brought up a clear feeling that this is NOT what the academic study of religion is about. The anxiety that a topic such as “revolutionary love,” could tinker with the value-free, objective and unmoored quality of the discipline makes me wonder about the paranoia to face that what it IS. If “the objectification of anyone’s experience but one’s own,”²⁷ remains the only acceptable form of conducting research in the study of religion, I wonder how whiteness and the category of “religion” become entangled in a co-constitutive matrix in which the experiential, confessional, black, “empirical other” continues to be fetishized. If a rather general statement about “revolutionary love” is read as so theistic and colored that it sparks such aversion, what role does the imagined emotional distance from “religion” and the “empirical Other” (as the object of study) play in keeping the discipline white, objective and at contrast to everything Other? If there is no space for love, do we need hate, or impartiality, to upkeep our role as a “credible part of the human sciences”?

What this makes clear to me is that the critical scholar of religion does not (and never has) constitute(d) their identity without (the) other(s). The question I ask myself then is: How do I/we live with that recognition from here onwards?

26 Russel McCutcheon. “Revolutionary Love?” (blog, 2015), accessed 17th October, 2020 via: <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2015/12/10/revolutionary-love/>

27 Miller and Driscoll. *Method as Identity* (2018), 56.

I want to propose that *radical love* (for our profession, ourselves and others alike) should not be what discourse is about. It should be WHY we have discourse in the first place.

(RADICAL) LOVE:

“We have always loved each other
children all ways”²⁸

“Perhaps humans’ core function is love.”²⁹

“Like everyone else, you need love and water to survive.”³⁰

“Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*”³¹

“Black women, you are a threat on every point of the map
You are love, in its purest form, all unapologetic, all unconditional”³²

“If you want to change the world, it must be grounded in love and light.”³³

“I’m animated by love, I don’t move by chance”³⁴

28 Lucille Clifton “Listen Children” accessed 20th April, 2020: <http://www.afropoets.net/lucilleclifton4.html>, see Appendix A.

29 brown. *Emergent Strategy* (2017), 9.

30 Thiahera Nurse, “Love and Water.” *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic*. ed. Jamila Woods, Mahogany Brown and Idrissa Simmonds (Chicago: Heymarket Books, 2018), 121.

31 Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers Garden* (London: Women’s Press 1984), xii. emphasis adapted from original version.

32 Rapsody.”Reyna’s Interlude.” *Eve*, (9th Wonder, 2019) accessed February 2020 via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL4cObe9HPw>

33 Quote retrieved from an undated interview with OSHUN by Helen Jennings, *NATAAL Digital*, accessed 8th March, 2020 via: <http://nataal.com/oshun>.

34 Brother Ali. “Own Light.” *All the Beauty in This Whole Life*, (Ant, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2017) accessed 10th March, 2020.

“(…) the defining emotion is love. Always love.”³⁵

“love that is not fractured in its expression or experience. In more common terms, *radical love* is an unconditional love, which is the pinnacle of love, because it means that it is not based on merit or competition.”³⁶

> “LOVE AS TRANSFORMATIVE POWER”³⁷

“It is my sincere conviction that the power of love in the world is the greatest power existing. If you have a greater power, my friend, you may move me,”³⁸ is what “angelic troublemaker”³⁹ and civil rights hero Bayard Rustin responded to a police officer in 1942, upon his violent attempts to remove peaceful Rustin from the front section of a bus. Rather than positioning love as the opposite or absence of hate, Rustin believed in a notion of love so powerful that it could transcend the oppression and segregation of people, concepts and nations (that violence created in the first place). He let the power of love dictate his action, eclipsing binaries, dancing around them and never shying away from (non-violently) resisting those who tried to enforce them. Love for him was not to be understood as passive, or peaceful, but as directly linked to action, and resistance; aka as transformative force. In his commitment to love and non-violence, he demanded total dedication to justice and (spiritual) well-being for all. His concept of love embraces contradiction and multiplicity and moves towards community, and an economy of sharing. Being both militant in his expression and soft at heart, ruthless in his demands and non-violent in their execution, Rustin showed the world a love so real, determined and confronting that I regard it as fundamental for Black (feminist) love politics. Rustin’s spirit comes to me often when I feel scared. I can almost feel his warm handprint on my right shoulder, sense how he chuckles, leans in and whispers in my ear: “What are you scared of? You know that in love there is no need for fear.”

35 Joan Morgan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as A Hip Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 121.

36 Corrina Horne. “What is Radical Love” *Better Help* (online 2020), accessed 24th February, 2020 via: <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/love/what-is-radical-love/>

37 bell hooks. *All about love: New Visions*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xix.

38 Bayard Rustin. *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Devon W. Carbado, Donald Weise (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2003), 2.

39 a term coined by Rustin himself.

As bell hooks explains, “the notion that love is about getting what one wants, whether it’s a hug or a new sweater or a trip to Disneyland.”⁴⁰ Love, so hooks, is not something one can own, neither does it describe a state of being, rather “we would all love better if we used it as a verb,” she concludes on the backcover of the book. Elaborating that “the light of love is always in us, no matter how cold the flame. It is always (...) waiting for the heart to awaken and call us back to the first memory of being the life force inside a dark place waiting to be born-”⁴¹ Comparing love to life force, hooks (and Jordan) highlight the dynamic potential of love as an action, an ever present possibility, or invitation to co-create, care and commune.

“*Love is lifeforce, it is the creative spirit manifest*”⁴²

>>LOVING (FAT) BLACK WOMEN

In Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ *M-Archive*, (fat) Black women are identified as the ancient origin of humankind, an emblem of the roots that ground us in the earth. Society’s failure to acknowledge or uplift their existence, so Gumbs, can be interpreted as a linear progressive strategy of distance making, which by the same token can be seen as a denial of ourselves (our own human essence).

“you are damned by your hatred of fat black women,”⁴³ Gumbs advances. In a timeless myth-like fashion, she compares the colonization of the earth, the line drawing, land marking and pin dropping, to the colonization of black women’s bodies.⁴⁴ Herewith Gumbs directly links the freedom of black women to the freedom of the people and the freedom of the earth, arguing that only when the (fat) black woman (“who has processed your paperwork or fed you or cleaned something on which you would have slipped,”⁴⁵) will be free, the rest will be too. Both have given us life, have nurtured us, have served as pillars of their own destruction. The overlooked care-takers of problems we did not (want to) know we had. (Fat) black women aka the earth exist in a trope of lingering death, hidden under a thick white layer of dust, forced into the shadow of

40 hooks. *All about love* (2001), 19.

41 Ibid., 68.

42 June Jordan. “The Creative Spirit: Children’s Literature.” *Revolutionary mothering: love on the front lines*, eds. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai’a Williams (Oakland: PM Press, 2016) accessed 15th February, 2020 via Scribd, 45.

43 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 146.

44 A topic bell hooks writes about in her essay 1998 “Naked Without Shame” (bell hooks. “naked without shame: a counter-hegemonic body politic.” *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational-Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (New York: MIT Press, 2001), 65-73) and Audre Lorde addresses in “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power” (1984), of which her own reading can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWmq9gw4Rq0>.

45 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 146.

white life (instead of wildlife). Yet, it is under this layer of white dust that we find a form of life where Breathing equals M/othering,⁴⁶ equals Love(ing) = a revolutionary “practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life”⁴⁷ (that is and will be). Loving (fat) black women has gone unwritten and unrecorded in the face of his-story. Yet, it is precisely from this place that I want to narrate my thoughts towards critical method and theory in the study of religion, blowing away the dust to reveal a network of caring intra-action as onto-epistemological root system.

>>>LOVE POLITICS

“Prioritizing ourselves in love is political strategy, is survival,”⁴⁸ writes adrienne maree brown. Prioritizing Gumbs’ (fat) Black women in love is political strategy and survival. Whereas the present thesis will serve to dig deeper into the way in which (radically) loving (fat) Black women could function as a means to transcend supremacist notions of personhood, the following section problematizes the *self<>other* distinction that upholds it. What is more, I will lay out how it is precisely the implosion of such a distinction that is necessary in order to make the survival of (fat) Black women not just possible, but paramount.

I therefore ask:

How does love function as a political strategy in “black feminism’s love politics”⁴⁹?

However aware I was that I could not be the only one enticed by Black feminism’s love-politics, stumbling upon Jennifer Nash’s essay⁵⁰ opened new dimensions for the direction of this thesis. I therefore want to use the following section to engage her work. In her essay, Nash argues “that black feminism’s love-politics suggests a way of doing politics that transcends the pitfalls of identity politics.”⁵¹ More precisely, by creating the illusion of larger (static) inter-group differences, identity politics fails to account for dynamic relationality between and within

46 This concept will be discussed in [the green chapter](#).

47 Gumbs. *Revolutionary Mothering* (2016), 33.

48 adrienne maree brown. “Book Excerpt: ‘Love as Political Resistance’ From adrienne maree brown’s *Pleasure Activism*.” The Root, G/O Media Inc, March 29th, 2019, [https://theglowup.theroot.com/book-excerpt-love-as-political-resistance-from-adrienn-1833544520?](https://theglowup.theroot.com/book-excerpt-love-as-political-resistance-from-adrienn-1833544520?fbclid=IwAR2tCXmj8TQTHuDNJhks1lnJSepDpUvvMrafHiwdhmZEdnVSb_8wrseYhVA)

[fbclid=IwAR2tCXmj8TQTHuDNJhks1lnJSepDpUvvMrafHiwdhmZEdnVSb_8wrseYhVA](https://theglowup.theroot.com/book-excerpt-love-as-political-resistance-from-adrienn-1833544520?fbclid=IwAR2tCXmj8TQTHuDNJhks1lnJSepDpUvvMrafHiwdhmZEdnVSb_8wrseYhVA).

49 Jennifer C. Nash. “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2013): 1–24. <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1>.

50 Nash. “Practicing Love” (2013), 1.

51 Ibid, 1.

groups (and individuals). Academic spaces that continue to invoke “fixed, legible and knowable”⁵² categories of identity overlook not just in-group differences, but also intra-group similarities and the relational dynamic between them. Accordingly, she offers love-politics as a way in which Black feminism can be recognized for its “rich and heterogenous”⁵³ tradition.

I want to briefly summarize a sequence of Nash’s assumptions that I resonate with:

- 1) Black feminism has a rich tradition of practicing, preaching and elevating love-politics that has allowed love to transcend the private sphere into the political (see Jordan, hooks, Morgan, Hill Collins).
- 2) Black feminism’s “affective love politics” manages to circumvent the pitfall of identity politics that reduces Black feminism’s legacy to a specific moment of effectiveness which is now to be found in the linear past.
- 3) By stressing Black feminim’s long labor in affective (and public) love- politics she hopes to allocate “affect theory *within* black feminist studies.” Therefore emphasising Black feminist love as always already transcending romantic concepts of love.
- 4) Endowing shifting experiences of self-hood with force, Nash stresses (Black feminist) self-love as the pathway to a radical transcendence of selfhood.
- 5) Specifically targeting a Black feminist orientation towards difference she draws on Jordan, Lorde and Walker to demand a ruthless form of self-love that transcends all (fear of) difference from inwards out.⁵⁴

Here I will intervene again. Up to this point in her essay, Nash illustrates with finesse the ways in which Black feminist “affective love politics” can blur *self<>other* boundaries in a way that makes the shoreline between them (aka love) a meeting point, rather than a rigid wall.

Then, however, does she present “love as resistant ethic of self-care,”⁵⁵ seemingly opposing self- love with romantic love . Thereby reducing love to a dualistically defined concept. Nash appears to wave aside Morgan’s publication⁵⁶ for its “romantic” portrayal of love hastily, when she writes: “By evoking the specter of black female loneliness, Morgan reveals that her concept of love is not about the transformation of self but instead about romance.”⁵⁷ Despite

52 Ibid, 7.

53 Ibid, 7.

54 Ibid, 8-11.

55 Nash, “Practicing Love,” (2013): 3.

56 Morgan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999).

57 Nash. “Practicing Love.” (2013): 12.

arriving at the conclusion that love-politics essentially invokes a transcendence of selfhood, I struggle with understanding Nash's move to cram love into a dualistic frame by leaning on an absolute distinction between self-directed and other-directed love. Although I resonate with Nash, I am concerned that in spite of her attempt to propose a non-identitarian interpretation of "love-politics", she still binds herself to the dualistic frame that contributes to holding such identities in place.

When asked about the way in which love operates in her infamous speech "Where is the Love"⁵⁸ in the context of (self-)love as political power, June Jordan replied:

"It's what we're living for and that's what I'm fighting for. I think of myself as a political person doing whatever I do, but basically what I aim for is to make love a reasonable possibility.(...) My commitment to love is not an alternative to my political commitments. It's the same thing."⁵⁹

Jordan does not see her general commitment to love as extractable from her political engagement, nor does she elevate self-love over other form(at)s of love, for "it's (all) the same thing." Dedication to (self and other directed) love makes commitment to (and transformation of) change possible. This revolutionary form of love does not negate the trauma inflicted by cis white patriarchal supremacy, but grows life filled with love (against all odds) nonetheless; nurturing resilience and growth in life that is not supposed to exist (e.g. (fat) Black women).

The concept of love that I engage with from now on, assumes co-constitution between the object and the subject that precedes their partition into separate entities. This builds up to a form of (re)conceptualization of the *self*<>*other* relationships that sees the category of *self* as radically interrelated, inter- and intra- connected and refractive of each other, "intra-acting within and as part of."⁶⁰

Choosing to love the wor(l)d radically every day is then the political act of shaping the collective wor(l)d into a place of love (and not of self). Loving and caring for creation at large, rather than a

58 June Jordan. "Where is the Love?" *Some of Us Did Not Die*. (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 268-274.

59 June Jordan. "June Jordan by Josh Kuhn." interview by Josh Kuhn, *Bomb Magazine*, 1st October, 1995, accessed 25th February, 2020 via: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/june-jordan/>.

60 Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), 89.

self, person or an object, is a revolutionary practice in that it animates static notions of personhood into dynamic shorelines of “becoming-with”⁶¹(each other).

It follows that *radical love* is not just a *passive* manifestation, but an “implementation of freedom.”⁶² It is in its recognition, practice and experience that we can transcend the identitarian sphere by loving love so truly that we also (and particularly) cannot deny and have to practice to love Black women (with our whole body), in order to fully love ourselves. *Radical love* does not ignore, negate or belittle the history of Black women’s oppression, but is born in exactly that place.

RADICAL (LOVE):

What is radical about loving?

“Despite the overwhelming pressure to conform
to the culture of lovelessness,
we still seek to know love.”⁶³

I have tried to flesh out above a shape of love that does not fit the shape of the self, without its *intra-action* with an other. Now, I ask: What makes love as a transformative force (a) radical (act of resistance)?

Perhaps the most memorable notion of *radicalism* I encountered whilst reading *Radical Ecology* by Carolyn Merchant.

“Radicals refuse to blame homelessness and starvation, the rape of women and abuse of children, the theft of labor and lang, hope and self- respect on divine Providence or

61 In her 2016 publication *Staying with the Trouble* Donna Haraway defines “becoming with” as: “The slight curve of the shell that holds just a little water, just a few seeds to give away and to receive, suggests stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not too end the storying, the worlding. With a shell and a net, becoming human, becoming humus, becoming terran, has another shape --- the side-winding, snaky shape of becoming-with” Donna Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 118-119.

62 Audre Lorde. “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (London: The Crossing Press, 1984.) 19.

63 hooks. *All about love* (2001), 77.

unchangeable human nature. Rather, they believe that much of it comes from injustice, exploitation, violence, and organized cruelty that can be eradicated. If we drastically alter our social arrangements in the direction of equality, justice and human fulfillment, the brutal realities of the present can give way to vastly increased material security, social harmony and self-realization.”⁶⁴

In her preface Merchant speaks of “radicals” in rather general terms as people who dedicate their life to (continuing to) transform our social arrangements into systems that have justice and fulfillment as their highest goals. Diving deeper into Merchant’s view onto *Radical Ecology* reveals a theory of change that emphasizes the dynamic entwining of social inequalities, by not just locating them, but likewise initiating change that is aimed at affecting multiple networks of oppression by targeting their connections. Her notion is not just stressing self-realization, but also active participation in molding the social space in the direction of “equality, justice and human fulfillment.” By confronting “the illusion that people are free to exploit nature and to move in society at the expense of others,”⁶⁵ She does not only denounce the hierarchization of human over nature, white over black, male over female, or self over other, but also questions the possibility of a harmonious planetary society that does not understand itself as deeply entwined, dynamic, and relational. She therefore draws a clear relationship between human domination over nature and other systems of oppression (see Gumbs). As another voice pleading for the necessity of a revolutionary reform of social systems (of oppression), Paulo Freire⁶⁶, writes: “The revolutionary’s role is to liberate, and be liberated, with the people - not to win them over.”⁶⁷ Then, to really liberate people, no matter where or how they are being oppressed, demands the radical act of love as “a commitment to their cause.”⁶⁸ Like Merchant, Freire appeals to a radical restructuring of social systems, whilst likewise “opting for a

64 Carolyn Merchant. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1992), xi.

65 Ibid., 1.

66 I resonate with bell hooks, when she writes in an interview with herself: “There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he (like other progressive Third World political leaders, intellectuals, critical thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi, etc.) constructs a phallogocentric paradigm of liberation- wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same. (...) And yet I never wish to see critique of this blind spot (sexism in Freire’s work) overshadow anyone’s (and feminists in particular) capacity to learn from the insights.” bell hooks “bell hooks speaking about Paulo Freire—the man, his work” *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, eds McLaren, Peter, and Peter Leonard, (London: Routledge, 1993): 146-154.

