

QUEER AND FEMINIST: SOR JUANA AND AUDRE LORDE QUEERING  
INCLUSIVITY

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By

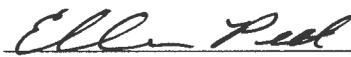
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Queer and Feminist: Sor Juana and Audre Lorde Queering Inclusivity* by Ashley Kathleen Kimura, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in Comparative and World Literature at San Francisco State University.



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QUEER AND FEMINIST: SOR JUANA AND AUDRE LORDE QUEERING  
INCLUSIVITY

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This thesis focuses on the Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648/51-1695) and the American writer Audre Lorde (1934-1992). It examines their similarities and differences in the context of their critical work and poetry. In doing so, I will use each of their critical works to examine their own respective poetry and each other's. This kind of self and other comparison illuminates how each of them fought for marginalized peoples' rights. For Sor Juana, these marginalized people were women in colonial Mexico. In addition to asserting women's rights to superior education, Sor Juana wanted women's education and intelligence to be valued in her socio-political climate as equal to men's. For Lorde, these marginalized folks were lesbians and people of color, particularly Black women and Black people facing oppression. Lorde used her poetry to examine and critique her current political climate and a eurocentric, heterosexist society. Although occupying radically different spaces in time, each woman used her writing voice via poetry and critical texts to critique a patriarchal society which devalued women's voices and intelligence.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

Elle Paul

Thesis Committee

Apr. 25, 2018

Date

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*“To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin’s blister?” (Zami 3).* I would like to thank the many loved ones I have in my life who have always supported my path toward and through education. I would like to thank my thesis committee who have supported and encouraged my work and the direction I wanted to take with this text. Thank you to my mom and my sisters: I would not be the person I am today without your constant love and empowering examples of strong women. Thank you to the many women in my life who have served as powerful role models: my friends, my family. This thesis is dedicated to queer folx, to trans folx, to people of color, to the marginalized: we are important and deserve a voice and place in larger narratives.

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Feminism, Queerness, and Queer Temporality: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Audre Lorde  
as Feminists and Queer Figures

How do we define and engage with queerness? with those who exist on the peripheries, the not-quite, the indefinable? With growing queer visibility, this thesis will situate Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Audre Lorde as queer literary figures who demonstrate queerness through existing in queer temporality and through queer sexuality. These women defied social and political expectations of their bodies and, in having done so, exist today as canonical writers and political figures; the chances they took with their writing position them as forerunners of the multifaceted way we define the feminist movement. This thesis will argue that these authors used writing to maneuver around heteronormative expectations and advocate for marginalized bodies disenfranchised by patriarchal structures.

Comparing two seemingly unlike authors, this thesis will situate both authors as feminists, queer figures, and women who exist in queer temporality. Their positioning in queer temporality is evident through the voluntary actions each author took to remove herself from heteronormative, linear temporality and its expectations of marriage and bearing children. Understanding queer temporality as that which exists outside of heteronormative expectations is crucial, for it implies a sense of agency each author understood and used to make a life not dictated by social expectations of women's bodies. The central questions I aim to answer in this thesis are: How do we recognize queerness in these authors' lives *through* their writing? Why is their past queerness important to recognize? and what does it do for present and future queer bodies? How can we expand our

vocabulary and historical references to understand feminism as more encompassing of other bodies?

I argue that by analyzing both authors' writings, we can begin to answer these questions and find new ways to bridge them together across centuries and societies. More specifically, we can use queerness as that bridge; each author used notions of queerness and her existence in queer time to subvert socially normative expectations about marginalized people's place in society. Whereas Sor Juana wrote to advance women's rights to education in colonial Mexico, Lorde wrote to advance Black, lesbian, and women's lives during socially and politically hostile times in the United States. Yet both authors wrote to advocate for those who did not have a voice; their relevance and recognition today show their success in doing so.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born in 1648/51<sup>1</sup> in San Miguel de Nepantla, Mexico and died in 1695 while caring for her fellow nuns during an "epidemic" akin to a plague (Arenal and Powell 14). Although her life was without her biological father, a patriarchal figure was replaced by her maternal grandfather who fostered her love of and devotion to education and the intellect. As a young child, she showed exemplary willingness to learn. She devoted her childhood to reading and learning, so much so that she begged her mother to dress her as a boy and send her to Mexico City to study (Peden 7). She gained fame into her young adulthood from rumors and, then, actual manifestation of her genius through a

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<sup>1</sup> Several sources indicate this two-year disparity in when Sor Juana could have been born.

questioning in front of Spanish royalty. Well into her nunhood, Sor Juana was a famous figure of scholarly pursuit.

Reading and reviewing Sor Juana's many works, there is no doubt of her intelligence. However, having her writings as historical documentation of her genius would not be possible had she not entered the convent. It was there that she maintained solitude to read and write. It was also in the convent that she formed relationships with other nuns and was able to spread her genius; Sor Juana was a popular figure both inside and outside of the Catholic church. Although scholars could speculate as to what her legacy would be without her move to the convent, it is more productive to analyze what that move means for existing in queer time. Sor Juana herself cites her "total antipathy...for marriage" as a justification for joining the convent (Peden 9). Combining this notion with her love of learning provides contemporary scholarship a "practical" reason for her move. Yet, I argue that her move into the convent is also a queer temporal move, in that it necessarily removed her from the impending heteronormative temporal trajectories into marriage and childbearing. Today, she is considered an early feminist for her bold decisions in both her life choices and her writings.

Audre Lorde was born on February 18th, 1934 in Harlem, New York and died on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1992 from liver cancer. Lorde used writing from her childhood to her deathbed to express her recognitions of social injustice, her deepest secrets, and every part of her life in between. Born to immigrant parents, Lorde considered herself a social outsider. Her childhood and emergence into adulthood are detailed in her "biomythography," *Zami: A*

*New Spelling of My Name*. This text subverts genre conventions as Lorde relies on prose, poetry, and parts of an imagined past to narrate her life. As stated by Alexis de Veaux in her biography of Lorde, “What is known about Audre’s childhood comes chiefly from Audre herself. Filtered through highly stylized, literary imagination, certain ‘facts’ and ‘events’ are played, replayed, and edited in the corpus of her work, published interviews, and literary memory” (13). Although Lorde’s work is well-known within feminist and race discourses, she defined herself first and foremost as a poet (Bereano 7). In both poetry and prose, and the combination of the two as in *Zami*, Lorde’s writing conveys a range of emotions meant to elicit action in her readers. Her use of several mediums offers current scholars a multifaceted look into her queer recognition of possibility for change by responding to racial injustice, homophobia, and heteropatriarchal sociopolitical conditions.