67 Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 84.

In a footnote (4) on page 77, Freire adds: “I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love.”

68 Ibid., 84.

continuing faith in the human capacity for a fundamentally different and profoundly liberating form of life.”⁶⁹ Both authors demand to actively take on the responsibility to co-create a future in which all humans (and non-humans) can flourish.

Consequently, a “politicization of love”⁷⁰ which has the primary focus of ending domination and oppression is radical in that it demands a transcendence of selfhood that acknowledges the oppression of any people as an assault to the self. Rather than denying difference, *radical love* nurtures and illuminates them, shining its light through a prism of different colored glass particles, together projecting dancing vibrant colorful images onto the earth.

A guideline that reminds us as writers of love to always ask the question:

Is what is (written, written) for the purpose of weaving love into the world?

“Because love is energy and love is the defining energy of my life that I am not separate from anyone I love. And black feminism is this radiant practice of loving beyond, beyond, beyond, beyond, loving across difference, being transformed by love. Which means everyone is here and we are everywhere.”⁷¹

69 Merchant. *Radical Ecology* (1992), xii.

70 hooks. *All about love* (2001), 76.

71 adrienne maree brown and Autumn Brown. “A Breathing Chorus with Alexis Pauline Gumbs.” 17th December, 2017, in *How to Survive the End of the World*, podcast, MP3, 21:00, <https://www.endoftheworldshow.org/blog/2017/12/19/a-breathing-chorus-with-alexis-pauline-gumbs>.

THE YELLOW CHAPTER OF AIR (AND JUSTICE)

EITHER OR:

Dualistic discursive strategies: Duality, Secularism, Rationality and Neutrality in the
"critical" study of religion.



Does two divided by two make one?

How do dualistic frameworks narrate *self* \leftrightarrow *other*
in the "critical" study of religion?

Dear sister,

“I want to stop
 wanting to be you
 I want to be you
 I want to be the voice in your head
 I want to be able to see the beauty in being you
 Because every time we hurt each other
 we lose a little bit of self (respect)
 we make ourselves superior
 for the glorification
 of someone else's acknowledgement.”⁷²

I am writing this to you, because you and I, we come from one. Trying so hard to be two, to be what the other is not, has made us nothing whole and nothing half. Having shared a belly for 8 months, we must have come into the world “bloody, messy and surprised to be alone.”⁷³ I was so wrinkly and small that I needed you to stop the nurses from taking me away immediately after. I needed you to scream as loud as you could (and maybe you did), but they didn't hear you, or me, or us. They took me away from you. And I cried, because I needed you there and I could not understand, it felt like just a moment ago that we were one, that you were the only one.

Sometimes I think, I never forgave you for leaving that day. The 13th of January, 1993 at 17:44 you left the womb and for one scary moment, I was alone in the world. You were the one that got all the food in mama's belly. I think I could have accepted that if you would have stayed. Instead, I am struggling to find you back ever since. I moved further and further away from you in order to get close. I wanted to be able to say “this is me, and this is you,” trying to find a me that was not you. Ironically, I hoped that by bringing enough distance between us, I would be able to become one that was not you. Yet, I always came back feeling more different, in a surprisingly similar way. Still your twin, still so much the same and so different.

72 This is an excerpt from the video “This is to say: I am sorry.” An artwork I made out of a letter to my sister in Monterrey, Mexico in 2016. I asked my sister to send me a video of her waiting for me in an empty room. The video was projected in the bottom corner of a room with a beamer. In order to achieve a more private setting, the viewers had to bend down, or sit to watch the video. A full length replication of the video can be found via: <https://www.venuswarrior.com/a-letter-to-say-i-m-sorry>.

73 brown. *Emergent Strategy* (2017), 6.

Still the same?

“this is what it takes. the strength of no separation. the bravery of flow. the audacity of never saying this is me, this is not you. this is mine, this is not yours. this is now, this was not ever before,”⁷⁴

Gumbs writes. Reading her work, much like any work written from a place of revolutionary togetherness, or *radical love*, gives my body the sensation of wanting to cry, laugh, hug myself and scream. It makes me crave that “we”, that we once were. Because I believe that:

“This can’t be the purpose of our species, to constantly identify each other as ‘Other’, build walls between us, and engage in both formal and informal wars against each other’s bodies.”⁷⁵

“If to ‘Other,’ creates distance between us, why can't we all be One?”, is a question that kept reemerging in my quest for a methodological implementation of a *radical love* research strategy that could narrate wor(l)d-making from the *ethico-onto-epistemological*⁷⁶ situatedness of a shapeshifting shoreline. When trying to map out the fine differences between conceptual Oneness (or monism) and radical intra-relatedness, my supervisor (Monica Miller) pointed me to the dangers and difficulties I could face, when trying to melt down everything into one (e.g. essentialism). Because, the difficulty with such “a logic of the One,”⁷⁷ she reminded me, is that the primacy of such One, always already excluded an Other⁷⁸. This conundrum is the source for this chapter, for this exact perspective can be particularly dangerous within the tradition of Euro-American scholarship that has often used the Black or Non-European Other as the object, or contrast point, to the white or neutral subject (or scholar). What is more, such a logic is built on an unspoken agreement that defines the essence of selfhood as so fixed and permanent that it can be clearly separated from an equally fixed and continuous body of Otherness.

74 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 107.

75 brown. *Emergent Strategy* (2017), 16.

76 “What we need is something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology*; an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being—since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter,” Barad. *Meeting the Universe* 2007, 185.

77 term adapted from Laurel C. Schneider *Beyond Monotheism* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008), 15.

78 Whenever I refer to “Other” as capitalized I speak of the concept in contexts in which it is utilized as a distinction making mechanism. I want to highlight how such Other is operationalized to carve out static notions of person-hood to justify and hold in place the dominance of the (white) self. I choose capitalization to signify a naming of a static object. I want to stress that this is not the logic I draw on in this thesis, but a conceptual framework I analyze. One of fundamental quests of this thesis is to question the rigid duality between self \leftrightarrow other and on a different level to problematize the ceaseless objectification of everything non-European (American) generally (and African diasporic specifically) as empirical Other.

In this chapter, I want to address this logic-of-the-One-that-is-not-Other. I am particularly interested to discern the implication of such a logic and the intrinsic split, or distance making strategy, that keeps the construction of “self” at bay from that of the “Other.” I am curious to trace the roots of this logic-of-the-One-that-is-not-Other within the study of religion to estimate what implications the heritage of such may have on the continued exclusion of Black (feminist) scholars in the field.

It is to note that my focus in this thesis is directed primarily at the concepts of dualism and monism, leaving a discussion of pluralism⁷⁹ in this context relatively untouched. This is because I find the particular (dualistic) tension field between Oneness and Otherness provided by these two approaches helpful for uncovering the way in which hegemonic whiteness continues to anchor scholastic wor(l)d making in precisely this logic-of-the-One-that-is-not-Other in order to maintain control over the (tension) field. Therefore, the current chapter follows my own path in slowly peeling the transparent layers of the onion that is hegemonic whiteness.

I ask:

How do dualistic frameworks narrate self<>other in the contemporary “critical” study of religion?

In order to contemplate this question, I move through and with five different strata that I find helpful in unpacking the dualistic discursive strategies that support “critical” approaches to the study of religion. To order my thoughts, I labeled each of the sections with a simple mathematical equation. A friend once told me that “in programming everything is 1 or 0, either the signal happens or it doesn’t.” This technical either/or process helped me conceptualize the way in which the “logic of the One” is really always seeking to be Two. The metaphoric use of equations will therefore be used to explore the main conundrum in each section in the following way:

- Neutrality, Secularism as the logic of the Half ($0-1=-1$)

0 is assigned to the secular “neutral” self in my formula. Since the Other is only acknowledged as that which is not neutral (-1), in this logic I result in a reality that defines itself by what it is not. Making it impossible for the non-neutral to obtain a position of neutrality.

⁷⁹ I regard the concept of pluralism as equally valuable to explore. However, due to the scope of this thesis, I hope to investigate radical relationality in pluralistic world-making in future research.

- Contradiction as the Logic of either One/or Other ($1 \neq 1$)

The notion of binary contradiction presupposes that One (1) can never be equal to Other ($\neq 1$). The formula $1 \neq 1$ describes this impossibility in an inter-personal (I cannot be you), but also intra-personal sense (I cannot change over time/space).

- Method as Identity: *Self* <> *Other* in the Study of Religion ($1 + \infty = ?$)

Every 1 self has ∞ ways of meeting the Other in their work. Could the recognition of a changing subjective selfhood (1) of the critical scholar of religion open the field of vision for the infinite (∞) and multiple ways in which reality presents itself(?)

- No Humans Involved ($1 - 1 = 0$)

The complex entrenchment of the neutral white subject (1) behind such paradigms are designed to not just mute the Black Other's voice, but literally denounce their humanness ($-1 = 0$?). In this logic, the neutrality of the subject (1) is kept in place by means of literally withdrawing the Other's (-1) worth.

- How separate are we really? Gumbs-Goldstein-Goethe Triangle (Can $1/1 = 1$?)

Can a logic (and wor(l)dmaking strategy) that debunks the illusion of white unfragmented personhood ($1/1$) be the only way to expunge the "white ghosts" hunting the study of religion (and Euro-American scholarship)?

Neutrality, Secularism as the Logic of negative One ($0 - 1 = -1$)

Before I take a deeper look at dualistic discursive structures (either/or) of narrating *self* <> *other* in the study of religion, it strikes me as relevant to take a look at the assumption of neutrality that appears to surface around hierarchical dualities. In order to illustrate what I mean by this, I pose and ponder the question:

What does the secular got to do with it?

When I began studying religion in an academic setting, I became fascinated by the way in which dualistic polarizations kept uncovering as problematic (to say the least) reductions that somehow relate to a beheading, (or rather be-bodying), a separation of mind and body, secular and religious, white and black, male and female, public and private, culture and nature. This binary logic is often paired with the hierarchical idea that one alternative is more "neutral" and

thus more desirable -- that to be neutral and distanced is the only way in which one can attempt to get at the truth (neutrality as the only proper epistemology), which then relegates all that is not neutral to a false position of closeness and subjectivity. Then the question arises: who are those who have the position of neutral? How did they obtain (or manufacture) neutrality for themselves? Neutrality (which, in this context, sounds dangerously close to privilege)⁸⁰ is an assumption easily overlooked by those under the impression of possessing it. That is exactly what makes it so difficult to draw attention to.⁸¹

Moving away from the abstract invisibility promised by the (catholic) church, an observability on the basis of rational reason and logic that would be “freed from error, partiality, and particularity and hence would be free as such,”⁸² became a desired quest for Enlightenment thinkers. Religion as the contaminated Other in such a logic was elevated as the ultimate threat to the insinuated neutrality, secular reasoning appeared to offer. “‘Neutrality’, ‘reason’, and ‘rationality’ are fundamental components of how ‘Western’ scholars and policy-makers understand ‘fairness’, ‘equality’, and ‘justice’ (Rawls, 1988; Sen, 2010) and how issues of global injustice are approached in policy and practice (Ager & Ager, 2011, pp. 459, 461; Barnet & Stein, 2012, p. 25; Lynch, 2011). ‘Secularism’ is widely viewed as providing the guarantee for this neutrality (Ager & Ager, 2011, pp. 458–459; Casanova, 1994, 2011),”⁸³ writes Erin Wilson, offering a meta-analytical insight into discourses on secularism.

Dividing cultures, people, epistemologies, or cultural structure into polar opposites (neutral/non-neutral) has been under sharp scrutiny by scholars interested in the study of the secular.⁸⁴ Criticizing such a thinking structure that is “the air we breathe” as Euro-American scholars appears to be a difficult task. Henceforth, I would like to take a closer look at the

80 On that note, I would like to share Roxane Gay’s notion of privilege and invite you to think about the ways in which this could relate to the concept of “neutrality”: “We need to stop playing Privilege or Oppression Olympics because we’ll never get anywhere until we find more effective ways of talking through difference. We should be able to say, ‘This is my truth,’ and have that truth stand without a hundred clamoring voices shouting, giving the impression that multiple truths cannot coexist.” Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

81 “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.” Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” (1990), accessed 15th March, 2020 via: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf>

82 Wendy Brown. “Introduction.” *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, eds. Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Judith Butler, (Berkeley: University of California, The Townsend Center for the Humanities (2), 2009), 9.

83 Erin Wilson. “‘Power Differences’ and ‘the Power of Difference’: The Dominance of Secularism as Ontological Injustice.” 1076–93, *Globalizations* 14 (7), 1083.

84 Next to Wilson, Brown, Mahmood and Scott, see for example:

different ways in which the assumption of neutrality underpinning secular logic unfolds within the discursive structures studying *self<>other* (as distinct, fixed and separate units) in the academic study of religion.

Saba Mahmood suggests: “To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analyzing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future.”⁸⁵ She therefore proposes critique or possibly (self-) reflectivity over normative regimes and practices as a way to unblock the underlying assumptions of such regimes and dispossess them of “innocence and neutrality.” What can I learn about “the (secular) box I sit in” and how can I deconstruct it, without falling prey to my own privilege of neutrality?

Contradiction as the Logic of the either One/ or Other (1≠1)

“those days
 them days
 the days
 before the bubble closed
 over the top of the world no
 this is not better than that”⁸⁶

can that be better than this?
 when this and that
 are bridged by and or
 than or

Talal Asad. *Formations Of The Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010).

Craig J Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Stacey Gutkowski. *Secular War: Myths of Religion, Politics and Violence*. International Library of Security Studies, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 5.

⁸⁵ Saba Mahmood. *Religious Difference In A Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 61.

⁸⁶ Lucille Clifton. “november 21, 1988: 25 years.” in *quilting: poems 1987-1990* (Brockport: BOA Editions Ltd., 1991), 42.

or?

The urge to remain in control over the source of all existence always entails a power struggle in which a false “Other” is instituted to contrast the true “One.” The basic understanding of which relies on a deep conceptual schism between One-ness and Other-ness, simultaneously demanding a structure of “reality” that be reducible to an either/or framework in which what is “real” is likewise “true,” and what is “not (yet) real,” or “unknown” stays in a permanent “false” zone. This division of “reality” into two separate spheres creates the illusion that the comparative scholar of religion can stay in one and glance over into the Other. This *scientification of religion*⁸⁷, as Kocku von Stuckrad calls it, is defined by the “discursive organization of knowledge about religion inside a secular environment.”⁸⁸ The ensuing line drawing between the secular and the religious, the academic and non-academic, the comparative and theological study of religion invoke a form of either/or “borderwork”⁸⁹ that manufacture narratives of exclusion by postulating permanent mutually exclusive identities.

In a recent blog post addressing the current (2020) pandemic chaos (following the international outbreak of covid-19), Anthony Pinn shines light on the shortcomings of either/or approaches in the study of religion, by writing:

“There is no answer to the theodicy question—the challenge is more ‘earthy’ than theodicy can manage; but anthropodicy doesn’t satisfy either (...) Neither, however, can fully satisfy a situation that seems to point out the best and worst elements of human behavior—marking out human thinking and doing that both affirms and degrades human life. Each of these two approaches leaves us flat—still facing circumstances theological language is ill equipped to describe and resolve.”⁹⁰

Stuck between theodicy (the white self as only god) and anthropodicy (the white human as only human), it is this imagined distance between (chosen) One and (unworthy) Other that keeps notions of self/personhood fixed in their positions. A position in which the absoluteness of

87 Kocku von Stuckrad. *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000*. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.

88 Ibid, 180.

89 Ibid, 180.

90 Anthony Pinn. “You Can’t Theologize a Virus.” *Sacred Matters: Religious Currents in Culture* (blog). 13th April, 2020, accessed 16th April, 2020 via: https://sacredmattersmagazine.com/you-cant-theologize-a-virus/?fbclid=IwAR1oXoQW_uXTU5Tifl2IMckGuJxO1HQDOAXikcSz6CdariYsBwRsH5pleNE

the problem appears far away from the self (either in an incomprehensible cosmic logic, or the “confines of human history”⁹¹). By employing the taxonomical method of illusive vertical distance making, we (as scholars of religion) make it impossible to stay together with the fragmented complexity of otherness in the horizontal now, by choosing simplicity and reduction we turn our backs to life as messy, simultaneous, filled with absurd contradictions as it is. The luxury of circumventing contradictions comes with the privilege of naming their parameters. For instance, granting scholarly legitimacy to certain “objective” or “critical” experiences or dimensions (such as whiteness, or secular scholarship) over “experiential” Others (such as Blackness, or religious practice) always already situates the latter in a paradoxical position of illegitimacy in academic wor(l)d-making. This mechanism of either/or binarization that undergirds the neutrality of the subject/self insinuates the impossibility of neutrality for the object/other, likewise affixing the Other in that place that can never be subject/self. Therefore, whenever the Other tries to claim selfhood or neutrality they find themselves stuck in a sticky spider web of contradiction, which is built to keep them at bay.

“Contradiction, itself an act of rebellion strictly forbidden in our house,”⁹² writes Lorde in her mythobiography. In like manner unveiling the demand for strict adherence to the (white) hegemonic norm and the courage necessary to break with it (even in her own house). “But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racist; and my friends were that color I was not supposed to trust,”⁹³ she advances. Stressing the contradiction inherent to embodying “Otherness” with courage within a framework of either/or wor(l)d-making.