Here I want to define how I will use both “feminism” and “queer.” In keeping with our current political conversation<sup>2</sup> surrounding feminism, I will discuss feminism within the context of intersectionality. The term “intersectionality” would not be possible without Kimberlé Crenshaw’s coinage of the term in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” She defines intersectionality as: “My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245).

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<sup>2</sup> By the time this thesis was written, our socio-political awareness has allowed some of us to differentiate nuances of how particular people advocate for feminism: specifically the difference between “white feminism” and “intersectional feminism.” When I discuss feminism, I take an intersectional approach.

When I refer to intersectionality, or an intersectional approach to feminism, I want to signify the recognition of these “multiple grounds of identity.” Using intersectionality allows us to recognize many facets of an individual’s existence in the advocacy for feminism.

I define feminism, then, as that which encourages, advocates, and emphasizes egalitarian access to social, political, and economic rights and advantages. This model of feminism does not disavow difference, but instead recognizes that these social, political, and economic rights and advantages are readily given to privileged, normative bodies: heterosexual, cisgender, white men. Understanding this concept of feminism through an intersectional lens does not use a heterosexual, cisgender, white woman as a counterpart to the privileged, normative body. Instead, using intersectionality asks us to reconsider what normative looks like, and how it is used as an orientation point when striving for these social, political, and economic rights. Using intersectionality asks us to recognize the difference in our experiences and asks us to be more inclusive of race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and disability. With this in mind, I will use both feminism and intersectionality to analyze Sor Juana and Lorde’s texts. I will portray the ways both authors advocate for women and how, more specifically, Lorde’s texts emphasize a need for intersectionality.

Now, I will define how I will use “queer” and “queerness” as a way to bridge Sor Juana with Audre Lorde across three centuries. I define my use of “queer” in two specific ways. Firstly, “queer” will be used as an adjective and is defined as *different from a* (hetero)normative, patriarchal, consideration of gender and sexuality. Secondly, “queer” will be used as a verb. Within this context, “to queer” something is to alter or subvert

heteronormative and patriarchal norms. These terms will be used to describe and analyze both authors, and their writings, as a means to show their subversion of the normative roles each was expected to fulfill as women. Highlighting similarities between the two using not only their own critical works and poetry, but queer theory's critical work, will illuminate how both authors were queer, and how they queered social expectations.

Moreover, both authors saw potential in subversion; this potential was their catalyst to write for future changes, for subversion would not affect that which is stagnant and incapable of change. Although each author is recognized today as a feminist, I move to argue that each should also be recognized as queer figures who used her agency and writing as tools to advocate for *potentiality* for future change. As stated by José Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, "Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a *potentiality* is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, *a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense*" (9, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> It is from this definition of queerness that I ground my above definitions: that as both adjective and verb, these authors recognized that which did not exist in their (and, arguably, our) present tense (marginalized bodies' access to rights allotted to privileged bodies) and used writing to alter these unfair conditions. Although both authors did not see marginalized access to privileges in their present tense, they did see the potential to change it. Both authors recognized the "eminent" necessity to change, to queer, social expectations of gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies. The

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, when I use the terms "potential," "potentiality," and "possibility" I refer to Muñoz's definitions: the latter as "a thing that simply might happen."

“nonbeing” exists as an elevated potential; these authors understood their ability to incite change through writing—through the “thing that is present” and the actualization of that change is that thing that “[does] not actually [exist] in the present tense.”

More specifically, then, both authors understood their ability to use potentiality to advocate for future changes. Using queerness means recognizing the potential and malleability of that which we consider to be concrete, such as social positions and constructions of identity. Considering a person or action as queer makes space for the potential, that which has the ability to be challenged, such as gendered and racialized social positions. Muñoz again furthers this consideration of queer by stating in his introduction: “Queerness is not yet here...We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). Highlighting potentiality as a characteristic of queer identities, theory, and action allows us to consider how this positionality relates to both Sor Juana and Lorde. Since each used her own writing voice to subvert what were considered normative standards for women (of color), each also saw potentiality at their writing’s horizons.<sup>4</sup>

Their recognition of potentiality, then, not only provides us with textual examples of queerness, but of queer time more specifically. Although not all feminist texts or authors exist in queer time, these authors do for their refusal of heteronormative trajectories in their

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<sup>4</sup> Therefore, with this idea of potentiality in mind, I will not use Octavio Paz’s extensive work on Sor Juana in my thesis because of his own refusal of queer potentiality.

texts and lives. Sara Ahmed<sup>5</sup> discusses queerness through both spatiality and temporality in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. She introduces this concept through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of sexuality in his *Phenomenology of Perceptions*, and that spatial existence determines boundaries and orientations. Ahmed, however, states:

If we presume that sexuality is crucial to bodily orientation, to how we inhabit spaces, then the differences between how we are orientated sexually are not only a matter of “which” objects we are orientated toward, *but also how we extend through our bodies into the world*. Sexuality would not be seen as determined only by object choice, but as involving differences in one's very relation to the world--*that is, in how one “faces” the world or is directed toward it*. Or rather, we could say that orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such as different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, *means inhabiting different worlds*. (67-68, emphasis added)

Using this analysis, I argue that existing in queer time is determined by the decisions we make. I also want to add to Ahmed's assertion by recognizing queerness as not solely related to sexuality. In this case, by recognizing *and* advocating for bettering lives of the marginalized, Sor Juana and Lorde used writing to “extend through [their] bodies.” Each author's individual experience positioned her differently toward social pillars of systemic oppression; each saw in the world different possibilities than what was expected. I argue that both authors' understanding of potentiality, paired with their queer sexuality, situate them in

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<sup>5</sup> Although the notion of queer temporality has extensively been written on, it was first coined by Jack (Judith) Halberstam in *In a Queer Time and Place*. I do reference Halberstam on a few occasions, but will mostly use Sara Ahmed's approach for her conflation of time and space.

queer time, in “different worlds.” In this case, Sor Juana and Lorde’s writing and queer, sexual desires show how they refused heteronormative, linear temporality.