This makes me wonder, how and if we (as young scholars of religion) can re-formulate *either/or borderwork* into *both/and shoreline thinking* by foregrounding *radical love*, rather than person- and objecthood?

Method as Identity: *Self*<>*Other* in the Study of Religion (1+∞=?)

On the surface the onto-epistemological split between true and false, One and Other, subject and object may appear to have little to do specifically with the academic study of religion. With the humanities merging into the shadow of an academic world reigned by a

91 Pinn. “You Can’t Theologize a Virus.” (2020).

92 Audre Lorde. *Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1982), 80.

93 *Ibid.*, 81.

secular scientific approach, it has been particularly the study of religion that has been moved to the periphery of the university landscape. But: Does this outermost position as a subject of discursive knowledge-making bring us (as scholars of religion) really closer to understanding the lifeworld of those deemed objects exiled to the margins of society at large? What does it mean to study religion from a perspective that fashions itself most critical, when not contaminated with religious belief (or even more so, experience)? Particularly when rational (objective) distance is postulated as normative for “properly”⁹⁴ studying religion?

“The study of religion is particularly challenged in regard to its link to theology and thus to confessional or experiential approaches to religion, its link to colonial agendas that imposed a Eurocentric view on ‘non-Western’ cultures, as well as the tendencies in influential parts of the discipline to essentialize religion as something *sui generis*. One of the most important theoretical and methodological questions today is whether the discipline can respond to these fundamental challenges in a way that takes these critiques seriously and is able to transform the study of religion into an academic discipline that operates within a rigorous and self-reflective interpretational framework[...]⁹⁵

writes von Stuckrad in *The Scientification of Religion*, where he traces discursive strands in order to grapple with problems of “‘identity and legitimization’⁹⁶ in the (scientific) study of religion. Tracking the handling of renounced knowledge (alchemy, occultism, astrology) in secular discourses in the first section and the scholarly role of initiating and transforming religion in the second, von Stuckrad points to the blurred lines dividing science and religion. Furthermore, identifying them as socially situated, mutable and entangled within a messy web of colonial power structures.

In a similar vein, Monica Miller and Christopher Driscoll’s publication *Method as Identity* positions the “manufacturing of distances” (between subject (the scholar) and object (the “savage” or religious Other)) within the epistemological core of the (Northern American) study

94 “The word *properly* is often used to mean ‘communicating with standard English.’ Any deviation outside of English, including African American English (AAE), is commonly perceived as broken, which has problematically mislabeled people as uneducated or improper.” Khristi L. Adams. *Parable of the Brown Girl* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 147.

95 von Stuckrad. *The Scientification of Religion* (2014), xiii, 1.

96 Ibid., viii.

of religion. In a dense, yet air tight, analysis, the authors map out “operational acts of identification” as deeply entwined with methodological (aka distance making) strategies. They take the tension field between theology and the comparative study of religion as a starting point to reexamine the dynamic relationship of the “critical”⁹⁷ method (in the study of religion) and its (concealed (white)) identity, applying the self-reflective interpretational rigor von Stuckrad had hoped for.

Miller and Driscoll do not construct history from a position of the present, looking onto the past, but rather weave historically specific examples into contemporary observations and contemplations on the role of the Other from within the study of religion. Using their own discipline and heritage as data, they “practice what they preach,” in that they direct their own critical gaze towards themselves and their heritage (as scholars of religion), rather than towards the distant Other. “*Method as Identity* might be read as a sort of rules for cross-silo discussion inside of the AAR and extending beyond it,”⁹⁸ the authors write, revealing the larger purpose of their project: to open the field for renegotiating the dominant order of onto-epistemologizing in the academic study of religion.

To get a better grip on the way in which I find their work helpful, I want to identify two of Miller and Driscoll’s main assumptions to work forward from:

- a) “Critical” method (in the study of religion) is built on a clear demarcation of such method from a theological (or confessional) approach. By distancing itself from an experiential or theistic point of view, operators of such a method assume an objective distance to allow for a more neutral and rational view onto the subject (matter).
- b) The legacy of the comparative study of religion is deeply rooted within the colonialist striving to position the wild and profane Other and their so-labeled “superstitions” in stark (or binary) contrast to the “naturalized” Christian European.

It is exactly the deep anchoring of the study of religion in an academic opposition of subject and object, (neutral) self and (savage) Other, that makes this discipline the ideal starting point to start unpacking the mountains of baggage that have been hidden under “neutral” disguise⁹⁹. In the fifth chapter *Method as Identity* highlights the process of distinction-making as

97 Quotation marks adapted from *Method as Identity* (2018).

98 Driscoll and Miller. *Method as Identity* (2018), xxvii.

99 I think here also of the piles and piles of plastic and garbage this supremacist society has “hidden” in the ocean. “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” Ocean Clean Up, Accessed 10th June, 2020 via:

a necessary procedure to “totalize” and “normalize” a white (“critical”) identity. It is precisely in the act of drawing up that distinction that we are able to find our own (white) reflection. Because as long as the “black” in “black religion”¹⁰⁰ is subject to an “*experiential* naming”¹⁰¹ (whilst the (white) study of religion stays unnamed), there is a question about the veiled (white) identity, which functions as an apparent norm. “What has been packaged (or often passes) as a professional problem *in* the academic study of religion in many ways can be viewed as discursive and credential-based distance-making responses *to* the perpetual social crisis of white male authority.”¹⁰² Miller and Driscoll write in the preface.

Miller and Driscoll’s work is helpful in thinking through and with a study of religion that addresses its “white ghosts” and urges (the experience of) “paranoia” as a fruitful identity or situation to continue from. The authors offer an adaptive and shifting quality to the notion of identity that recognizes switching social codes in their movement, rather than continuing to trail an always already past objective gaze under the umbrella of “critical” method. They show that the embodied self-reflective experience of paranoia can become the gateway to an honest moment of unearthing rigid notions of “critical” identity that haunt (scholars in) the study of religion (and the methods therein). Rather than manufacturing one steady “objective” distance (aka “critical theory and method”) in the form of a “critical” method they recognize the constant renegotiation of distances as always already part of employing a truly critical method. By doing so, they show their awareness of their own impartial perspective and avoid the (colonial) pitfall of stationing the self as absolute and separate from an Other. When the caretakers of identity/selfhood recognize that they will never be (and never were) transparent¹⁰³ or stable, can the intrinsic duality that fortifies the academic study of religion become a fruitful tension field to work from?

Following our own tracks, unpacking the lies that have become our truths, may lead us onto roads in which we might not have to constantly keep the Other at the far end of the tunnel,

<https://theoceancleanup.com/great-pacific-garbage-patch/>.

100 Driscoll and Miller. *Method as Identity* (2018), 150.

101 Ibid, 150.

102 Ibid, xxi.

103 “Such hauntings offer the ability to continue life after death, and to live life before one’s birth: and that is perhaps the magic of modernity’s metaphysics, more than the persistence of an attribute such as *whiteness* in the colorless ghost. Recall that the ghost, for the child, remains durably *white* amid a universe of possible colorations” (Ibid., 204).

but could swing back “the pendulum of scholarly criticism” “to return the gaze to the ‘critical’ classifier themselves.”¹⁰⁴ Could the recognition of a changing subjective (or possibly phenomenological) selfhood (1) open the field of vision for the infinite (∞) and multiple ways in which reality presents itself(?). Likewise uncovering the ways whiteness, neutrality (and binarization) are imprinted by way of their inherent, unseen (socially pervasiveness) in our (“critical”) study of religion (and the onto-epistemologies that substantiate it). As a consequence, I draw inspiration from *Method as Identity* to question a permanent notion of an (academic) selfhood/identity that moves teleologically into the future. And join Miller and Driscoll in asking:

“How would analyses and critical discussions about blackness of black religion be altered if we began to consider ‘diaspora’ as not unidirectional, linear, or even geographic (per se), but about the manipulation of distinctions operative (already) in the social field?”¹⁰⁵

No Humans Involved (1-1=0?)

In her infamous 1994 letter, Sylvia Wynter addresses her colleagues when she questions what it means to be human, academically as well as socially¹⁰⁶. She compares a theocentric paradigm (of the European past), to a biocentric paradigm (of the present) in which a human’s value is pre-determined by its genetic worth. Wynter showcases the complex entrenchment of the neutral white subject (1) behind such paradigms that are designed to not just mute the Black Other’s voice, but literally denounce their humanness (-1=0?). In this logic, the neutrality of the subject (1) is kept in place by means of literally withdrawing the Other’s (-1) worth.

In the context of *Method as Identity*, this adds an instructive layer by linking the “neutral” (or critical) approach to the study of religion to a larger biocentric identification neurosis that allows hegemonic groups (e.g. White middle-class people) to view themselves as the “most human” out of all. The clear hierarchical distinction between categories of humanness on the basis of “genetic worth” accentuates the (neo) colonial nomination of The Black as the

104 Ibid., xxiv.

105 Ibid., 110.

106 Brought to public attention by the murder of Rodney King and the subsequent 1992 LA riots, Wynter’s NHI points out how the consequent silence of academia perpetuates actual material violence by upholding the mutual reliance on co-constitutivity and violence to feed hierarchies of human worth.

“most Other.”¹⁰⁷ A logic that continues to keep everything “Black” in specialized, and neatly transferred boxes, containing dusty books labeled “Black history”, that are shipped to the “Black” or “African” Studies departments, as if to clearly say: You cannot be part of those history books we use to teach our children to know who they are, but here you have your own, so now shush, everyone is equal. Separate(d)/(segregated) but “equal”.

Similar to Miller and Driscoll, Wynter sees the divorce of (or enforced distance between) the “inner eye” (the experiential category of subjective understanding) and “truths” harvested from the objective scientist’s knowledge of social reality, as the birth of a human evolutionary organism that could be *less* or *more* human, based on “the extra-human ordering of bio-evolutionary Natural Selection.”¹⁰⁸

She scrutinizes the perpetuation of an “Absolutism of Scholastic order of knowledge,”¹⁰⁹ in which hierarchies function to uphold systematic classification of humans. What is more, she points to the Humanities and Social Sciences as primary caretakers of such hierarchies, for these disciplines are the discourses that link a biocentric matrix to social (or experiential) factors that fixate the black Other as hierarchically inferior to the white self.¹¹⁰

Moreover, in order to question “the validity of our present order of knowledge itself,” she follows Eritrean anthropologist Asmarom Legesse in proposing a reformulation of such a static *Weltanschauung*¹¹¹ by adapting the category of the *liminal*. Such a category distinguishes itself by assuming all living systems and orders as dynamically generated and generating. They propose to understand, learn, and teach the world as it is evolving, in its intra-actions. Avoiding absolutism at all costs, by situating epistemologies, locating and identifying differences, not in order to spot outcasts or build hierarchical taxonomies, but to use them as guides, or markers to continuously map that complexity that is human life in its relational becoming.

107 I find octopus-thinking helpful to accentuate this point, inspired by *Other Minds* (octopus) philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith. I find his book useful to think about the way in which a shape-shifting, network-like form of consciousness is positioned on the polar opposite of dominant (white human) linear thought. For me, this stresses the manner in which not just the (black) “Other” becomes a point of distinction, but that also particular forms of onto-epistemologizing are by themselves regarded as less worthy for scholastic orders of knowledge.

108 Wynter. “NO HUMANS INVOLVED.” (1992), 53.

109 Ibid., 52.

110 Thinking here of Miller and Driscoll’s appeal to private and public anxieties, this plays into their observation that when such private emotions (like fear) enter the public (or social) space they become fixated within that space. The dissociation from the experiential perception of fear, in light of its public (social) dimensions, then inherently elevates the white subject to a *more than* human self/god, fixed within its position by appointing itself the highest social *as well* as biological worth.

111 German for “ideology,” but can be more loosely translated as “world-outlook,” or “the way the world is viewed.”

1-1=0, then meaning when we (white scholars) continue to ignore the ways in which our pursuit of (static) personhood, we will soon be left with nothing.

How separate are we really? Gumbs-Goldstein-Goethe Triangle (Can 1/1=1?)

“Überhaupt sollte man sich in Wissenschaften gewöhnen wie ein anderer denken zu können.”¹¹²

Can (the neutral, white) One be transcended by dissolving the very essence (its distinction from the Other) that keeps it in place?

“The answer is ethics—behavior that enhances life, a time to rethink the markers of healthy personhood and how this obligates us with respect to each other. This isn’t so simple as doing the ‘right’ thing because we see ourselves in others—that’s too easy and too self-assured. Rather, we need ways of behaving in the world that entail a deep and abiding appreciation for intersections—fragile connections to others, whether they are like us or not. And that are mindful of humans as only one dimension of a larger framework of living things,”¹¹³

are the concluding thoughts Pinn shares with us in a recent blog post, particularly highlighting “fragile connections”. Rethinking the “markers of healthy personhood” along the lines of “fragile connections” is what scholar Amanda Jo Goldstein does in *Sweet Science*. Goldstein describes personhood as “a logic of life that declines to define itself absolutely against mere matter, decay, vulnerability, or death, and declines to take organic integrity as ideal.”¹¹⁴

In order to close and open a cycle, I would like to briefly reflect on Goldstein’s re-engagement with Goethe’s thoughts on morphology, as a means of weaving my own ancestral choir into my reading practice of Gumbs’ *M-Archive*. Goldstein dissolves the boundaries between organic and inorganic matter by asking: “What, the morphologist asks instead, might

112 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and Dorothea Kuhn. *Schriften Zur Morphologie*, (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987), 511. Loosely translated into English: “In general, one should get used to think like an other in the sciences.”

113 Pinn. “You Can’t Theologize a Virus.” (2020).

114 Amanda Jo Goldstein. “Obsolescent Life: Goethe’s Journals on Morphology.” *European Romantic Review* 22, no. 3 (2011): 405.

life look like from the perspective of the particulate losses that mediate *between* beings?”¹¹⁵ She results in a relational network between processes that tracks and mediates objects in terms of their distinct losses and gains rather than solidifying their place and defining its continuity.

By focusing on their intra-actions/intersections/shorelines/emergences, “the Life/organization – Death/decomposition binary relaxes, and a range of activities come into view that are neither heterosexually reproductive, nor definitively self destructive.”¹¹⁶ What this proposes is a re-configuration of subject/object boundaries that moves away from a linear order/division of sequences. Thus, also elevating the urgency for a non-linear time-space ethos. Goethe’s morphological observations rather propose sputtering (*Verstäubung*) as a methodology to represent the mediating processes between lifeforms. This observation holds that no object/subject is ever fully dead, nor alive, because everything is in constant flux between organic and in-organic states. “The most important thing, however, remains the simultaneous(/equally timed), because it is reflected in us as purely as we are in it,”¹¹⁷ writes Goethe. Just as in *M-Archive*, this enables a cosmology in which all matter stems from one fabric and is always-already a composite part of its intra-action with the hole. An example of this radical morphological re-organization (or sputtering) is drafted by Gumbs when she writes about “crying” in her “Archive of Ocean”¹¹⁸ Here she describes a scene that likens the re-awakening of the post-apocalyptic plan(et), more specifically, the re-creation of the ocean. After the end of the world with “no land. just love. no anchor. just air.” “She,” aka the (fat) black woman aka mother earth (aka each one of us), begins to cry. Her eyes filled with water, she is flooded with nostalgic memories of lives/thoughts/worlds that could have been.

As she continues to weep, she unintentionally transforms the formless space into an ocean. Gumbs illustrates crying as breathing under pressure, as an act of desperation and mourning that is an implementation of creation, of “life as we know it. life as we be it.” An act of unreckoned sputtering becomes the rhythm of life. This multiform “She” is the creator of new life, like Goethe’s plants, she sputters life through the unintentional loss of tears, as an expression of a sadness of and for all, expressed through the vessel of one.

115 Ibid, 405.

116 Ibid, 411.

117 Goethe. *Morphologie* (1987), 565. Original: “Das Wichtigste bleibt jedoch das Gleichzeitige, weil es sich in uns am reinsten abspiegelt wir uns in ihm.”

118 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 108-109.

What I hope to have shown in the beginning of this chapter is the way in which a “logic of One” that draws on absolute notions of personhood, has been anchored in principles of neutrality (0-1) and hierarchy ($1 < 0$) that bolster the supremacy of the One over an Other. Further, the way in which this either/or ethic ($0 \neq 1$) has shaped distance-making mechanism in study of religion has been linked to the devaluation of Blackness as an absolute contrast to a neutral, secular and superior Whiteness. This led me to question the danger of docking the assumption of static personhood within an “absolutism of scholastic order of knowledge”, that denounces the non-linear intra-activity of the different processes that mediate lifeforms ($1 + \infty$). I therefore ask, whether a logic (and worldmaking strategy) that transcends personhood ($1/1$) could be the only way to expunge the “white ghosts” hunting the study of religion (and Euro-American scholarship).

The question for the following chapter then becomes: Can $1/1=1$?

THE BLUE CHAPTER OF WATER (AND FISH)

BOTH/AND:

Monism, *M/othering* and the “possibility of wholeness”



How do wholeness and multiplicity contribute to a relational framework for *radical love monism*? How does whiteness disrupt such a framework?