Considering those who exist outside of social expectations, then, allows us to recognize those who exist outside of heteronormative temporality. In other words, to understand queer temporality, we need to consider time more broadly. Even though time can be viewed in a linear fashion, queer theory reconsiders these notions to view temporality *as subject to its occupant*. In this case, linear temporality exists as a heteronormative notion in which a subject moves through time with expectations of marriage, reproduction, and continuing a family line. The reproduced, then, also continue this linear temporal trajectory and produce their own familial lines. However, if we consider temporality as queer, we can view the ways people are both forced to, and voluntarily, exist outside of, this linearity. The motivations behind this existence can vary, but understanding existence within temporality as choice-driven aids consideration of these authors as existing outside of heteronormative linearity.

Both Sor Juana and Lorde, then, used their own agency to resist a heteronormative linearity and expectations of their gendered bodies. In Sor Juana’s case, her move to join the convent and her motivations to do so represent this choice-driven aspect to existing in queer temporality. To devote oneself to the Catholic church *as a means* to escape heteronormative social expectations of marriage and childbearing and pursue scholarly interests positions Sor Juana as outside of heteronormative, linear temporality. Indeed, “...in her time only the convent offered a woman an opportunity to pursue an intellectual life” (Peden 9). Her desire

to learn was greater than her desire to be a wife and a mother. Writing of society's expectation of heterosexuality, Ahmed states: "This enforcement does not mean that women are 'victims' of heterosexuality...rather it means that to become a subject under the law one is made subject to the law that decides what forms lives must take in order to count as lives 'worth living.' To be subjected is in this way to 'become straight,' to be brought under the rule of law" (84). In this context, Sor Juana's move to the convent necessarily made her not "straight," not heteronormative, not heterosexual. Even though nuns' occupancy of the convent conventionally signifies marriage to Christ, I argue that Sor Juana's occupancy signified her refusal of marriage to men. Instead, she used the convent as a means to escape actual marriage and replace it with a figurative one to education.

Unlike Sor Juana, however, Lorde did want to have children and was married. Often left out of academic conversations surrounding Lorde's life, including her own biomythography, is Lorde's marriage to Edwin Rollins. Even though seemingly contradictory, Lorde still identified as a lesbian before, during, and after her marriage to Rollins. This move in between heteronormative spaces positions Lorde in a queer space outside of heteronormative temporal linearity. Whereas heteronormative temporal linearity would position a cisgender man and woman together in marriage with the expectation of childbearing and continuing familial lineage, Lorde and Rollins queered this institution. Both identified as gay and entered their marriage with the expectation of raising their children with a reconsideration of the family model (de Veaux 74). Their decision queered the very

institution of marriage as existing for heterosexual ends, decades before gay marriage was legalized in the United States.

Both Sor Juana and Lorde existed outside of heteronormative temporal linearity in their own unique manners specific to their historical time periods. These positionings in queer spaces represent not only certain agency each author had in her own time but risks each took to fulfill her own sense of identity and position in society. By consciously stepping outside of heteronormative-dictated temporality, these authors wielded their senses of agency and often stood on the peripheries of social expectations. In his book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, Jack (“Judith” in the works cited) Halberstam describes “queer subculture” as those who use agency to occupy time differently. Halberstam states: “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience--namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Both Sor Juana and Lorde viewed their futures in terms outside of the heteronormative expectations Halberstam mentions. Producing “alternative temporalities,” both authors believed that their future, and their readers’ futures, could exist outside of these rigid expectations for women.

Although I aim to add to an expanding archive of each author, I also recognize that it is crucial to do so through already-existing archives. In this sense, this thesis will address critical works and poetry by each author. These works are famous not only within their own academic discourses, but within literature as a whole. Even though each author wrote outside of these mediums, using these critical texts provides a more holistic consideration of

them. I consider these critical texts as resources to fill in and expand on what their poetry leaves out. Moreover, these critical texts illustrate each author's personal, political, and social motivation behind the poetry I will discuss in the following chapters. Furthermore, I will refer to scholars who imagine and reimagine Sor Juana as a lesbian and feminist figure to add to her own expanding archive. Indeed, Sor Juana's *La Respuesta* and the essays from Lorde's *Sister Outsider* provide readers with more nuanced and concretized representations of their personalities and the structures each fought against.

“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”: Feminist and Queer  
Outsiders Speaking to Oppressive Silences

This chapter will discuss Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Audre Lorde’s critical texts: *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (referred to as *La Respuesta* hereafter) and *Sister Outsider*, respectively. Many writers and scholars<sup>6</sup> consider these texts early representations of feminist ideologies through their advocacy of women’s rights, and as early examples of queer movements: Sor Juana’s for her early advocacy of women’s right to education and Lorde’s for her advocacy of queer women and women of color. Indeed, these women paved the way for feminist and queer education and thought. Even though both authors wrote extensively, I chose each of these texts for their contribution to feminist, queer and intersectional ideologies and their wide use in academia.

These texts have a similar message: advancement of marginalized people within oppressive social structures. Separated by centuries, both Sor Juana and Audre Lorde pursued similar goals they thought could be achieved through writing. Their messages still retain significance today through our current social battles: through feminism, through Black Lives Matter, through the growing recognition of bodies outside of a gender binary. Their texts are examples of both the progress we have made and the progress we have yet to fulfill.