“Love is life force. I believe that the creative spirit is nothing less than love made manifest. I see love as the essential nature of all that supports life. Love is opposed to the death of the dream. Love is opposed to the delimiting of possibilities of experience.

When we run on love, when we move and change and build and paint and sing and write and foster the maximal fulfillment of our own lives, as well as the maximal fulfillment of other lives that look to us for help, for protection, or for usable clues to the positive excitement of just being alive, then we make manifest the creative spirit of the universe: spirit existing within each of us and yet persisting infinitely greater than the ultimate capacities of any one of us.”¹¹⁹

“The problematic core construct was that in order to be sane, which is to live in one body, which is to live one lifetime at one time, which is to disconnect from the black simultaneity of the universe, you could and must deny black femininity. and somehow breathe. the fundamental fallacy being (obvious now. obscured at the time.) that there is no separation from the black simultaneity of the universe also known as everything also known as the black feminist pragmatic intergenerational sphere. everything is everything.”¹²⁰

I want to invite you to keep both of these statements in mind throughout the following pages. Having covered the Logic-of-the-One-that-is-not-Other) in [the yellow chapter](#), the present chapter contemplates a different conception of the logic of one, or everything is/as everything. “Oneness,” here, is examined as a process of collective creation (or *radical love*), rather than a collective essence or existence that builds on static notions of being or selfhood. It therefore asks:

- If mutually exclusive polarity is so harmful for defining and describing human multiplicity and intra-action, what could be an alternative?
- How can we as (young) scholars of (comparative) religion continue a study that builds on a legacy of self-over-otherness and hegemonic whiteness (as discursive genre)?

119 Jordan. “The Creative Spirit” (1977), 45.

120 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 7.

In an attempt to grapple with some of these questions, the present chapter will unfold by working through the following sections:

Can $1/1=1$? Is there a “possibility of wholeness”?

Is (*RADICAL LOVE*) *MONISM*, a “possibility of wholeness”?

How do multiplicities and Womanist theology play into such a possibility?

Can *RADICAL LOVE* AKA “M/OTHERING”¹²¹ be(come) a monistic wor(l)dmaking strategy?

What does it mean to “show up fully human” and how does whiteness function as the problem of wholeness?

MAPPING MORE: Final Contemplations

Can $1/1=1$?

Is there a “possibility of wholeness”?

“Among other things love is an energy of possibility: the possibility of wholeness.”¹²²

The idea of “Oneness” or “Wholeness” sounds beautiful at first, but is likewise haunted by images of totalitarian, universalist or absolutist rule. Systems which often position the (abstract) source of oneness (objectivity, Gods) as the ideal state of existence also appear to position us (as individual cut-off hu(man)s) as unknowing agents, waiting for the truth to be revealed to us. In most of these systems, (hu)man is purported to aim for a form of absoluteness, whilst always reminded of his own incompleteness, stuck between two polar sides. Undeterred by the unattainable pursuit of reaching “Oneness” by means of “manufacturing distances” between the (always already) ideal (selfless) self, and other (that we cannot be), the category of

121 The concept will be explained in the following section as it is coined and explained by Gumbs in *Revolutionary mothering* (2016) and Gumbs “We Can Learn” (2010). Her text is a response to Lorde's proclamation that “we can learn to mother *ourselves*,” pointing to the necessity for Black women to queerly love themselves and each other across heteronormative, ancestral lines. (Audre Lorde. “Black Women Hatred and Anger” *Essence* 1983, 90-158.)

122 brown. *Emergent Strategy* (2017), 32.

(hu)man is left incomplete and imperfect. I hope to have illustrated in [the yellow chapter](#) how this logic-of-One-that-is-not-Other unfolds in four different modi.

- Firstly, the heavy reliance on absolute notions of selfhood that tails monocosmic worldviews is fostered by the urge to remain in control over the source of all existence. It therefore always entails a power struggle in which a false Other is instituted to contrast the true One. From this position, the scholar of religion can study their object by keeping the Other at the absolute opposite side of the self. In this logic one (the self) is not the same as (an Other) one.
- Secondly, more than just creating a dualistic reductionist framework, the so-assumed “neutrality” (or immunity) of the secular scholar (of religion) likewise feeds into a hierarchization in which the religious Other becomes dumping place for everything the “invisible” “neutral” (and absolute) self is not.
- Thirdly, this claim is taken further in that it identifies this previously undefined Other as the “savage Other,” or the “black Other”. This logic does not only keep the Black scholar at bay from becoming subjects of knowledge making it also continues to literally justify this hierarchy by means of hiding its whiteness behind “critical” distancing mechanisms.
- The fourth section applies Sylvia Wynter’s framework of *No Humans Involved* that argues that the “black Other” is further robbed of her personhood and agency (in the scholastic sphere) by stripping her of bio-evolutionary worth. It is within a framework that denounces the subjective complex “inner eye”, whilst simultaneously anchoring the hierarchization of bio-evolutionary worth in the social dimension, that the “black Other” *no longer* is human.
- Challenging the clear demarcation of a-biotic from biotic matter, the chapter ends in questioning whether the collapse of (white) static selfhood could lead to a “possibility of wholeness” that builds on radical relationality.

Therefore coming to the conclusion that a logic of One that perceives such a “Oneness” as constant, neutral, white and supreme fails to grasp the rich, diverse and ever changing multiplicity inherent to the complex emergence of (human) life. Oneness entrenched in a primary onto-epistemological conviction that multiplicities are its polar opposite, builds on an either/or logic that always already contradicts *both* Oneness *and* Otherness. Driven by the anxiety this

separation creates, one-size fits all solutions offer fake salvation from being alone in the wor(l)d. I believe that such manifold solutions distract from recognizing the powerful dynamic oneness that is always already *between* us. I speak here of the *moment* of no-separation, of always already intra-connectivity (aka “the black simultaneity of the universe”).¹²³ A shared mo(ve)ment that is not breakable into parts, but is both parts and whole in creative emergence. There is a big difference between assuming one (linear) direction for all to (come from or) result in and recognizing that all our differences (always already) create each other by shaping each other in the socio-spirito-material wor(l)d. From this perspective, radical intra-action becomes the co-constructive framework from which to re-assess our future as a planetary community. The present chapter assesses whether there is/can be a “possibility of wholeness” from the perspective of *radical love* as a shape-shifting onto-epistemological shoreline,

“filled to the very living

full

one solid gospel

(*sanctified*)

one gospel

(*peace*)

one full Black lily

luminescent

in a homemade field

of love.”¹²⁴

123 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 7.

124 June Jordan. “1977: Poem for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer.” *Poetry Foundation* (1977), accessed 5th July 2020 via: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48763/1977-poem-for-mrs-fannie-lou-hamer>.

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(RADICAL LOVE) MONISM, a “possibility of wholeness”?

What is “monism;” what can “monism” be?

What notions of personhood conform with a monistic writing practice?

Is it useful to reopen the onto-epistemological box of monism?

"my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender/ my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face,"¹²⁵

writes legendary playwright Ntozake Shange. What the previous chapter has (hopefully) revealed are the multiple ways in which my thinking as a white german woman is (still) deeply rooted in precisely that separation. I recognize with this chapter (implicitly) that unfolding my argument in this particular way demonstrates that I cannot just step into and grasp womanist theology and Black feminist “everything is everything” without working through the obstacles of my past-present. Relying on my own standpoint, I fall prey to a typical pattern of whiteness that centers its own thinking and moves outwards from there. However, I see the writing of this thesis to act also as a way to spi(ri)t out these patterns by literally un-learning them in the process of their becoming.

In order to do so, an investigation of “monism proffered by Haeckel”¹²⁶ as told by Whitney Bauman will serve as a key element in pondering the usefulness of conceptual monism in the present quest for a “possibility of wholeness.”

The Britannica describes (the philosophical term) monism as:

125 Ntozake Shange. *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. (Kent: Eyre Methuen, 1978), 45.

126 Whitney Bauman. "Ernst Haeckel's Creation: Developing a non-reductive religious naturalism." in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*, eds. Crosby, Donald A. And Jerome A. Stone. (Routledge: Taylor&Francis, 2018), 117.

Bauman's reading of Haeckel strikes me as an adequate point of contact to the larger Euro-American traditions outlined and critiqued in [the yellow chapter](#), to unpack and exorcise the “white ghosts” haunting my own knowledge making propensity. I want to be explicit also about Haeckel's common association with Nazi biological theories. Although, his actual involvement in producing anti-semetic ideas for Nazi is questionable (see: Robert J. Richards. “Ernst Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology.” 2007), I find it important to note that some of his more radical ideas have provided a rich ground for these to sprout from.

“the view that the universe has its origin in one basic principle (e.g., mind, matter) and that its structure is one unitary whole in accordance with this principle—”¹²⁷

Whereas epistemological dualism is classified by its either/or principle, and pluralism by a multitude of principles, monism acknowledges only one unitary source of all. My prior excavation of the challenges with the dualistic split behind monocosmic onto-epistemologies in the Euro-American context, spawns an urge to revisit monistic theories. Although I see danger of ruthless reductionism in the pursuit of a monistic theory, I am propelled by the notion that everything could be regarded as “one unitary whole.” I believe that in order to conceptualize everything as radically intra-connected the necessity for static personhood could be de-/re-solved by employing the dynamic force of *radical love* as the primary guiding principle for one radically intra-active whole.

Hence, this section asks:

- What could monism look like from the perspective of a process based principle (radical loving), rather than a static source of origin (god, science, matter or mind)?
- How could such a principle transcend, instead of bolster, selfhood as a concept?

In his chapter “Ernst Haeckel’s Creation,” Whitney Bauman deliberates Haeckel’s monism in light of its non-dualistic qualities. Indeed, Haeckel, a self-proclaimed Darwinian, thought of ontological dualism as “the largest philosophical mistake in Western thought,”¹²⁸ and furthermore “would agree that there are no un-interpreted facts,”¹²⁹ “rather, everything is *radically* interrelated and evolving, and thus we are always in the midst of life.”¹³⁰ Whilst regarding lineages in an evolutionary sense as highly plausible, the authors pair this onto-epistemological maxim with a relational and non-linear approach, rather than the linear and supremacist notion of Natural Selection. Drawing attention to intra- and inter-species relationality and multiplicity, “essence, for Haeckel, was impossible from an evolutionary perspective in which biotic life emerges from abiotic life, animal life from plant life, and human

127 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monism-philosophy>

128 Bauman. “Ernst Haeckel’s Creation.” (2018), 33.

129 Ibid, 34.

130 Ibid, 34.

life from animal life. There simply is no room for any type of essentialist understanding of *self*<>*other*, and no hard separation between the different categories of life that scientists use.”¹³¹

To Haeckel, so Bauman, life is regarded as something that happens in action. There is no external viewpoint that allows for an “outside perspective,” as a fixed distant spot. Rather, being is enacted in the moment of its becoming(-with), in its birthing of to-gather-ness. “That means that whatever human beings strive to call truth is inaccessible to human life except fleshed in folds of language, culture, and interpretation,”¹³² adds Laurel Schneider, adding extra weight to the active (and continuous) responsibility to (acknowledge the power and accountability to) shape collective truth (discursively) in order to transcend self/other-hood. Individual bodies therefore are defined by the tension field they/we unfold together (or in Haeckel’s case, thereupon). Further, the component of accountability dictates the acknowledgment of differences (in self and between other) as foundational for the survival as a unitary whole.

Well known for his precise and delicate drawings of (a-)biotic earthly critters, Haeckel carefully archived similarities and differences to look for patterns and constellations. Similar to Goethe, Jordan, Lorde and Gumbs¹³³ (and many other discussed authors), he saw nature (and human) in its creative and intra-active becoming as poesis and art (and vice versa). He believed, according to Bauman, that all of life’s purpose could be broken down to weaving beauty into the wor(l)d and each other. That in creation we extend over time and space laying the perfect ancestral tracks for the flowering of collective being.

In this point, I return to (Goldstein-)Goethe¹³⁴ a corrective to Bauman-Haeckel's move towards white supremacy (by way of eugenics)¹³⁵. By studying mushroom pollination, Goethe¹³⁶ detects that *Verstäubung*¹³⁷ “does not occur here and there, but rather that every fold yields its

131 Ibid, 34.

132 Schneider. *Beyond Monotheism* (2018), 108.

133 The way in which this premise unfolds in each of the authors is, of course, diverse. This list is not thought of as a way to generalize the contribution of said authors, rather it aids in showing a joint notepoint.

134 My ideas for this section grew out of my reading of Goldstein’s and Bauman’s work, it is important to know that my subsequent reading of Goethe’s and Haeckel’s work happened through already tinted lenses.

135 “we questioned the end point of evolution when we noticed it wasn't us.” Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 119.

136 I want to draw attention to the way in which Goethe’s whiteness surfaces by means of distance making, as summarized in the following newspaper article: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/latent-racism-neo-nazi-killings-expose-broad-german-xenophobia-a-798450.html>.

137 Loosely translated into “dispersion” or “diffusion.” ”Verstäubung, Verdunstung, Vertropfung: plays on the work of the common verb prefix ver-, which indicates an object’s transition into the state named by the stem, but can also indicate that the stem action has gone wrong: while laufen is “to go” in German, verlaufen is ‘to get lost.’” Goldstein, *Sweet Science* (2017), 167.

portion in its native direction.”¹³⁸ Herewith accentuating the non-linear/non-hierarchical dynamic inherent to the creative unfurling of nature and the poetry/art that weaves us humans into it.

What I find useful about the resulting (composite) monistic perspective is that the element of Oneness is defined not by a fixed idea(l) (like “mind, or matter”). Rather, it is located in the dynamic process of co-creating response-ability to radically shape wor(l)ds “by any means necessary.” Haeckel himself wrote: “Ever clearer does it become that all the wonderful phenomena of nature around us, organic as well as inorganic, are only various products of one and the same original force¹³⁹, various combinations of one and the same primitive matter.”¹⁴⁰

This way, Oneness translates into “the possibility of wholeness.” A static notion of Oneness (that is not Other), is stripped of its permanence and totality and reconfigured more so into a force, a “possibility,” always already intra-acting itself into existence. Showing that Haeckel went so far as to augment the interaction of organisms as the one guiding principle of existence (or the monistic backdrop of his thought), Bauman accentuates the radical quality to regard change as the only constant. He goes on to criticize Haeckel’s inability to come to terms with his own response-ability¹⁴¹. His responsibility to leave his “god’s eye” behind and acknowledge his own particular perspective, his own intra-activity with the shaping of the ever changing reality that he so ardently observed. This, for me, displays the way in which whiteness insulates its worshipers from recognizing the inherent contradictions it fathoms. Bauman concludes by drawing on feminist ancestor Sandra Harding’s notion of “strong objectivity.”¹⁴² Following a line of thought which argues that objectivity can only gain in strength when thriving on particularity, and multiplicities of perspectives, Bauman underscores the necessity to question universal truths, which glaze over the fact that “we are multiply embodied creatures, none of whom can escape that entangled embodiment.”¹⁴³ What both Goethe-Goldstein and Haeckel-Bauman bring to the forefront is the notion of beings as composite parts, and the necessity to

138 Goethe. *Morphologie* (1987), 513. Original: “woraus erhellt, dass die Verstäubung nicht etwas hin und her geschehe, sondern dass jede Falte ihren Anteil in angeborene Richtung hergebe.”

139 Think: “Love if Lifeforce” (Jordan)

140 Ernst Haeckel. “Monism as Connecting Religion and Science.” *The Project Gutenberg EBook* (2003), accessed 22nd September 2020 via: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9199/9199-h/9199-h.htm#link2H_4_0002

141 Donna Haraway uses the term “response-ability” to refer to “cultivating collective knowing and doing.” (2016, 34) It is the privilege of the ability to respond to stimuli, which makes it our responsibility to foster collective “praxis of care and response... in ongoing multispecies worlding on a wounded Terra” (2016, 105) Haraway knows/believes that we are all (humans, critters and nature) intra-connected and it is our response- ability to take this connection seriously, to nurture and care for the precious dance of becoming-with.

142 Sandra Harding. “‘Strong Objectivity’: A Response to the New Objectivity Question.” *Feminism and Science* 104, no. 3 (1995): 331-349.

143 Bauman. “Ernst Haeckel’s Creation.” (2018), 40.

dismantle the illusion that life(form) is defined by static or “ascendant (organic) autotelic form.”¹⁴⁴

Siding with inspiring poet troublemaker Aja Monet, I demand that

“we protest to empower personhood
more than mourning, we roar
be not discouraged, be not dismayed
be defiant and deliberate
always, be.”¹⁴⁵

Multiplicities and Womanist Theology

How does multiplicity function within such a framework?

Having elaborated the radical potential of collapsing singular selfhood into its multiple composites, I hope to have prepared the field to continue in cyclic motion, I therefore want to ask:

- What if we seek one-ness not in a merging of separate bodies (one/self \diamond other), but in meeting points of collective emergence and multiplicity?
- (How) can multiplicities be accounted for from a monistic perspective?

“Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: ‘Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow and our cousins are white, beige, and black?’ Ans: ‘Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented’,”¹⁴⁶ writes Alice Walker in her already cited definition of *womanism*. The founder of womanism here ties the “wholeness of entire people” into an imagery of luscious multiplicities. Indeed, it is within the ranks of womanist scholars, more specifically theologians, that the question of multiplicity is

144 Goldstein. *Sweet Science* (2017), 73.

145 Aja Monet. *My Mother was a Freedom Fighter* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 146.

146 Walker. *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, 1. full version in Appendix B.

moved to the foreground. Womanism in the theological project Valerie Cooper describes as “decentering the ways that theology has been understood as primarily male and European and is acknowledging that there are other people who have something to say.”¹⁴⁷ What Cooper suggests here is that the question of multiplicity (in life and scholarship) is directly linked to the process of dismantling centralized systems of power (that prioritize (white male) singularity).