Even though only Sor Juana’s critical work, *La Respuesta*, translates to “The Answer” in English, I believe both authors’ critical texts provide answers for their readers. Just as Sor

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<sup>6</sup> The feminist ideologies of both authors have been extensively researched, and Lorde identified herself as a feminist. For more information about Sor Juana as an early feminist, refer to Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Catrióna Esquibel, and Stephanie Merrim.

Juana's letter replies to a letter addressed to her, Lorde's critical works from *Sister Outsider*<sup>7</sup> answer questions of injustice during her writing career. Both authors use critical works to advance social justice causes such as feminist ideologies to their readers. This advancement and advocacy position both authors in queer time by illuminating potentiality, as defined in the previous chapter. Their existence in this outside space not only bridges both authors together across centuries, but exemplifies how each used her "outsider" characteristics to fight for inclusivity and social justice.

Often lauded as a feminist text, Sor Juana's *La Respuesta* rallies readers for women's rights to improved education in colonial Mexico. This letter directly responds to a letter from Bishop Manuel Fernandez de Santa Cruz (*Carta Atenagórica*)<sup>8</sup> who signed his letter "Sor Filotea de la Cruz." Penning *Carta Atenagórica* as a fictional fellow nun allowed the letter to critique Sor Juana's actions as not directly benefiting the Church<sup>9</sup>. Sor Juana's letter uses genre conventions of her time, such as humbling language (or, "false humility"), to linguistically retaliate against the Bishop and defend women's rights to knowledge. She

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<sup>7</sup> Although *Sister Outsider* contains 15 texts (essays, speeches, and one interview with Adrienne Rich), the ones I will focus on in this chapter and the ones that follow are: "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", and "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."

<sup>8</sup> *Carta Atenagórica* was the original letter written to Sor Juana to chastise her for her perpetual devotion to learning as she gained popularity in both Mexico and Spain. The letter was written by her former confessor, Both this letter and *La Respuesta* were published and not meant for secretive reading. For more context, consider this excerpt from *Plotting Women*: "The publication of the *Carta Atenagórica* proved to Sor Juana (if any proof were needed) that there was no private space, nowhere outside the domain of discourse of the church and the court. To write was to write within an institution. The only possible response was parody and mimicry" (43).

<sup>9</sup> "In order to soften his criticism the Bishop signed the letter 'Sor Filotea de la Cruz', as though the writer were a sister nun instead of a powerful cleric, though the real identity of the author was widely known" (Scott 32).

invokes these genre conventions to simultaneously showcase her own intelligence and seemingly present her own humility. This linguistic and rhetorical move in her writing demonstrates her awareness of gendered prejudices against her as both a nun and a woman to justify women's access to knowledge for reasons other than benefiting social structures, like the Church. Sor Juana defends women's rights to education as well as describes her own maneuvers to access education by moving to the convent. Stating that the convent was a place for her to not only access education, but avoid marriage and childbearing, illustrates her position as an early, queer, scholarly figure. Physically leaving heteronormative expectations through the Church shows her early feminist practices.

Lorde's collection of writing also responds. Unlike Sor Juana's work responding to a particular letter, Lorde's work responds to larger structural issues that oppress marginalized groups. Not addressing a particular person, Lorde's work captivated a multitude of readers to help them recognize injustices faced from white supremacy and its intersections with sexism and homophobia. Lorde did not have to write within particular, acceptable, genre conventions as Sor Juana did. Rather, Lorde's writing is poetic in her own right as she manipulates language to demonstrate linguistic injustices. One of these linguistic moves is her adherence to and disavowal of capitalization. When discussing ethnicity, Lorde always capitalizes the word "Black" and leaves "european" and "white" lowercased. In doing so, she acknowledges language's power and refuses the racialized hierarchy society pushes onto its members.

Each critical work critiques injustices against women in each author's respective society. Even though separated by centuries, each of these women demonstrated her intelligence in the battle against oppressive patriarchal structures. Both women fought for the future in the hopes that there would be more opportunities and less struggle for women.

### Feminism and Queer(ing)

Sor Juana's *La Respuesta* is often hailed as an early representation of a feminist text, when we use current definitions of feminism. Comparing her text to Lorde's essays more thoroughly shows Sor Juana's early representations of current feminist ideologies. Since we have built definitions of feminism over decades, many connect these definitions to figures in first- and second-wave feminism such as Susan B. Anthony and Gloria Steinem. Using ideologies of first- and second-wave feminist movements will situate readers within a familiar framework, but positioning these texts in both an intersectional and queer lens will situate readers outside of this framework. As mentioned by Lorde in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (referred to as "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" hereafter), the necessity to move away from blanketing collectivity becomes more evident as we recognize and celebrate our differences: "There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116). Both Lorde and Sor Juana, in their own ways, recognize the necessity to both acknowledge and critically use differences within gender and within race.

First, I will discuss how both critical texts exemplify notions of feminism. Recalling my definition of feminism in the previous chapter, we can position Sor Juana's ideologies as more akin to first-wave feminism (that which focuses on white women's access to socio-political equality through larger institutional structures such as voting and education) and Lorde's ideologies as more akin to intersectional feminism (that which focuses on multiple components of one's identity and how those components face oppression on a daily basis through institutional structures such as voting and education). In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," Lorde tells her readers: "As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become 'other,' the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (117). Here, Lorde demonstrates early recognitions of intersectionality by illustrating the disparity of privilege between women of different races. Considering this quote as following the preceding quote concerning "sisterhood," Lorde's writing asks women to understand their varying social positions and the consequent detriment of using terms like "sisterhood" to imply a false collectivity. Lorde wants her readers to acknowledge and value women of color *as* women of color, as bodies that face different structures of oppression than white women do.