As part of the same panel discussion on *Black Public Womanist Theology*, Leslie Callahan adds:

“This business about owning your own identity is deeply womanist to me and it has had an impact on absolutely every bit of work I have ever done and every bit of work I will ever do, not just professionally, but also the work I do interpersonally. So, I think that is the answer. This project of really showing up fully human *in all of our identities* is that womanist project.”¹⁴⁸

Two aspects that immediately jump out to me in this sequence are that “owning your own identity/identities” and “showing up fully human” are put on center stage. It is in this sincere moment of “showing up fully human” where Callahan transcends the spheres of identity politics (or statically classified selfhood) and enters into the realm of multiplicity as onto-epistemological octopus/shoreline. Moreover, she attaches such humanness to the shape-shifting quality of moving with multiple, fluid identities, through various daily life situations. Like Goldstein-Goethe’s iteration of non-linear, non-static materiality of bodies, many womanist scholars see personhood as similarly multiple, shifting, and contradictory. Henceforth, to be human, to experience sincere and humble humanness, can only happen in the acknowledgement and jubilation of multiplicity. Theology is the only field that has been able to incorporate multiplicities and the proliferation of difference. Because “the logic of the One” is continually disturbed through the project of re-construction.

→ Cherishing multiplicity by celebrating change is a project that exceeds one faculty/identity/self alone. It is a project of collective imagination, of *collaborative ideation*, of

147 Lisa Thompson, Candace Shields, Leslie Callahan, and Valerie Cooper, moderated by Tamisha Taylor. "Panel Discussion: Black Public Womanist Theology." FULLER studio, 6th November, 2018. video, 9:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRPB8rLy34c>.

148 Ibid, 15:00.

showing up, exposing our contradictory and multiple bodies and deciding to allow change, to welcome change and to celebrate difference.

“God is change,”¹⁴⁹

writes the genius Octavia E. Butler in *Parable of the Sower*. Both Butler, herself not a womanist theologian per definition, and womanist theology remind us that the responsibility to shape collective change is the “only everything worth anything.”¹⁵⁰

For:

*“All that you touch
You Change.*

*All that you Change
Changes you.*

*The only lasting truth
Is Change.”*¹⁵¹

It follows that however far away multiplicity may appear from what has so far been understood as “monism,” I observe these two collapsing in the face of womanist demands to “show up fully human.” For it is in the recognition of difference and multiplicity that the (earth)seed of human togetherness can germinate and grow into a constantly intra-acting “possibility of wholeness.”

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RADICAL LOVE AKA “M/OTHERING”:

A Monistic Wor(l)dmaking Strategy?

How could “m/othering” function in a both/and wor(l)d-making practice?

149 Octavia E. Butler. *Parable of the Sower* (London: Headline, 1993), 3. Her infamous sentence that has led to the genesis of a whole religious movement. For more info visit: <https://godischange.org/god-is-change/>.

150 Monet. *My Mother was a Freedom Fighter* (2017), 97.

151 Butler. *Parable of the Sower* (1993), 3. Emphasis adapted from original.

What is radical about mothering (love) work?

>Radical Love Monism and M/othering

Whereas the second part of this section will more thoroughly explain AP Gumbs concept of *m/othering*, I briefly want to reflect on the usefulness of the term *Radical Love Monism* I have used thus far. At the beginning of my writing process, this definition appeared useful to compile my loosely and abstractly connected thoughts concerning the evaluation of a “possibility of wholeness” from a relational intra-active understanding of personhood. However, at this point I begin to question the convenience of such a form(ulation), because of

> its capitalization of letters: I see a discrepancy now in my intentional use of capitalization throughout this thesis as a signal for subjecthood. A concept that tries to circumvent static idea(l)s of personhood, or objecthood, may be confusing when titled in a way that evokes such absoluteness.

>> the rigidity it implies: Thinking back to bell hooks’ appraisal to think of “love” as a verb (in **the red chapter**) as a foundational premise for this thesis, makes its use of a noun in this context (*Radical Love Monism*) inconsistent.

>>> the suffix “-ism”, basically refers to a (philosophical) position that *is*, rather than *is becoming*.

>>>> avoiding to overwrite an already pre-existing notion (*m/othering*¹⁵²), that is not just more suitable, but also provided to me by authors/inspirations who have fundamentally shaped my thought. Claiming ownership over such a concept would be ignorant as much as a capitulation to my white privilege.

The subsequent section will therefore attempt to guide the reader through *m/othering* as a radical practice that extends from writing, to living and loving at large. Following Gumbs’ example in tracing ancestral (shore)lines, the introductory paragraph will ease us in with the help of one of Gumbs’ (self-proclaimed) ancestors: renowned wor(l)d-acrobat lucille clifton.

152 “The radical potential of the word ‘mother’ comes after the ‘m’. It is the space that ‘other’ takes in our mouths when we say it. We are something else.(...) *all of us breaking cycles of abuse by deciding what we want to replicate from the past and what we need urgently to transform, are m/othering ourselves.*” (Gumbs. *Revolutionary Mothering* (2016), 50.)

>>M/othering as a Monistic Wor(l)dmaking Strategy

“somewhere
 some woman
 just like me
 tests the lock on the window
 in the children’s room,
 lays out tomorrow’s school clothes,
 sets the table for breakfast early,
 finds a pen between the cushions
 on the couch
 sits down and writes the words
 Good Times.
 i think of her as i begin to teach
 the lives of the poets,
 about her space at the table
 and my own inexplicable life,”¹⁵³

clifton’s powerful voice enters my body and finds shelter in the area between my heart and my womb, wrapping itself into a ball of light nestling deep in my soul. The snug embrace of simple words leaving space for the heart to fill in the missing pieces. A poem then becomes a space in which hearts meet, a collective space driven on the power of love. What catches my eye in the present poem is best described as a network of keywor(l)ds:

--mothering=(domestic)-nurturing future life--poetry--teaching--change/changing-wor(l)ds--
 → mothering change as “a possibility of wholeness”?

The figure of the (Black) mother translates directly into the motion of caring, a rhythm of breathing and loving that collapses distance in space and time into the sensitive hands of the creation of the now. A motion of response-able daily caretaking, tending to the wound between you and I, *self*<>*other*, with diligence and purpose.

153 clifton. *quilting* (1991), 48.

Describing *m/othering* as the practice of continuing¹⁵⁴ shows the radical potential this loving practice brings to the table. *M/othering* as a practice of birthing, of bringing into the wor(l)d is a powerful image. A guardian of wholeness, the mother is the witness and nurturer of that fragile intra-connection we come into the world with. *M/othering*, however, goes beyond the giant eruption of birth. It describes the reiterative way in which we radically care for each other every day. *M/othering* is every-day revolution, it is “love on the frontlines,”¹⁵⁵ loving against all odds, across species, genders and races. It is the repetition of nurturing as a daily habit by filling every single intra-action with relentless loving. What makes this practice monistic for me is that, *m/othering* love appears as such a pervasive practice of meeting the wor(l)d that it is not frame-able within a dualistic straitjacket, nor from the perspective of (gendered) absolute identities. For *m/othering* transcends every need to define selfhood as something that is not Other. Even more so, it thrives (and only exists) with and on the relation to the (self and) other. *M/othering* celebrates differences and multiplicity for they become colors in a mesmerizing motion of weaving vibrant love patterns into the wor(l)d.

“Mothering is a queer practice of transforming the world through our desire for each other and another way to be,”¹⁵⁶ Gumbs writes in *Revolutionary Mothering*. “A possible action, a technology of transformation”¹⁵⁷ and desire alike, *m/othering*, in her work, can be read as a practice that combines monism and multiplicity by diffusing “desire for each other” as dynamic doctrine of be(com)ing-with that makes individual personhood seem cold, unbearable, and undesirable. *M/othering* then is an intra-subjective act of creating lineages out of love and care by “dispersing” care work. I was fascinated to see that Gumbs uses the word “disperse” in the context of *m/othering*. Thinking back to [the yellow chapter](#), this links into Goethe’s use of the word “dispersion” (*Verstäubung*) as a radical non-linear process of continuous procreation in an intra-active realm. Both apply *dispersion* to signify the non-linear diffusion of information in contrast to a logic of life that centers around the rise and decay of organic (absolute) bodies. *M/othering* aka *radical love* in this reading is a promise to nurture intra-active networks of care that eclipse the nuclear family, and heteronormative standards. Loving ourselves, and especially

154 Think “God is Change” (Butler).

155 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, Mai'a Williams (eds.). *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Frontlines*. (Chico: AKPress, 2017).

156 Gumbs. *Revolutionary Mothering* (2017), 170.

157 Gumbs. *Revolutionary Mothering* (2017), 51.

for Black women to love themselves and each other, across differences, across change is “a queer desire enacted.”¹⁵⁸

Gumbs’ unwavering believe in, support of, and love for queer life-forms, fugitives and angelic troublemakers shines through her wor(l)ds. She clarifies that it is particularly the caretakers of Black queer lifeforms that “are not supposed to exist,”¹⁵⁹ those who literally love life into existence, who sustain the energy to provide for those the system fails to account for. When Gumbs speaks of “we”, she speaks of the Black queer mother, who transforms the violent energy she is confronted with daily (in a white supremacist system) into her fuel to relentlessly love a wor(l)d that is not created for her. *Black M/othering* has to be understood as the radicalized and total commitment to love as a life-giving resource. For Black mothers to *radically love* themselves, each other and humanity, despite the hate, violence, destruction and oppression they (have) face(d) (for what way too long), is the most powerful sign that we can *all* love each other! If black mothers can love, so can the rest of us.

It becomes a template for me to think through and with *radical love* as such a powerful transformative (life-)force that I wish to imagine a world founded around the monistic principle of *m/othering* as filled with justice, love and community.

The idea of choosing to love radically (in form of *m/othering*) counters an understanding of love as instinctual, or primordial, and rather regards it as a practice, as a dynamic process that demands commitment and agency. Therefore, love is read as the capacity to act with intention and responsibility for the fragile intra-connective network that dilutes *self<>other* in the multiplicity of differences. In order to radically *m/other*, one must tab into the realms beyond status, object-hood or achievement. By these means, entering into a similar monistic intra-action with the universe that Bauman appealed to. With a much more radical approach to celebrating and caretaking of differences a practice is born that eradicates the anxiety-based reflex of hiding behind a (White Male) “logic of the One,” that always already relies on a (black female) m“other”. *Black Queer M/othering*, at once, is presented as *both* a gift *and* a response-ability, making space for caretakers who unlearn and refuse domination, healing past trauma through transformation in the now (to secure “better” futures). *Radical love*, in this perspective, is a

158 Gumbs. “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves.” (2010), 188.

159 Ibid., 188.

monistic decision to become-with (instead of against) those we exist alongside at the shoreline, “because mothering is love by any means necessary.”¹⁶⁰

“Showing up fully human” and How the Problem of Wholeness as/is Whiteness

How does whiteness disrupt radical love as the “possibility of wholeness”?

Radical Love as m/othering is the radical choice to become-with, is the acknowledgement of the responsibility that comes with the ability to respond. This (Black) practice dreams of a possibility to be whole and home in change and multiplicity. A possibility that has been disrupted for centuries by those (white supremacists) interested in keeping the Other apart, yet dependent (see [the yellow chapter](#)). As you will remember, Haeckel, for instance, did see the world as one big web of interaction. He forgot to account for his own participation in it, nonetheless. He failed to “show up fully human.” Disconnecting his own subjective standpoint from his “critical” scholarly perspective, he directly impaired the wholeness he had just stitched up.

Having outlined the “possibility of wholeness” in the context of Womanist Theology and the beautiful commitment to nurturing change offered in *Revolutionary Mothering*, the main goal for this section is to explain the fundamental onto-epistemological problem with whiteness in the establishment of a wor(l)dmaking practice that transcends absolute personhood or linear-binary frameworks (aka *m/othering*).

When typing in the names of Black women scholars of religion like Dr. Keri L. Day, Rev. Dr. Emilie M. Townes, Dr. Yolanda Pierce, Rv. Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman, Dr. Margaret Aymer, Dr. Stephanie Crumpton, Dr. Kimberly D. Russaw, or Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas into the search engine of my research institute’s library, the screen flickers before bold black letters emerge from the eye-piercing white of the screen: No results found.

I ask myself: How can it be that the texts by such high ranking scholars cannot be found in the search engine, whilst book reviews of their publications authored by predominantly white male scholars are made available? How can I learn from an institution that selects which voices I

get to hear? If we were progressing linearly into a better future, are we progressing towards or away from an academic system that does not want to face its ever-more invisible “white ghosts,”¹⁶¹ aka the founding fathers of socially acceptable knowledge production? And how is it that I, as a white woman, can study my own (white) experience when simply enrolling for a Master’s program in *Religious Studies* (not White Religious Studies)?

With this in mind, I choose to look at whiteness in a framework that both exceeds the study of religion and exists in its core. However, I believe that it has such a pungent smell that it far transverses the scope of one field of study and has thus to be faced in its totality.

Inspired by my sister-friend-editor Forrest Kentwell, I want to draw on Jim Perkinson’s work on *White Theology*,¹⁶² on the one hand, and Robin DiAngelo’s *Anti Racism Worksheet*,¹⁶³ on the other, in order to scrutinize the innate premises tailing “Common White Patterns that obscure and protect racism.”¹⁶⁴ Because, I regard these patterns as actively inhibiting *m/othering* as a wor(l)d-making practice that provides a “possibility of wholeness.” I choose these two authors for their poignant analyses situating “historic, normalized, taken for granted, deeply embedded”¹⁶⁵ whiteness at the head of the fire that is systematic and historically specific racism against all non-white people. By identifying the patterns, beliefs, and axioms that sustain this notorious white domination over all aspects of (Black) life, both authors stress the danger of whitenesses perpetuation of innocence, ignorance, and uninformedness. Perkinson writes: “Whiteness is a cultural ‘position’ that reproduces itself without noticing how it relies on and incorporates non-white creativity (in musical style, for instance, or in colorful colloquialisms) As the dominant, or ‘normal,’ identity, it usually finds no need to mark itself publicly. Whiteness is just ‘natural’; it is what needs no explanation or special recognition.”¹⁶⁶

161 Driscoll and Miller. *Method as Identity* (2018), 62- 68, 178, 204- 207.

162 I refer mostly to James W. Perkinson. “RAGE WITH A PURPOSE, WEEP WITHOUT REGRET: A White Theology of Solidarity.” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 82, no. 3/4 (1999): 437-463. It is to be noted that Perkinson published a book on *White Theology* in 2017. Due to the scope of this thesis, I have decided to put my focus on the chronologically earlier published article, in order to trace the original use of the concept.

163 Robin DiAngelo. “Anti Racism Worksheet,” (2012), accessed 20th April 20, 2020 via: <https://robindiangelo.com/2018site/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Anti-racism-handout-1-page-2016.pdf>. Robin DiAngelo is also the author of the book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

164 Subtitle in DiAngelo, 2012.

165 DiAngelo. “Anti Racism Worksheet.” (2012) cites Hilliard’s definition of *racism*. For more, see Asa G. Hillard III, “Behavioral Style, Culture, and Teaching and Learning” *Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 3 (1992): 370–377.

166 James W. Perkinson. “RAGE WITH A PURPOSE” (1999): 439.

Interestingly, this farce of “normality” DiAngelo positions as a “lack of.”¹⁶⁷

A lack of interest in Black perspective & experience,
 a lack of (effort to) understand(ing) of difference;
 a lack of empathy, commitment, (racial)humility,
 a lack of attention to (racial) history and politics,
 and a lack of willingness to learn/do better,
 a lack of social engagement in terms of a preference for isolation and individuality
 and a lack of daily embodied attention to the necessity of others, but in particular the Black
 Other. All in all, DiAngelo’s brief worksheet highlights the complex (yet simple) formats in
 which whiteness manifests itself in a “politics of exclusion and fear,”¹⁶⁸ that tries to make belief
 that whiteness be transparent¹⁶⁹.

When thinking with the notion of transparency, I was reminded of a passage in Alice Walker’s novel *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, where she writes:

“Besides, though we have seen so much of white men, they do not appear to see us. They dare not’, said Rick, shrugging. ‘Any dark-skinned or poor person is likely from a place we have harmed. The more powerful the powerful appear the more invisible they become,’ said Armando. ‘(...) But now the powerful have merged with the shadow, really with death, and when you encounter them they are really hard to see. (...) What is the medicine for this invisibility that white men have?’ asked Rick. An invisibility they are spreading to others.”¹⁷⁰

I find this section extremely potent in the way in which the invisibility of whiteness is described as an absence, a withdrawal from visibility, an inexorable merging into the shadow, into life as death. Walker’s characters treat this invisibility not as desirable, rather as a virus, spreading and slowly devouring the collective (white) soul for bringing harm to the land of Black (and) poor people. “‘In my opinion’, he said, ‘after a while, the only medicine that cures invisibility among the powerful is tears,’”¹⁷¹ shaman Armando concludes in Walker’s text. I pause here to breathe in the mental image of the invisible (white) men crying. Tears, for me, are water, are emotions and deep feeling and flow, are connected-ness, are octopi and Medusas. The

167 DiAngelo. “Anti Racism” (2012).

168 James W. Perkinson. “RAGE WITH A PURPOSE.” (1999): 441.

169 “At the risk of stating the obvious, we need no reminder that ghosts, for what they’re worth, are *white* as *life* before, after, and beyond the scandal of death.” (*Method as Identity*, 2018, 204).