In many ways Lorde critiques women like Sor Juana who base their idea of gendered oppression in gender alone. Even though our concepts of feminism and intersectionality were not present during Sor Juana's lifetime, I argue that her critical work uses notions of first-wave feminism (as previously mentioned) to position readers in proximity to her own

gendered struggle against an institutional structure, namely the Catholic church. In this way, rather than mentioning concepts of class, race, or inherent privilege, Sor Juana instead used her gendered body to advocate for other women's rights in *La Respuesta*. Early in her text, she tells the Bishop:

Pues ¿como me atreviera yo a tomarlo en mis indignas manos, repugnándolo el sexo, la edad y sobre todo las costumbres? Y así confieso que muchas veces este temor me ha quitado la pluma de la mano y ha hecho retroceder los asuntos hacia el mismo entendimiento de quien querían brotar; el cual inconveniente no topaba en los asuntos profanos, pues una herejía contra el arte no la castiga el Santo Oficio, sino los discretos con risa y los críticos con censura... [Then how should I dare take these up in my unworthy hands, when sex, and age, and above all our customs oppose it? And thus I confess that often this very fear has snatched the pen from my hand and has made the subject matter retreat back toward that intellect from which it wished to flow; an impediment I did not stumble across with profane subjects, for a heresy against art is not punished by the Holy Office but rather by wits with their laughter and critics with their censure]. (44 and 45)<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, Sor Juana cites the impossibility of her response since her own oppressive structures (the Catholic church) refuse recognition of her gendered voice. She describes her body as “unworthy” (“indignas manos”), thereby recognizing her gendered position in

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<sup>10</sup> All parenthetical citations for excerpts from *La Respuesta* reflect the Spanish text first and the English translation following.

society as also “unworthy.” She also recognizes that her response to Sor Filotea’s letter is not one necessarily punishable as those against “profane subjects” (“asuntos profanos”). Indeed, her understanding that her punishment will be more severe than that against a more privileged body, a man’s body, instills fear and stalls her writing (“este temor me ha quitado la pluma de la mano y ha hecho retroceder los asuntos hacia el mismo entendimiento de quien querían brotar”). Lacking the intersectional approach Lorde uses, Sor Juana uses her gendered body as a site of collectivity for her women readers.

Within this context, we can now examine how each communicated her feminist ideologies through the liberating medium of writing. Sor Juana could not express possibilities for gendered liberation as explicitly as Lorde could; rather, she had to veil her early feminism in formal language to address others, especially her superiors. Within these writing conventions, Sor Juana was able to populate her writing with subtle jabs at those in power. As Arnell and Powell state in their introduction to Sor Juana’s text, “Letter, legal defense, treatise, and autobiographical essay, the *Answer* displays traditional learning and demonstrates the need for freedom of experimentation and opinion. For educated readers of the time, Sor Juana’s methods were familiar, but her message was pioneering; for us, only the message is familiar” (19). Arnell and Powell point to these same concepts previously discussed: that her writing’s message resonates with present-day readers because of its similarity to feminist ideologies. However, *La Respuesta* was not radical solely for its expression of these ideologies, but through the way its author used the knowledge she obtained through the Church against them.

Unlike Sor Juana, Lorde did not have to formally, or politely, address her readers. Whereas Sor Juana used her gendered body and mind as a site of collectivity, Lorde used her intersectional body to fill her writing with a message to recognize and celebrate our differences. Lorde positions her readers to consider ways to bridge across our differences of race, gender, and sexuality, and use them to dismantle social oppression. Understanding that there existed social superiors who maintained power over the marginalized, she sought to teach others that the discrepancies between the privileged and the marginalized created and maintained a division in which the ability to coordinate seemed almost impossible. Similarly to Sor Juana, Lorde states of writing:

Recently, a women's magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less "rigorous" or "serious" art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue...As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. ("Age, Race, Class, and Sex" 116)

Whereas Sor Juana's previous excerpt emphasizes her gendered intellectual oppression, Lorde elaborates on intersectional oppression. If we consider Sor Juana's above excerpt as stating that her gendered body did not readily allow written opposition to social structures, Lorde states that her multiple differences from social norms connect to how her writing is also met with opposition. Lorde describes oppression that stems from social roles of gender, race, and class and restricts particular forms of expression. Not feeling Sor Juana's fear, but

anger, Lorde asks for reclamation through writing which allows women of color to readily express their own anger. Lorde asks readers, rather than to continue to consider difference as deviant, to consider the way difference has been used to create division and privilege.

As suggested by the title of Lorde's collection, *Sister Outsider* portrays her understanding and legitimizing of herself as a social outsider. From a young age, Lorde felt as though she existed outside of her family's normative ideologies and expectations for their daughters: "To her parents, especially her mother, Audre was 'wildish'...She was not like them...Compared to them, she was not their kind of Lorde, and they demanded she 'straighten up and act right'" (de Veaux 18). Despite intense sentiments of existing as a disappointment, Lorde used her outsider status as a resource of empowerment for her writing and activism. As she states in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex,": "As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an inter-racial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong" (114). Lorde not only understands her own intersectional identities, but understands that, regardless of which piece of her identity she may emphasize, she will always be viewed as an "other." Using these notions of "outsiderness" from childhood, she positions her subjectivity and identity as a writer as that which always writes "outside of."

Sor Juana's life in the convent was full of her own recognition of being a social outsider. As mentioned by Jean Franco in *Plotting Women*, "The irony was that in refusing this 'feminine' convention of silence, Sor Juana found herself transformed into a fairground freak, something of a New World marvel who was constantly on show, exhibited, as she

herself recognized, as a 'rare bird' because she was a woman who wrote on religious matters and a nun who wrote profane poetry" (23). Sor Juana existed on her own peripheries through her writing. By advocating for women's rights to education, she exceeded her religious and gendered expectations. Because her writing constantly pushed against what her superiors wanted, she was "constantly on show" and existed in a similar manner as Lorde. Like Lorde, Sor Juana was also aware not only of her outsider status, but that this this status was completely of her own making. Her writing exceeded expectations of women's normative writing roles.

Both authors' positions as outsiders, then, situate them in a queer space outside of heteronormativity. If we consider queer through the two definitions provided in the previous chapter, we can see how each author exemplifies both (straying from heteronormative expectations and exhibiting potentiality). Although not all feminists or feminist texts are queer, or queer norms, I argue that these two authors' works and lives exist within a queer time. To elaborate on the second definition of queer from above, we can consider queer as both a time and space for subversion. Within the realm of queer potentiality, then, did both *La Respuesta* and *Sister Outsider* exist to answer, to respond, to social norms with the idea of possibility. In "The Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power" (referred to as "The Uses of the Erotic" hereafter), Lorde defines the erotic as a woman-based power that manifests itself once structures of oppression are fully recognized. Discussing both the racial and the gendered inequality of Black women in comparison to white men, she states: "It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives

and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power” (53). Here, Lorde recognizes “male modes of power,” consequential derivations (patriarchal systems that women also adhere to), and the active dismantling of women’s gendered power (the erotic) under the guise of empowering women. Lorde tells her readers that only by embracing the erotic, a sentiment deep within all women—expressed in multiple ways—can we liberate ourselves from structural inequality and oppression. Emphasizing the erotic as a means to socially, politically, and even economically subvert structural models of gendered and racialized oppression is a queer act itself, for her experience as an outsider both allowed her to recognize these subversive systems and encourage others to follow. The erotic acts as a bridge to step outside of heteronormative expectations with a sense of potentiality—encompassing both definitions of queer positionality and temporality. These possibilities varied for each author as each combated different oppressive structures. For Sor Juana, the possibility of subverting patriarchy existed within giving women equal access to education. For Lorde, the possibility of subverting white, male-dominated modes of oppression, as varied as they were and still are, existed in recognizing differences and recognizing power in women of color and non-heteronormative sexuality. Both Sor Juana and Lorde’s positions as social outsiders positioned them in queer spaces outside of heteronormative expectations and allowed them to advocate for queer possibilities.

Each author’s use of the erotic reiterates both her feminist ideologies and her position in queer temporal spaces. Lorde begins “The Uses of the Erotic” with: “There are

many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). Although beginning her essay with a generalized and expansive understanding, Lorde’s essay details the way the erotic takes many shapes and definitions. Since Lorde describes the erotic as specific to women’s bodies, and these bodies suffer at the hands of patriarchy, this sentiment and source of power is also couched in the unknown (“unexpressed or unrecognized”). As elaborated by Kyla Tompkins in “Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality: Queer of Color Critique”:

Eroticism, as Lorde understood it in her revolutionary essay, is sexual; but more than that, erotic refers to the infusing of the everyday with a feeling of belonging to and expansively enacting a sense of alignment between the self and world. Queer of color critique’s interest in performance brings this specularly, this commitment to wielding visibility against a phobic public sphere, into sharp relief and finds political value in the courage that queers of color contribute to everyday aesthetic practices, ranging from literature, drama, poetry, essays, autobiography, and dance to the movement of bodies in the space and time of everyday life. (186)

Although queer time and space define themselves against that which they are not, not a part of heteronormative linearity, they also exist as a realm of potentiality. It is within this potential that Sor Juana and Lorde existed, for each found space for change and wrote to encourage it. This sentiment of belonging between “the self and world” which Tompkins mentions portrays endless realms of potential in which Lorde and Sor Juana wrote.

Moreover, the sentiment of “wielding visibility” acknowledges the possibility of inserting denied experiences into dominant social narratives. Connecting back to Lorde’s initial definition of accessing “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,” we can see how the erotic is an inherently queer resource of knowledge through experience—that tapping into the “unexpressed or unrecognized” illuminates potential. Using the erotic as not only a space of change, but a space which exists outside of heteronormative linearity, portrays the potentiality of paving ways for each author’s audience.

Inherent in this potentiality of one’s future lies another instance of Sor Juana anticipating Lorde’s “erotic” in the context of obtaining knowledge. Sor Juana’s letter details her own recognition of power in learning, and the power she personally gained by learning. Her desire to learn, she tells Sor Filotea, began in her youth. Recounting her childhood desires, Sor Juana declares,

Acuérdome que en estos tiempos, siendo mi golosina la que es ordinaria en aquella edad, me abstenía de comer queso, porque oí decir que hacía rudos, y podía conmigo más el deseo de saber que el de comer, siendo éste tan poderosos en los niños [I remember that in those days, though I was as greedy for treats as children usually are at that age, I would abstain from eating cheese, because I heard tell that it made people stupid, and the desire to learn was stronger for me than the desire to eat--powerful as this is in children]. (48 and 49)

Veering away from false humility and entering realms of truthfulness, Sor Juana’s linguistic moves subtly elevate her above others. By mentioning that she exerted such self-restraint as

a child, she puts herself about others, including the recipient of this letter. More importantly, it shows her inherent willingness and desire to learn. Sor Juana uses her childhood self-control not only to justify why she and others similar to her deserve access to education, but to show the excessive extents to which she has to go to justify this access. In doing so, Sor Juana also Lorde's "male modes of power"; like Lorde, Sor Juana refuses to disavow her own erotic nature of writing and learning by succumbing to white male ideologies of oppression.

Furthermore, Sor Juana also uses Lorde's sense of the erotic as connected to motivation and intent in the action, in the "doing" of everyday life. As mentioned in the above quote and elsewhere in her text, Sor Juana displays her conscious motivations for her actions despite being outside the realms of acceptability for both women and nuns. Connecting to Lorde's sense of the erotic as being an explicitly gendered action, thought, and sensibility, Sor Juana uses this intentionality to express her own interests and interests for other women. According to Lorde, "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how *acutely and fully we can feel in the doing*. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness" (54-55, emphasis added). For Sor Juana, then, using the means available to her (as few as they may have been) to access education was her way of using "life[s] endeavors" to bring her closer to the "fullness" of having an education. Not only through writing, but also through direct

and purposeful action, did Sor Juana also use Lorde's senses of the erotic because she recognized the benefits of potentiality in her and other women's future.