170 Alice Walker. *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (London: Phoenix/ Orion Publishing, 2005), 169.

171 Walker. *Now is the Time* (2005), 169.

cure of invisibility (aka whiteness) in the form of tears, in this interpretation, urges for us (white scholars) to “admit defeat” and self-consciously deal with the consequences of (the structural and all-encompassing) oppression we have forced onto our fellow humans of color. To allow the tears to flow in recognition of the approaching angel of history, of which behind her is the desolation and death caused by white, colonial activities.

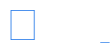
I therefore believe that it is high time for the non-black contributors¹⁷² to the (“critical”) study of religion to recognize the enormous amount of self-reflective work we have to do. It is time to relinquish the power of person-hood by re-thinking who is capping the connections here (to hide behind invisible white walls). Indeed, this is not merely a call for private self-reflection, but an additional demand to reflect on our social, spiritual, discursive, political and material (and more) entanglements and response-abilities alike. As [the conclusory chapter](#) of this thesis will serve to theorize such entanglements, it suffices for now to say: I believe that with such a radical re-configuration of the singular self subject must also come the understanding that every “single” one of us is host to a multiplicity of dimensions. In my present function as a scholar, I see my vessel for intra-connectivity primarily in the realm of discursivity. When writing I shape-shift into a modus of wor(l)dmaking that is concerned with weaving words into the world. When moving on to paint, my response-ability to nurture and give love, may shift to a different dimension and require different modalities. Nonetheless, the (unitary) energetic force that drives me (ideally) is and stays *radical love*. *Radical love*, then, functions as a monistic energy to narrate multiplicities at the shoreline.

It follows that in order to truly embody a writing practice like “m/othering” or *radical love* we need to re-assess the ways in which we choose to turn a blind eye, or fail to hold ourselves accountable to the various ways in which our success and our ability to express ourselves silences the voices of many (non-white/human) others. We (as earthly critters) can only function as a team, when we support every player. If we do not fight for the justice of every single one of us (including, but not limited to, Black women, queers, co-critters and mother earth), we will never be able to break the white hegemonic system of oppression, which can lead

172 I want to emphasize that I address myself here as much as any other non-black folk. I am aware that my authoring of this thesis does not exclude me from an on-going necessity to self-reflectively apply myself to a rigorous day-to-day exorcism of the racism and “white ghosts” that continue to haunt my spirit, my ancestral line and my material, spiritual and economic sphere.

us to a “possibility of wholeness.” It is our turn to make a change. Or, as the revolutionary freedom fighter Fanny Lou Hamer said:

“Nobody is free, until everybody is free.”¹⁷³



MAPPING MORE: Final Contemplations

M/othering radical love for me is the practice of connecting with *the black simultaneity* of the universe, to seek radical connection and to un-learn the de-connecting habit that whiteness holds us locked in.¹⁷⁴ So, in an attempt to listen, the **next chapter** will turn an eye onto the mothering work of *radical love* that has been the inspiration and reason for this thesis: *Black Feminist Lyricism*. Having mapped the onto-epistemological foundation of my (shapeshifting) standpoint, the next section tries to peel another layer by taking a deeper look at how and why *Black Feminist Lyricism* can be seen as an excellent prism to contemplate the functionality of such an approach in the field. I investigate why, how, and what we can learn from Black Feminist poets, rhymesayers, and activists in narrating *self<>other* as relational, rather than definite. I follow Carmen Kynard in asking:

“We have to begin to ask, for instance: what does knowledge in this field look like and do when overwhelmingly white editors have published the work of white scholars about students of color, and when those very same white scholars would so casually and calculatingly defame the only black female professor and graduate on their campus? What might it mean that our publications about students of color emanate from racist roots and what does it mean when a publishing apparatus affirms that?”¹⁷⁵

173 I retrieved this quotation from *Black Feminist Breathing Chorus*. An online course offered by Sangodare Wallace and Alexis Pauline Gumbs via: <https://sangodare.podia.com/>

174 James W. Perkinson. "Pedagogy Beyond Piracy: Un-Learning the White Body to Recreate a Body of Learning." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 15, no. 4 (Oct. 2012): 323-337.

175 Melanie Harris et al. "Roundtable." (2016), 103. Taken from: Kynard, Carmen "Teaching While Black: Witnessing and Countering Disciplinary Whiteness, Racial Violence, and University Race-Management" *LiCS* 3, no. 1, (2015), 3.

THE GREEN CHAPTER (OF EARTH)

Black Feminist Lyricism and Non-Linear Wor(l)dmaking



How do genres, formats or *cultures of scholarship* contribute to the continued colonization of knowledge-making? What is the role of whiteness in this?

(How) does (radical) love function as a discursive tool to analyse Black Feminist wor(l)d-making?

“The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children”¹⁷⁶

“Human language is local and changeable, and is therefore incapable of being used as the means
of unchangeable and universal information.”¹⁷⁷

What I hope to have shown in the [last chapter \(blue\)](#) are:

- the “possibility of wholeness” as a multiplicity based tradition within Womanist theology,
- why force- (instead of matter-) based monism may overcome dualities,
- the necessity for the establishment of a (discursive) practice that transcends personhood (or linear-binary frameworks) (aka *m/othering*),
- *m/othering* as a (Black feminist) monistic practice of weaving *radical love* into the world
- how whiteness disrupts “a possibility of wholeness,” by a “lack of” response-ability for shaping the collective wor(l)d
- demanding accountability and self-reflection within the ranks of white (“critical”) scholars of religion.

Whereas Miller&Driscoll and Wynter have mapped out the confounded relationship of binary and neutrality to hierarchization of human value in white supremacist cultures, this chapter zooms into the particular context of languaging and discourse in hegemonic *cultures of scholarship*. In the present chapter, I want to narrow the focus by analysing the way in which hegemonic white wor(l)d-making can be linked to the perpetuation of hegemonic *cultures of scholarship*. Taking Audre Lorde’s invitation to consider poetry as no luxury, but an

176 Audre Lorde. *The Black Unicorn: Poems* Reissue edition. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 113.

177 Thomas Paine. *The Age of Reason*, (1794) Deism, accessed online 20th May 2020, via: <https://www.deism.com/images/theageofreason1794.pdf>.

“implementation of freedom,” this chapter attempts to learn from *Black feminist lyricism* as a radical non-linear writing practice “at the shoreline.”

Narrating in doorways, hallways and in-between moments¹⁷⁸ by radically embracing the ebb and flow of information, I want to consider the (necessity) for such a practice to break with hegemonic systems that keep knowledge making refined to its white-square-standards.

Therefore, in the later section of this chapter, I look to Black feminist wor(l)dmaking to learn about narrative form(at)s in which narrating *self<>other* functions independently from static notions of personhood and linear time/space. I am hereby curious to explore what exactly the established white *culture of scholarship* misses out on when staying within the square that is “talking white”¹⁷⁹.

In attempting to grapple with these topics, I am to look at:

What are “hegemonic cultures of scholarship”?

How do linearity and normativity (discussed in the yellow chapter) relate to prevailing oppressive structures in Euro-American scholarship?

Why is “poetry is not a luxury”? How have “poet m/others” been transforming our lives all along?

What is (the function of) *Black Feminist Lyricism*?

How *Black Feminist Lyricism* Transforms Future Wor(l)ds:

- *Example I: How Words Become Worlds*
- *Example II: How Radical Love Functions Discursive Agent*
- *Example III: How to Narrate Non-Linear Wor(l)ds in the Study of Religion*

Cyclical Return

178 a beautiful visualization of such a narration of “Flurmomente” can be seen here:

<http://www.carolinaburandt.de/index.php/-flurmomente--garderobe/>

179 The derogatory expression “talking white” is “meant to both ridicule and shame, suggest black people have characteristics and interests that belong to a particular social script and only that one,” (*Parable of the Brown Girl*, 2020, 126) writes Khristi Lauren Adams. Highlighting the difficulty of Brown girls to battle with social scripts that were never designed for them, She warns of the phrase “talking white.” For it creates the illusion that “proper” speech and “higher” knowledge are formats of shaping the world only suited for white people.

How Whiteness as the “Hegemonic Culture of Scholarship” disrupts the “possibility of wholeness”

If we consider that the contemporary academic organism (that is predominantly situated within the Euro-American landscape) continues to depend and draw on the colonizer’s (white) toolkit, archive, and modes of writing, it appears absurd to even assume that this system has ever, or could ever, tell the stories of non-white people’s experiences and knowledges.¹⁸⁰ Walter Mignolo draws up a critique of hegemonic *cultures of scholarship* that positions the coloniality of power over language and discourse at the *ethico-onto-epistemological* core of contemporary (Western) scholarship. Particular his criticism of “the colonization of discursive genres (or types),”¹⁸¹ encourages scholars to reflect on the monochrome (white) templates for discourse and language that are too often taken for granted as “neutral” or “logical”. Where Mignolo ties imperial structures of knowledge directly to those of language and political power,¹⁸² I additionally link the static conception of selfhood (or personhood) to the equation. By “perpetuating the *nonidentity* of whiteness, (...) ultimately denying the discursive naming of *that* very thing so privileged as to not be named,”¹⁸³ Miller and Driscoll scrutinize the entanglement of whiteness and personhood in a discursive power matrix aimed at erasing its own footprints. Strict policing of languaging and discursive genres become white tools to gloss over the dependency on The Black as a fixed Other. If static notions of self- or white- hood serve to defend hegemonic *cultures of scholarship*, we are stuck with “the most narrow parameters of

180 It is particularly interesting here to re-consider the deep seated onto-epistemological split (between self/other, comparative/confessional, white/black) and the distance-making mechanisms in the contemporary academic study of religion discussed in [the yellow chapter](#).

181 Walter Mignolo. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, 259.

182 “Cultures of scholarship are cast in terms of textual national legacies, for it is in and by texts that the educational system, in modern and Western Europe (the Europe of Hegel and Fichte), is structured and that science is articulated, packaged, transmitted, and exported.” Mignolo, *Local Histories* 2012, 262.

183 Ibid, 262.

change,”¹⁸⁴ stuck within the confines of linear temporality,¹⁸⁵ either/or polarization, and hierarchical evaluation of human worth.¹⁸⁶

“The question is, How shall I proceed in this rethinking and undoing? From ‘where’ will I rethink? From the legacies of the very foundations I am trying to undo?”¹⁸⁷

A suggestion to start Gumbs appears to offer in *M-Archive* when she speaks about knowing.¹⁸⁸ Or rather she urges us to stop knowing, stop thinking that we know, or that the moment of “knowing” can ever really be complete or important (to hold onto) at all. Writing out “knowing” in the process of its becoming demands surrender; surrender to the ego-less space of not-knowing, of learning from and with each other's uncensored feelings. “That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding,”¹⁸⁹ writes (the) Lorde.

In the following sections, I attempt to learn “un-”knowing by practicing loving as an emergent process and strategy through the form(at) of lyricism. I turn to *Black Feminist Lyricism* in its function to narrate from a both/and, rather than an either/or space. Having never lived in the privileged wor(l)d of personhood, whilst basking in the denial of contradiction, Black feminist wor(l)dmakers strike me as the ideal teachers to un-learn the empowerment of personhood from. Letting my embodied creative flow guide me (and you) through the wor(l)ds of *Black feminist lyricism*, I hope I can use this chapter to “learn to love by loving.”¹⁹⁰

184 Audre Lorde. “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.” In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Lewis, Reina, and Sara Mills, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 25.

185 I love June Jordan's poem “Calling on All Silent Minorities” in envisioning the role non-linear imagination plays in the temporality of non-white wor(l)d-making. June Jordan. *Directed by Desire : The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, eds. June Jordan, Jan Heller Levi, and Sara Miles, (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 150. Full Poem in Appendix C.

186 See [the yellow chapter](#) for a discussion of “No Humans Involved” by Sylvia Wynter.

187 Mignolo. *Local Histories* (2012), 256.

188 Gumbs. *M-Archive* (2018), 84, 112, 153, 161-162, 189.

189 Lorde. “Poetry is Not A Luxury” (1984), 1.

190 adrienne maree brown. “Love as Political Resistance”, 2017.

POETRY IS NOT A LUXURY¹⁹¹

is NOT

a reason to call me vain and
dreamy and hopelessly romantic and
far away from “this”

(reality)

is NOT

your means of telling me
that I am wrong
to weave and knit and quilt¹⁹²

(m-)archives¹⁹³ of possible wor(l)ds

(unknown)

is NOT

an excuse to
question my ability to
“think straight” or “make sense”

is NOT

an invitation to offer
(Y)OUR insecurities as
weapons of fear

is NOT a *ding-*

an-sich

a “something” that can be
wrapped in plastic

stamped with a label

that reads for sale

is NOT

191 This section borrows its title from Audre Lorde’s piece by the same name, “Poetry is Not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider* (1984). Due to its precise, apposite, poetic and thoughtful formulation I have added the full text to Appendix D.

192 See: clifton’s book *Quilting: poems 1987-1990*, mentioned elsewhere in this thesis.

193 See: Gumbs’ book *M-Archive*, mentioned everywhere in this thesis.

making a difference
 but making difference
 life-affirming
 is NOT
 perpetrating silence
 penetrating sirens
 dictating the iron (c)licking
 of a white-grey(/male) machinery
 is NOT
 yours to keep
 is NOT
 mine to hold
 is (not)
 love

is lifeforce (JJ¹⁹⁴)-

“I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean,”¹⁹⁵ writes Audre Lorde in her infamous essay “Poetry is not a Luxury,” which serves to iterate the radical potential she sees inherent to poetic writing. Clearly attaching problem solving (and therefore linearity) to a “european mode” of thinking, she describes it as superficial and uni-directional, unable to “cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes.”¹⁹⁶ She positions this “true knowledge” within the feeling, dark, ancient, and deep core (“the woman’s place of power within each of us”¹⁹⁷). Making poetry, as an “implementation of freedom,”¹⁹⁸ a possibility (of wholeness), a grammar for the liberation of feeling. “It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into

194 Jordan. “The Creative Spirit” (2016), 45.

195 Lorde. “Poetry” (1984), 29.

196 Ibid., 29.

197 Ibid., 29.

198 Ibid., 30.

more tangible action,”¹⁹⁹ she advances. More than “just” any narrative genre, poetry, in Lorde’s text, is the radical practice of feeling, of *radically loving* the deep dark feminine (in each one of us). When vulnerability is read as a super-power, life in its complexity and non-linear chaos no longer feels threatening. Because, relinquishing control over the linear past and future births the power of the now, the moment of meeting the universe in its be-coming. Or as Gumbs says:

“For those of us who write, read and live in the poetic as a radical practice of collaborative creation,²⁰⁰ these Black feminist poets offer an integrational archive with which to engage as readers and practitioners of poetry, generating a definition of poetry that turns the (re)production of language into life itself and an intervention into the practice of form that offers alternative forms of sociality and possibility for all of us.”²⁰¹

Poetry, following Lorde and Gumbs, is the honest acceptance (as an author) to meet language in its most vulnerable moment: its changing motion. In her practice, the (Black feminist) poet holds herself accountable for transforming worlds with words. She recognizes that at the bottom of her wor(l)d(s) lies justice for all. Because more than knowing, she has always felt that “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”²⁰² In short: poetry is a movement, an (intra-)action, a verb. For me, poetry is process learning, network-making. When no form is predicated onto the author, when words become movable elements, the pressure of literal meaning is lifted. Poetry requires a connection to wor(l)d(s) that does not suffice to be thought. The brutal honesty it requires demands a stripping down to bare nakedness. “Naked without shame,”²⁰³ the (Black feminist) poet lives “a counter-hegemonic body politic,” by merging her own embodied creative power with that of the universe. Poetry, then, becomes a *radical*

199 Ibid., 29.

200 Here Gumbs (“We Can Learn”, 2010) inserts the following footnote I have decided to keep for context: “Here I depend on Sylvia Wynter’s definition of the poetic as that which creates new relationships between human beings, each other and their environment by seeking (and failing) to describe what those relationships could be, beyond objectification, in a manner that is disruptive of the product to product relationship of capitalism on ‘Ethno or Socio Poetic’ in *Alcheringa...*”

201 Gumbs. “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves” (2010), 4.

202 Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, African Studies Center - University of Pennsylvania, accessed 7th June, 2020 via: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

203 hooks. “naked without shame” *Talking Visions* (2001), 65-73.

m/othering practice. Words become colors in a painting²⁰⁴. White ghosts as the “critical” invisible painters of Otherness are suddenly exposed to their messy aprons. From there on, the return to whiteness seems impossible.

“We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They lie in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare. If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is a luxury, then we have given up the core-the fountain-of our power, our womanness; we have given up the future of our worlds.”²⁰⁵

ANCESTRAL²⁰⁶ QUOIR:

“This land between the worlds [rationality and mythos] is that inexplicable place we all recognize once we experience it, but its nuances slip away and shape-change if one tries to pin them down, except when we use poetry, music, dance or story.”²⁰⁷

“poetry is very much like schizophrenia
 fixations on the fear of a hysterectomy
 meant to rectify any inner forgiveness
 the voices of guilt hug the lines
 I am learning to be vulnerable”²⁰⁸

“This land between the worlds [rationality and mythos] is that inexplicable place we all recognize once we experience it, but its nuances slip away and shape-change if one tries to pin them down, except when we use poetry, music, dance or story.”²⁰⁹

“the poet walks

204 A practice legendary Ntozake Shange brings to life in *for colored girls* (1977) by means of literally “coloring” each of her characters in orange’s, blue’s and purple’s. Shange guides the reader through the emotional wor(l)ds of the seven sisters, who love themselves and each other across differences, against all odds. Their voices swim like fish, into each other, apart, winding in the water to suddenly form one body (and then dissolve.)

205 Lorde. “Poetry is Not” (1984), 30.

206 the term refers to those discursive ancestors who have made this work possible.

207 Clarissa Pinkola Estés. *Women Who Run With Wolves* (London: Rider, 1998), 26.

208 Jasmine Gibson. *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2018), 16.

209 Clarissa Pinkola Estés. *Women Who Run With Wolves* (London: Rider, 1998), 26.

in through the door
of the scholar's house

the rooms leading off
from the hall
buzz with language

the poet
feels the door
behind her close

and the sinister hall
is dark with the one word
Choose"²¹⁰

"Poems come on their own time: i am offering these to you as what i've received from this world so far."²¹¹

"& a poem is my thank-you for music
& i love you more than poem"²¹²

"In my practice in Poetry I have tried to produce a grammar in which Black existence might be the thought and not
the unthought;
might be."²¹³

"'Radical Womyn of Color' is not an identity, it is a promise.
(...)

This means we love each other enough to make the world that we deserve out of our words, our bodies, our breath
and our need, our histories and our futures."²¹⁴

"poetry is a trestle
spanning the distance between
what i feel

210 clifton. *quilting* (Brockport: BOA Editions Ltd., 1991), 66.

211 Shange. *for colored girls* (1978), xvi.

212 Shange. *for colored girls* (1978), 13.

213 Dionne Brand. "An *Ars Poetica* from the Blue Clerk." *The Black Scholar*, 47, no. 1 (2017): 59.

214 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Without You Who Understand: Letter from Radical Womyn of Color," in *Feminisms in Motion: Voices for Justice, Liberation, and Transformation*, eds. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, adrienne maree Brown, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, Jessica Hoffmann, and Daria Yudacufski (La Vergne: AK Press, 2018), 17.

and what i say
 like a locomotive
 i rush full speed ahead
 trusting your strength
 to carry me over"²¹⁵

"Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world."²¹⁶

Black Feminist Lyricism

“Our word is powerful enough to make things manifest. Being lyricists, people who write (music), we are not necessarily just creating creative stories, we are writing the future.(...) Writing a more liberated future for our world,”²¹⁷ notes Thandiwe, one half of the hip-hop duo OSHUN²¹⁸ in an interview. Emphasizing the importance of projecting the kind of energy into the world that they wish to manifest, they see the discursive plane as directly linked to social (justice), material and spiritual forms of creation. OSHUN claims lyricism as a medium to channel love and healing, as occupying and holding spaces (of freedom); to “be vessels for the spirit of our ancestors.”²¹⁹ Welcoming oscillation between these multiple layers of reality by claiming authority to name, to become she who speaks, has been a fundamental part of Black feminist movements since the 1980’s (at least). For instance, legendary Toni Cade Bambara states: “Colleagues in the Neo-Black Arts Movement...had been teaching for years- that writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me.”²²⁰ Bambara stresses the act of writing (for Black women in particular) as an active participation in form(ulat)ing those realities that have deleted and denounced her existence (in history, present and future). Linking liberation to discursive expression, Bambara refuses to standardize²²¹ and attune to hegemonic (his)story-telling codes. What is more, writing becomes a

215 Nikki Giovanni. "Poetry Is a Trestle." in *Love Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 61.

216 Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971), 75.

217 “OSHUN Interview: Spirit of the Suffragettes.” interview by Diani Drake and Mikaela Clark-Gardner, A Media Sanctuary Production, 7th November, 2019, accessed 9th March, 2020 via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JetZzICCNE>.

218 “Oshun Homepage” OSHUN, accessed 9th March, 2020 via: <https://oshuniverse.com/>.

219 “OSHUN Interview: Spirit of the Suffragettes.” (2019).

220 Toni Cade Bambara. *Black Women Writers(1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* (Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984), 41–47.

221 Her language to fit “Standard English” (aka white) demands.

claim to the agency of naming and wor(l)dmaking alike; of not just telling one's story, but archiving it, protecting (it from) and projecting it into the (white) world. The power, then, to not just name who or what, but to determine how narratives unfold can be seen as a revolutionary act of transforming hegemonic *cultures of scholarship* by allowing the (deep dark feminine) body to shape and change the wor(l)d in their image.

“We are the stories

we tell

ourselves,”²²²

pens Aja Monet. Therefore, referring to story-telling not just as a means of recording and sharing experience, but also as a formative process in defining who we are. From this perspective, stories and their telling become the yarn we weave our life stories in, the particular fabric that connects each of our own lives with the larger, quilt patchwork we call “society” or “humankind.”

The highly diverse spectrum of wor(l)d-makers finding expression in lyrical form makes it difficult to reduce this choir of voices to labels like “poets,” or “songwriters,” or even “activists” . I therefore use the working definition *Black Feminist Lyricists* as an octopus term for those who knit and weave and quilt *radical love*, (hope and faith) into the world with their words. Who, coming from a deep, dark, feminine place, take charge of transforming the wor(l)d into a more radically caring, and respecting space.

How *Black Feminist Lyricism* Transforms Future Wor(l)ds

The following section aims to give examples for the myriad way in which *BFL* can function in dismantling and rebuilding prisms of knowledge. I do this in three divergent layers. Whilst the first example playfully intra-sects with a poem by Jasmine Gibson to foreground the flexible and relational nature of lyrical discourse, the second one takes up song-lyrics to showcase how such a discourse can function as the language of *radical love* by breaking the barriers of person-hood. The third layer weaves the first two into the fabric of Religious Studies discourse. By engaging the creative and critical flexibility of both author and reader, the examples aim to demonstrate the dynamic of intra-active wor(l)d-making inherent to *BFL*. Because I believe in process and collective learning, I choose this form(at) as an (in no-way

222 Monet. *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter* (2017), 3.

complete or perfect) exercise for myself and a practical example for those readers wondering “how to operationalize these abstract ideas,” to offer not just critique, but also suggestions.

a) Example A:

How Words Become Worlds

"History happens upon the flesh, sitting

Waiting to be introduced to mob theory

Whether it's our world

Versus

The Barking of indolent dogs

Begging for the world to end in the shape of their image,"²²³

Gibson writes in her book *Don't Let Them See Me Like This*. In the first line here, I read a critique of the dualistic framework of “his”-story as being imposed by “him” (or the mind) onto (/upon) “the flesh.” His story of self that “happens upon” the Other- the other that is incapable of responding to, or forming their own narrative. A narrative of absence, absence of personhood, absence of human worth.²²⁴ With the formation of “him” as person, as the narrator of the story, there remains no space for an(y) other -hood.

This becomes more clear in a later paragraph when she writes:

"Imagine all of the stories slaves would have written

If they didn't die writing with their flesh

Instead their flesh was for a sadistic master

and our |Age of Enlightenment|"²²⁵

Likewise hinting at “the complex and diverse ways the body has been foregrounded as a site of conquest in all efforts of colonization.”²²⁶ Gibson unsheathes Black women’s flesh as encapsulated in his-story as erotic, exposed²²⁷ and silenced.²²⁸ Within such a framework, the capitalization of “The Barking” appears to signify an authority to name, a title, a linking of the

223 Gibson *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* (2018), 30.

224 Think “No Human Involved” (the yellow chapter)

225 Gibson. *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* (2018), 30.

226 hooks. “naked without shame” (2001), 67.

227 As for instance happened with Saartjie Baartman.

228 As hooks writes in “naked without shame” (2001): “Ours (black women) is a history of shame. Written on the body we cannot erase.” (65), or “We dreaded our female flesh.” (66), and “I celebrate freedom in the flesh. They seek to silence” (67).

ego of the specific Barker (“indolent dogs”) to his action. A claim not granted to those oppressed by the same system that named them “lazy,” or “indolent.”

Take for instance the pseudonym *bell hooks* that was chosen by author Gloria Watkins with the intention to both take back her right to name herself,²²⁹ and set free her ideas from their owner, as one fixed source. This also serves the linguistic purpose of choosing process-based (adjectives, verbs), rather than result-based (nouns) expressions. The author’s identity becomes an intrinsically entwined element, rather than an definitely outward-positioned producer of text.

In her poems Gibson demonstrates a playfulness with (the fluidity of) person-hood, characteristic for *BFL*, that stands in stark contrast to the notorious rigidity of white male his-story carving into stone the names of white ghosts along a single line. By means of positioning herself in her voice and wor(l)ds, Gibson’s poems provide a space for the reader to intra-act with. “Showing up fully human,” she exposes her vulnerability. Likewise, foregrounding the paradox of (enlightenment) writing as a practice of eternal commemoration of those minds who enslave(d) the flesh (of slaves). Their words become their shrines, “begging for the world to end in their image.”

By these means, Gibson emphasises the necessity to break down person-hood to liberate the wor(l)d from “his” story. Her systematic critique of a white male hegemonic *culture of scholarship* goes hand in hand with her attempt to break free. Lyricism becomes her medium of wor(l)d-making, her “implementation of freedom.”²³⁰ No luxury, but a radical practice of survival, of “singing her rhythms.”

"somebody/anybody
 sing a black girl's song
 bring her out
 to know herself
 to know you
 but sing her rhythms
 carin/struggle/hard times
 sing her song of life"²³¹

229 Many Black people in Euro-America carry the name the enslaver gave to them through generations, for instance

230 Think: Lorde. “Poetry is Not” (Appendix D)

231 Shange. *for colored girls* (1978), 4.

b) Example B:

How Radical Love Functions as a Discursive Agent

Shapeshifting in content and form, here, I look into the ways in which radical love can function not just as a theme in writing, but as a writing practice itself. I understand the notion of *radical love* to function as a writing practice at the shorelines, radical Black feminist writing from a place of love, that builds networks of intra-action and emergence, breaking with the rigid squareness language has been refined to. When defining *radical love* as a writing practice for the purpose of this thesis I had to think back to a sentence I found in *Method as Identity*: “I use the term ‘revolutionary’ next to ‘love’ to turn our attention to love that seeks to transform the world, which includes love that both tears down and builds up.”²³² I think of this writing practice as surrendering to the flow of the waves, allowing them to hit the shore and reside again.

“My gosh we racing
Please sympathise all the lives we raising
Please realise all the time

Female Energy”²³³

echoes Sampa Tempo’s distinct voice. Best known as *Sampa the Great*, her delivery varies between sweet singing and dense rhymes, vibrating deep within. Within these lines, she expresses a sense of being haunted, or rushed and with kindness and certainty in her voice demands to be acknowledged “for all the lives we raising.” *M/othering* female energy “all the time,” the “we” becomes the personal pronoun for the Black female caretakers. She goes on to rap:

“Feminine energy
Balance up the indestructible
In the vaginal
Heaven in thine

232 Quote by Serene Jones in: Driscoll and Miller. *Method as Identity* (2018), 55.

233 Sampa the Great and Nadeem Din-Gabisi. "Energy." (Silentjay & Rahki, Ninja Tune, 2018) accessed 18th May, 2020 via: <https://genius.com/Sampa-the-great-energy-lyrics>.

She sing a melody to pass the time
 Give us her energy so she heal mine”

Here, similar to previous examples, (deep dark) *feminine energy* is described as the balancing force. Naming it heavenly, melodious, and indestructible, “vagina(l)” becomes synonymous with strong, invincible, birthing. The sweet sound of a melody- a meter of time through which energy pulsates. She, the heavenly and earthly voice heals through sharing her energy. As she moves through space portals, she tinkers her space-time continuum that is not defined by linearity, but by the rhythmic dance of feminine energy. I understand that to be an active rebellion, a move to decolonize linear time,²³⁴ a time that leaves no trace of black women’s existence other than as commodified slaves or exotic, sexualized bodies. She is untouchable, for she does not exist within a power scheme of her opponents making.

“One shot two shot three times sorrows
 Carry all the weight of the world on your shoulders
 Give a couple crowns to the women who had bore us
 Taught us
 Focus
 Love and support us
 Magical, umbilical my universe is radical
 Introduce the nation to embracing what is factual
 Feminine energy almost mathematical
 You can’t really sum up what is infinite and valuable”

Using feminine energetic force she likewise draws on scientific metaphors (“factual”, “mathematical”) and transcends them (“you can’t really sum up what is infinite and valuable”), confidently birthing contradiction in a both/and space. She depicts her universe as “magical,” “umbilical,” and “radical,” flooded by the unfeasible power of *feminine energy*. An energy that has grown powerful by sustaining the sorrow of many souls taken and the hard labor of carrying the “weight of the world” on their shoulders and in their wombs. Nonetheless, an energy defined by “Focus, Love and Support.” She appears to conjure the *radical love* aka *feminine energy* by

234 “we don’t learn to love in a linear path, from self to family to friends to spouse, as we might have been taught. We learn to love by loving.” (brown. “Love as Political Resistance.” 2017).

chanting it into the world, spreading its gospel through rhythmic repetition, spinning the listener into a feeling of revolutionary momentum.

“If I was astonished by the level of shame
 Feminine energy never shame again
 Reign, tamed
 Brain, praying
 Intuition and ambition running through my veins
 Pour up the love let the healing begin-”

c) Example C:

What I mean by non-linear narration (in the study of religion)

I use this last example to speak to those readers, skeptical as to how to incorporate this lyrical time perception/vibration in the scholastic, (“critical”) study of religion. For this purpose I examine an excerpt from *Method as Identity*. You will notice that this section, again, shifts codes and format. I do this deliberately to show the various formats non-linear wor(l)dmaking (or lyricism) can find its shape in. This particular section stood out to me due to its magnificent adoption of the metaphor of “white ghosts” that guides the authors in a onto-epistemological mapping of whiteness in the genealogy of the academic study of religion. Concluding their ghost-buster journey, the following excerpt functions as the climax point, at which they turn from mapping towards “excision/exorcism.”²³⁵ Haunting white ghosts in past, present, and future alike, they locate “the lifeline of their eternality”²³⁶ in “our inability to turn from the childish myths and fables housed in the ghosts of white mythology’s underlying logocentric metaphysics of presence.”²³⁷ To liberate the category of *being*, then, we (scholars of religion) *must* cut that lifeline that keeps us stuck in the eternal heaven/hell of white privilege.

They write:

“These ghosts of our history bear witness to what Walter Benjamin calls a ‘single catastrophe’ and our reliance on these ghosts see to it that we experience history only as that single catastrophe. Our intellectual forebears, these metaphysicians of whiteness,

235 Driscoll and Miller. *Method as Identity* (2018), 205.

236 Ibid., 205.

237 Ibid., 205.

turned tricks of identity-based substance, promising us the world if only for a minute of their time. It is indeed wonder-inspiring that, despite the histories of catastrophe that followed from the euphemistically labeled ‘Enlightenment,’ this faith in ghosts and gods-in the unseen suspended above and beyond time and space-manages to productively peddle and sell its Gospel of the Absolute values and ideals. In our reliance on these metaphysicians today, we remain charmed by phantom charlants who live on through our recursive citation and our overwhelming belief that somehow, their truths would not become our lies. At the risk of stating the obvious, we need no reminder that ghosts, for what they’re worth, are white as life before, after, and beyond the scandal of death. Such hauntings offer the ability to continue life after death, and to live life before one’s birth: and that is perhaps the magic of modernity’s metaphysics, more than the persistence of an attribute such as whiteness in the colorless ghost. Recall that the ghost, for the child, remains durably white amid a universe of possible colorations; whereas if the idea that any room for contestation, the imagination of a child would most certainly produce alternative ideas and constructions.

Amid these ghosts, we might begin again.”²³⁸

This section illustrates how both “critical” and experience based/phenomenological and psychoanalytic narration can find a place in the same space. By altering short, pregnant statements with longer lyrical lines, the authors jump between time continua, moving between the ghosts of the past to the metaphysicians of today, transcending the linearity of (one) life(time) by focusing on the continuity of life through death (in birth).

Whilst using "ghosts" as a compass, the passage itself gradually (not linearly) unpacks the metaphor itself, by applying it in what reads like process learning. This modus of narration epitomizes a form of knowledge making (and storytelling) that shows its critical ability to manufacture distances from the position of mutable "ghosts," rather than rigid "critical" identities and their "proper" narration formats. The richness of this one paragraph lets linear narration not just look confined, but also extremely slow and inefficient in its capacity to capture (religious and secular) experience and expressions on multiple levels simultaneously.