Sor Juana's anticipation of Lorde's erotic, in this moment, also highlights Lorde's sense of gendered recognition and justice. Sor Juana emphasizing her learnedness and her path to achieve it shows both her and the Bishop's gender and the social power inherent in these positions. Adding to our understanding of this moment in the text is Julie Bokser and her essay "Sor Juana's Rhetoric of Silence." Her essay argues to position Sor Juana as a rhetorician as well as an early feminist. Bokser problematizes this moment in the text by stating: "Her claim to be a prodigy in effect discards gender. Writing and studying are a calling for which she cannot be responsible. This deflection of responsibility serves to deny her own agency in defying gender norms. She is not a woman breaking codes but a poet who just happens to be a woman" (11). Although elsewhere Sor Juana explicitly positions women as worthy of having access to learning, here, Bokser asserts that Sor Juana denies her gendered place and body for the sake of justifying her learning. It can be argued that, in this moment, Sor Juana disavows her gendered position to elevate her desire to learn, but I argue that Sor Juana instead positions learning itself as an un-gendered desire. Yet, within this un-gendered desire, Sor Juana also argues for equitable gendered access to this desire. Since she writes with the awareness of both her and the Bishop's gender, Sor Juana recognizes Lorde's "male models of power" and highlights her gendered position against that model through learning (53). Rather than disavow her gender, Sor Juana instead highlights her gender through the act of writing itself by adhering to a belief akin to Lorde's assertion that the

erotic exists in “a deeply female and spiritual plane” (53). Sor Juana recognizes this gendered plane and writes against heteronormative expectations through subversive content. Similarly, Lorde uses the act of writing itself to write against heteronormative expectations.

### Silences Spoken

Each author felt overwhelming silence as a barrier to liberation for marginalized bodies. These silences manifested in many forms and were particular for each author. Whereas Sor Juana suffered from silences surrounding what we may currently consider inherent rights for women, Lorde suffered from silences surrounding justice for racialized bodies and sexuality in addition to silences surrounding women’s rights. Refusing these silences as oppressive structures against them, these authors used their writing to combat silences as a means for validation. As mentioned, both of these critical texts respond to intricacies of their oppression and consequently break these silences. This breaking occurs in two ways: their writing itself broke silences, and the content they filled their writing with also advocated the breaking of silences.

In this way, using writing as a subversive tool against their oppressors gave these authors access to break silences. Both authors use their gendered social position to combat their oppressors by using centering<sup>11</sup> as a means of resistance. Both authors center their

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<sup>11</sup> By “centering,” I refer to the way marginalized people move their identities and concerns to the center of social, political, and economic conversations. By contrast, marginalized people’s issues are often left out of these conversations, or not centered in broader conversations about access to privilege(s).

social positions and gendered acts of writing, even though their positions and considerations of gender differ. Whereas Sor Juana centers her simultaneous social positions as both a nun and a woman, Lorde centers her experiences as a Black lesbian through poetry and the gendered act of writing as resisting a patriarchal society. In these ways, both authors must emphasize their subjugated social positions in their writing to dismantle the structures that marginalize them—centering marginalization helps both authors name their oppression and aids their critique through writing. Each author’s critical work operates not only to prevent future marginalization, but to make their own marginalization known to their audiences. Both authors worked against silences surrounding their identities and used writing as a platform of resistance. Both authors emphasize their oppression through writing, by naming that which was previously unspoken.

Since Sor Juana’s text responds to a letter written to her to dictate the obedient way she should behave, her response itself speaks against the silence wished against her. She fills her letter with arguments against the Bishop’s wishes, and her text exists as a physical representation of speaking against gendered silences. Bokser elaborates: “Her very act of response is interruptive, since what she *should* be doing is heeding his advice and shunning letters...By refuting the bishop’s admonishments, she sounds a nondominant, disruptive, and potentially resistant voice. Sor Juana reconstructs the nuns’ interruptive behavior into a ‘female’ rhetorical model of resistance and challenge” (14-15). Sor Juana’s response through *La Respuesta* represents disruption and resistance, and it also represents a “nondominant” discourse, portraying Sor Juana’s outsider and discrete status in resisting gendered silences.

Moving from her social position as a member of the Catholic church to her social position as a woman, Sor Juana's response to the Bishop becomes a gendered response to silences surrounding women.

Similarly, Lorde centers her subjectivity to use against her oppressors. Lorde used writing in multiple forms—essays, other prose, poetry—to speak against the silences surrounding her, but she always considered herself a poet above all else (*Sister Outsider* 1). Her critical essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," discusses poetry's necessity in the lives of women, especially women of color. For Lorde, poetry is a means through which women, and women of color particularly, could center their identity and feelings in an otherwise oppressive world. She begins her essay:

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 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. (36)

Lorde asserts that poetry is that which not only precedes manifestation of an idea, but exists to name and give life to that idea. These ideas exist in "light," in the ways we consider our lives and choices. She emphasizes "light" as that which acts as a figurative guiding mechanism to aid one's trajectory through life. The nature of this light, the "quality" used to consider the life one leads, determines the "product," the result of the light's quality. Inside

the light, as a guide, potentiality and possibility are recognized and out of them comes manifestation. For Lorde, this manifestation can take shape through poetry “as illumination”—poetry as manifestation, poetry as catalyst, poetry as existence.

Through poetry and other writing, then, was Lorde able to describe and center her understandings of social injustices for the benefit of future generations. Validating poetry as a beneficial means of expression, Lorde understood that she could describe her own experiences of marginalization through several written mediums. Moreover, Lorde uses writing as a means to also detail others’ perpetuation of oppression. Both her definitions of the erotic and current scholars position her writing in proximity to queer potentiality. Cassie Premo Steele extensively analyzes Lorde’s poetry as a means to bear witness in *We Heal from Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa, and the Poetry of Witness*. Discussing Lorde, she states:

Lorde’s entire life’s work can be read as an attempt to learn and to teach how to dream. How do we learn to dream, how do we learn to envision, to imagine a better future? The answer lies in learning how to remember the pasts that we would rather forget, to remember the dreams that haunt us, and to speak of the dreams that scare us silent. Lorde teaches us that learning to dream the future is not only possible by learning to speak through the silence of the past. Lorde’s concern with silence shows us that paradoxically it is only through the very act of speech that there is any hope for the survivor. (36-37)

Many of Lorde’s essays and speeches in *Sister Outsider* speak of the past’s effect on the now and the future. Without extensively lamenting the past, Lorde critiques the present and

educates her readers and listeners on how to change the future. We can consider Steele's mention of "the very act of speech" as twofold: as literal speech (through her speeches at conferences and universities) and figurative speech. Lorde's realization of this hope for any survivor manifests in the messages inside her literal and figurative speech.