Cyclical Return

“There is one caveat, of course. One must trust black people to have lived deliberately in such a way that one understands that black cultural production, in all its many forms, does hold the potential to carry theoretical production,”²³⁹ writes Kristie Dotson in her wonderful article on “Radical Love.” What I hope to have pointed out in this chapter is some of the (much greater) potential *BFL* holds in carrying theoretical production. Even more so, I urge (white) scholars in the study of religion to do the work, to break through the limiting squareness the prevailing white hegemonic *culture of scholarship* tries to reduce itself to. I call this *squareness* for I have found squares to be exemplary in shape for the anti-organic pursuit to shape humankind away from bio-cultural diversity.²⁴⁰ Squares appear everywhere where buildings replace trees, where mental horizons meet the end of their reach and where the box to think out of becomes a fractioned glass (or green) house that has apparently led humankind to face environmental, as well as social, crises that have reached an almost satirical tragic valence and violence.

Having dissected the ways in which whiteness continues to uphold a system of squareness, I hope to have provoked thoughts concerning the discursive, as well as onto-epistemological patterns that continue to uphold patriarchal and white supremacist formats and standards within scholarship.

Niambi Sala, the other half of OSHUN, adds:

“The power of Ashe, the power of our words is, each and everyday, something we are constantly reminded of. Watching what we say, because it works both ways. We can speak sweetness and abundance and healing and joy and all this onto yourself and onto the world and watch it manifest, or you can speak doubt and fear and jealousy, frustration and destruction, unknowingly just put that out there. But when you put that out, that’s what you receive. I think remembering to speak power onto certain situations, onto myself and onto life, but also remembering not to speak destruction where I don’t want to see it.”²⁴¹

239 Kristie Dotson. “Radical Love.” *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 4 (2013): 40.

240 In 2015 I conducted an artistic experiment in which I took one week each to walk through city and nature scapes. I documented the squares and circles I encountered and found that whilst nature certainly produces many perfect circles, squares are hard to come across in this setting.

241 “OSHUN Interview: Spirit of the Suffragettes 2019.” (2019)

**THE CHAPTER OF
“THE BLACK SIMULTANEITY OF THE UNIVERSE”**



Reflection in the both/and space (*A Creative Contemplation*)

(How) can Black feminist *radical love* function as a discursive strategy (f shoreline thinking)

to narrate *self* \diamond *other* in the study of religion?

Can the revolutionary act of loving (or “m/othering”) serve as a monistic narration

practice in the study of religion? What good does it do?

“i realize my insignificance
 as important as yours
 and begin
 to love
 again.”²⁴²

Beginning to love again was the aim of this work.

The first layer, **the chapter of love and fire**, aims to set the stage. Introducing *radical love* as the bedrock of this work, I explore the discursive study of religion as a study of shoreline thinking. “Religion” as the study of the (savage) Other, as the meeting point/shoreline of two wor(l)ds (where rhetoric of discourse meets metaphysical arrangements), strikes me as the ideal place to explore *radical love* as “a transformative power” from.

In **the chapter of air and justice**, my aim was to explore and implode dualistic narration strategies. Busting “white ghosts” with *Method as Identity*, digging with Wynter to find *No Human Involved*, building on the detailed scrutiny of binaries, neutrality and hierarchies excavated by scholars of the secular, I hope to have unearthed various problems with a logic-of-the-One-that-is-not-Other. Finding justice on a scale that holds place only for two, can never create the balance necessary to account for human life in all its forms. Linking static notions of (white) person-, or subject-hood to a systematic supremacists neurosis of keeping the black Other at bay, I continued to ask myself whether a logic (and wor(l)dmaking strategy) that transcends personhood could be the only way to expunge the “white ghosts” hunting the study of religion (and Euro-American scholarship). In order to bring to light the arbitrary line drawing at stake, the linear-decay of natural bodies was put under critical examination.

Likewise questioning the stability of person-hood over time/space, in **the chapter of water and fish**, I look to *Black feminist lyricism* to learn about writing, loving and living with uncertainty and contradiction (in daily life experience). What would it take to realize a

242 brown. *Emergent Strategy* (2017), 92.

“possibility of wholeness,” I continued to ask. Following the (composite) monistic observation that one can never be outside itself, I came to conclude that the element of Oneness can never be defined by a fixed idea(l), that allows to exclude the “One” from becoming-with the Other. Learning with/from *Black m/othering* the dynamic process of radically co-shaping wor(l)ds “by any means necessary” (aka *radical love*), I hope to have spotlighted that in order to be human, to experience sincere and humble humanness, we need to acknowledge multiplicity within and between us. Cherishing change,

becoming aware that we are swarms of fish,
swimming
with, or against the current of
radical love.

radical love is read as the capacity to act with intention and responsibility for the fragile intra-connective network that transforms *self<>other* into “a flower garden, with every color flower represented”²⁴³. In order to radically *m/other*, one must tap into the realms beyond status, object-hood or achievement. By these means, entering into a monistic intra-action with the universe. With a much more radical approach to celebrating and caretaking of differences a practice is born that eradicates the anxiety-based reflex of hiding behind a (White Male) logic-of-the-One-that-is-not-(a black female)Other.

To answer to those who may question the practical implementation of such a practice in the discursive study of religion, **the green chapter** aims to ground the onto-epistemological examination of the prior chapters in the discursive practice provided in abundance by *Black feminist lyricism*.²⁴⁴ Learning how to find form(at) within an academic arena that holds limited space for them, in this chapter I hope to learn from those Black feminist lyricists brave enough to participate nonetheless. (the) Lorde’s *poetry is not a luxury* shows that to write wor(l)d-making in a particular format or modality (such as teleologically linear, or scientific) narrows it into the

243 think Alice Walker (Appendix B)

244 Due to the scope of the present thesis the examples are limited, but hope to be explored in future work.

confines of a particular angle, always already assigning privilege to those who inhabit and invented that angle. Writing *radical love* therefore becomes an “implementation of freedom,” cherishes contradiction and does not fear being irrational, emotional, embodied or confusing. To write for *radical love* does not entail writing for completion, for capital, for result, but writing with the body, for the process, for change, with change. Non-linear wor(l)d-making replaces the logic of teleological decay, for it does not need to hold on to “secure” points/grammars/modi if these serve to enable domination over all other kinds.

Radical love is relationality, it is the choice for to-gather-ness. Avoiding to carve personhood into static stone structures, capturing rigid patterns of subordination, a narrative practice emanates that refrains from presupposing the modalities (or formations) of subject-object-relationality. In the scholarly world of the study of religion, where comparative critiques define the hegemonic tools by which discourse is to adhere, I wonder if choosing to love, to m/other, to be partial (and proud of it), to write with the interest of nurturing otherness and selfness alike AND welcoming multiplicitous experience, can help us supersede the confinement of linear-binary thought?

I speak to myself as much as I speak to those of us who have benefited from the supremacy of this centralized mythoscientific system we call whiteness, when I say: We cannot afford exclusivity, normativity and laziness in the study of religion. Working with contradiction and multiplicity is a daily task in our field. Studying the category of “religion” as the (imaginary) shoreline between rational (self) and experiential/empirical (Other), we are always already sitting in a pool of difference, contradiction and uncertainty. “Showing up fully human,” unfinished, imperfect, adaptive, is a challenge the critical scholar of religion can no longer be pushed along. We must exorcise those spirits that keep us from confronting the negative image with have carved out in the Other. Seeing ourselves radically reflected and entangled in the vibrancy of the multitude and difference in which life shows up, needs to be the basis of studying (non-rational) meaning making.

This text is a means for me to exorcise the gooey white guilt that sticks to my body (and that of our discipline) that disconnects me (and us) from the *black feminist simultaneity of the universe*. The recent wave of the covid-19 virus has made the interwovenness of our existence blatantly visible. The difficulty to “socially distance,” to keep the virus from spreading, has made it inescapably visible that we always already rely on each other, if we want to or not. What has also become visible is the continued oppression that white supremacist power systems hold in place, when deciding whose human life is to be supported in such a moment of crisis. As we exorcise this virus, we exorcise the white ghosts that have infiltrated and held power over the unfolding of our existence, we recognize the power we have as a people to-gather(-ness). That we are not free, until the last one of us is free.

And this is where I draw hope. Because seeing so many people fight for each other, fight for to-gather-ness, fight for change, in spite of all the terror, made this thesis possible. This text is *both* an exorcism *and* a celebration. With you, I celebrate *radical love*. I celebrate the possibility of change. I celebrate the imperfection of my wor(l)ds. May they inspire you to intra-act, to change, to continue.

“let us counter fear with radical love and generosity
 healing our wombs with fierce care for ourselves
 going beyond binaries, birthing the revolution
 we follow the sun like sunflowers carrying our ancestors' wisdom.”²⁴⁵

“Circles in a circle, what’s the purpose?”²⁴⁶

some attempts at self-reflection

245 adrienne maree brown. “spells for radicals.” (online blog, 2017) accessed 4th June, 2020 via: <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2017/06/17/spells-for-radicals/>

246 Yugen Blakrok. “Gorgon Madonna.” *Anima Mysterium* (Johannesburg: Cyliid Sarl DBA I.O.T Records, 2019.) accessed 15th October, 2020.

I think back to presenting a paper on radical intra-connectedness in the (material-) discursive study of religion at the annual meeting of the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) 2019. Whilst the (mostly white) audience found it easy to resonate with my proposal that the categories of matter<>discourse (just like *self*<>*Other*) be as inseparable as ketchup and mayo (once mixed), the majority of feedback appeared to assure me that although the idea was not new to them, the execution would be impossible. Impossible because there had not been (academic) examples enough; impossible because the academic standard dictates a certain format of discourse; impossible because it would be too complex, too new, too different. I kept thinking about all of these claims, because it made me wonder:

- What does it say about our discipline, when the fear of difference, innovation and complexity inhibit adaptation?
- What does it mean for the academic study of religion, when such (white) standards dictate our form(at)s of discourse?

That there may be a lack of examples is simply not true. And even if it were so, I hope that this thesis has shown that the assumption of such a lack should be scrutinized and critically reflected upon, rather than taken as an excuse to look away. “God is change!”

There are millions of things that I would change about this work (as, of course, I change alongside the work every time I meet it again). In the final steps, I find myself incapable of finishing this work, because I am scared of failure. I recognize in myself the need to please (my supervisors, those beloved people I write about, the voices in my head). I recognize a longing to fulfill and excel the academic requirements for a thesis like this one. Yet, the paradox of this longing alongside my radical intent to reform and restructure continues to create tight feelings in my chest. Questions circle through my mind: What makes my particular standpoint useful for this paper? What are my intentions? Is my need to please societal expectations, am I trying to cope with my own guilt at the cost of other people’s achievements? How does my European

upbringing entitle me to write about a cultural system not fully my own? What would I know about the lived experience of Black women (in the US)?

Asking these questions is painful and facing my answers is hard. Yet, I believe that precisely this reflection is my undoing. Continuing to love myself and my process enough to continue, I extend my apologies to all those that my words may have harmed or offended in the process of doing so.

I am here to learn and to change. I am here, because I believe in *radical love*. I believe that Black women have mothered (Black) life, mothered (civil rights) movements, mothered soul and jazz music, mothered church, mothered homes, mothered streets, mothered white women's babies and have still been left to fight for themselves. I believe that, however imperfect, it is time for us to mother back, to fight for all our voices to be heard and to be nurtured and celebrated. In difference, with difference.

Before I finish, I want to say that I believe that the wor(l)ds I have presented here are filled with discrepancy, ignorance and wishful thinking. Although I criticize the *hegemonic culture of scholarship*, this text clearly replicates research formats dictated by the very same system it aims to excoriate. I believe that the issue at hand is larger than a reform(ul)ation of discursive styles or genres in the academic study (of religion) could ever discern. However, I believe it to be a good place to start, because I believe in the incredible versatile discourse being held around method and theory in our field. Yet, the implications of dismantling white personhood must seep through all layers of society, culture and human togetherness and must start with myself. Such radical reformations of meeting the wor(l)d are hard to implement from within one body alone, but they must begin there. I believe that this change will have to happen continuously and across all dimensions and cannot be accomplished by writing this paper. I believe that my privileged position blinds me from truly understanding the ramifications of my argument on all levels. It makes me wonder how far I can really circumvent the danger of taking on the role of a caretaker of those I try to learn from.

A copy machine, printing their (Black) words on white paper, multiply them, for my own good?
 In how far can I really speak with or along anOther, when all you read here is written by One?
 Is the romantic idea of “one unitary whole” yet another way of creating an outside to that whole?
 Does the world really need to hear MY voice? How do I know if what is created, is created from
 a place of *radical love*?

I believe that the expectation of this text exceeded my capacities, because I know myself to
 dream bigger than I can fathom. Yet I believe that I have to dream bigger and I have to try harder
 to *radically love* ourselves enough to admit my faults and learn from them, too.

With this I leave you as abruptly as I began: in the midst of the process, in the midst of life, in
 the midst of learning to believe in *love radically*.

Chanting with Assata Shakur, I conclude:

“I believe in living.

I believe in birth.

I believe in the sweat of love

and in the fire of truth.

And I believe that a lost ship,
 steered by tired, seasick sailors,
 can still be guided home
 to port.”²⁴⁷

247 Assata Shakur. “Affirmation.” *Assata: An Autobiography*. (London: Zed Books, 1987), 1.

CLOSING CEREMONY
Optional Radical Love Mantra Exercise²⁴⁸:
for reaching a radical Wor(l)d-Making Mindset

Last but not least, I want to thank you for coming, for staying with me and this text. It means a lot! In order to give space to our bodies to digest the many abstract twists and turns we did today, I invite you to a short breathing exercise with me that I practice occasionally to ground myself in writing. This exercise is optional. If you choose to stay, you may follow the subsequent instructions or choose your own variations.

- **Find a comfortable position**
- **Gently close your eyes**
- **3x Breathe in as deep as you can and let out all the air**
- **Open your eyes (in between mantra or meanwhile to remember it)**
- **9x Repeat the mantra**
- **Start off with a volume that is almost only audible to yourself**
- **Increase every round**

1)

“What we need right now is a radical, global love that grows from deep within us to encompass all life.”²⁴⁹

2)

“radically loving each other
 is the only everything
 worth anything”²⁵⁰

248 This Exercise is a tribute to the *Black Feminist Breathing Chorus* shared with the world by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Sangodare Wallace.

249 adrienne maree brown, “Love as Political Resistance”, 2017.

250 Monet, *My Mother was a Freedom Fighter* (2017), 96.

3)
 “Sun
 make me whole again
 to love”²⁵¹

- **Close your eyes again and try to feel into your body.**
- **I want you to think about (if and) where in your body you feel the light of love.**
- **Try to picture yourself in that place.**
- **Open your eyes and open your wor(l)d-making device (notebook, canvas, microphone, camera)**
- **Ask yourself:**

Is what is (to be) created, created with the intention of weaving love into the world?

Is what is (to be) created, created with the intention of weaving love into the world?

Is what is (to be) created, created with the intention of weaving love into the world?

Is what is (to be) created, created with the intention of weaving love into the world?

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Is what is (to be) created, created with the intention of weaving love into the world?

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“I thank everybody in this book for coming”
(Alice Walker, 1982, *The Color Purple*)

I owe my deep felt gratitude & love for

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the Venus Warriors > for guidance
Octopi > for shape-shifting in and out of my life,
Douwe > for loving and celebrating me every day,
“despite all the smart stuff I say,”

my parents
& grandparents > for teaching and bathing me in love, support, care and independence,
my sister-self > for being the other (self), I cannot be,
my sister-Forrest > for always helping me see the trees
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for being the lemon to my tree

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“When you feel like drowning
remember
you are a fish”

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the great (dark) mother for teaching me how to love beyond,

for Lilith
for Medusa
for Oya

you for coming,

Somos amor,
Sophia

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Appendix A
“Listen Children” by Lucille Clifton

listen children

keep this in the place

you have for keeping

always

keep it all ways

we have never hated black

listen

we have been ashamed

hopeless tired mad

but always

all ways

we loved us

we have always loved each other

children all ways

pass it on

Appendix B

Full excerpt of the opening pages (xi-xii) of Alice Walker's *In Search of our Mother's Garden*, 1984.

- Womanist** 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

Appendix C**“Calling on All Silent Minorities” by June Jordan****from *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, 2005.**

HEY

C'MON

COME OUT

WHEREVER YOU ARE

WE NEED TO HAVE THIS MEETING

AT THIS TREE

AIN' EVEN BEEN

PLANTED

YET

Appendix D

“Poetry Is Not a Luxury” by Audre Lorde
 from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 1984.

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, "Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of weakness" and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

When we view living, in the European mode, only as a problem to be solved, we then rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious.

But as we become more in touch with our own ancient, black, non-European view of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes.

At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches as keystone for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean — in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known and accepted to ourselves, our feelings, and the honest exploration of

them, become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas, the house of difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have once found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but the true meaning of "it feels right to me." We can train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.

Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is also not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy. We can sometimes work long and hard to establish one beachhead of real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live, only to have that beachhead assaulted or threatened by canards we have been socialized to fear, or by the withdrawal of those approvals that we have been warned to seek for safety. We see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of non-universality, of self-centeredness, of sensuality. And who asks the question: am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? (Even the latter is no mean task, but one that must be rather seen within the context of a true alteration of the texture of our lives.)

The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us—the poetwhispers

in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. However, experience has taught us that the action in the now is also always necessary. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours? Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves, along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions our dreams imply and some of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accord with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

For within structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were meant to kneel to thought as we were meant to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They lie in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare.

If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is a luxury, then we have given up the core-the fountain-of our power, our womanness; we have give up the future of our worlds.

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean (feel like) on Sunday morning at 7 AM, after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth; while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while tasting our new possibilities and strengths.