Establishing writing as a means through which oppression is centered aided both authors to advocate for equality across differences. Both authors' writings exist today as relics of speaking against silences, but it is their messages within their writing that give figurative voices to silences. Through centering their identities and criticizing oppression, both authors resisted the shrouded inequality surrounding their social positions. I argue that this simultaneous centering and criticizing queers their writing through content. This subversive content further positions them in queer time for recognizing the potentiality for change over time.

Sor Juana queered her writing by centering her oppression by the Catholic church. Even though she used false humility to engage her reader, her *continuing* to write (by responding to the Bishop's letter) uses that convention to confront her oppression. Early in her text, she states:

...y casi me he determinado a dejarlo al silencio; pero como éste es cosa negativa, aunque explica mucho con el énfasis de no explicar, es necesario ponerle algún breve rótulo para que se entienda lo que se pretende que el silencio diga; y si no, dirá nada el silencio, porque ése es su propio oficio: decir nada [And therefore I had nearly resolved to leave the matter in silence; yet although silence explains much by the

same emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing]. (40-41, 42-43)

Sor Juana tells her reader that, because of Sor Filotea's exceeding knowledge, and because of the Bishop's privileged social status, she did not feel herself worthy to respond. However, she goes on to state that a non-response would do the same detrimental social damage as maintaining a silence around this issue, that not responding would then validate Sor Filotea's initial concerns stated in *Carta Atenagórica*. Sor Juana also queers linguistic conventions by giving a figurative voice to silence by writing, showing that unlike silence, she has the power to speak. Within this context then, we see Sor Juana again recognizing the potentiality behind silence by speaking against it.

Elaborating on *La Respuesta* is Theresa Yugar and her book describing Sor Juana as both a protofeminist and an ecofeminist. Although Yugar states that Sor Juana "[did] not want any problems with the Church," she later states that "*La Respuesta* illuminates how hurt she felt by her mistreatment in general, but also by being betrayed by someone who was once a friend [the Bishop himself]" (68-69). Sor Juana's motivation to write *La Respuesta* was to properly give name to her marginalization, much as she does in the above quote literally stating so. By queering her writing, by combating the silences the Church imposed on her, Sor Juana showed the possibilities she envisioned for herself and future women.

The Catholic church existed as a mainstay of continual oppression of women, for example, through greatly limiting their access to an education equal to men's. Using the education she did receive through the Church, Sor Juana writes to Sor Filotea under the guise of false humility. Sor Juana humbles herself to Sor Filotea to show the latter that her words and education, no matter how extensive, will never allow her an equal level of knowledge:

Y si veo que preguntando el Ángel de las Escuelas, Santo Tomás, de su silencio con Alberto Magno, su maestro, respondió que callaba porque nada sabía decir digno de Alberto, con cuánta mayor razón callaría, no como el Santo, de humildad, sino que en la realidad es no saber algo digno de vos [For when I consider how the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, on being asked of his silence before his teacher Albertus Magnus, responded that he kept quiet because he could say nothing worthy of Albertus, then how much more fitting it is that I should keep quiet—not like the Saint from modesty, but rather because, in truth, I am unable to say anything worthy of you]. (38 and 39)

Although on the surface Sor Juana humbles herself to another's extensive knowledge, Sor Juana's language actually places her on the same level as Sor Filotea. Sor Juana recognizes the privilege the Bishop's gender holds and yet tells her recipient that women, like herself, are both able to access some knowledge and use it in a productive way against oppressors. Likening herself to St. Thomas Aquinas showcases her access to knowledge and draws a parallel between his situation and hers—both positions disallow voicing opposition against a

superior. Her ironic statement that she is “unable to say anything worthy of” the Bishop (“no saber algo digno de vos”) exemplifies both sentiments regarding this section. The existence of this text refutes silence by showing that she, indeed, has plenty worthy to say to him—and that which she fills her text with subverts dominant structures of oppression against her.

Similarly, Lorde’s work in *Sister Outsider* uses her own knowledge against her oppressors. Lorde not only centers her intersectional identities but her recognition of strength and power in those identities. Lorde wanted to portray how women in general, and women of color specifically, contain power within themselves that was vastly different from men’s. Much like Sor Juana, Lorde’s critical works also show men, and those who perpetuate patriarchy, their own misunderstandings of how women were treated; her works also break silences surrounding the mistreatment of marginalized bodies. “Poetry is not a Luxury” centers women’s feminine strength as a point of resistance by stating: “Women see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of nonuniversality, of changeability, of sensuality” (38). Here, Lorde queers recognitions of femininity by giving power to it rather than moving away from it. Rather than staying silent and compliant with the ways femininity is considered weak, she tells women that instead of allowing these characteristics to be corroded by oppressive narratives, they can be used as powerful resources. Readers understand that Lorde asks them to not be “softened” by these labels, even if these “accusations” ask them to be. Instead of staying “diminished” by these characteristics herself, Lorde pushes against them by refusing to stay silent about the way

they have been used against women. Furthermore, giving power to characteristics of “nonuniversality, of changeability” emphasizes queer notions of potentiality inherent in femininity as power.

By focusing on recognition, then, Lorde also refuses silencing. Lorde uses her own aforementioned definitions of the erotic to emphasize specifically women-centered strength. Through her writing, she centered her recognition of oppression and actively criticized oppressive structures. As Lynda Hall argues in her article comparing Audre Lorde and Jewell Gomez’s lesbian novels, “[Lorde’s] ‘act’ of writing achieves change, since she records a historical continuum and refuses erasure and invisibility” (398). Lorde’s very act of writing negates silence through “erasure and invisibility.” Her writing instead centers that which has been marginalized and moves to change it. Lorde also constantly recognized the potential to change underlying oppression that many took as social givens. By both figuratively and literally speaking against these oppressive structures, Lorde queered her writing by centering identity in the face of oppression.

### Gendered (In)Justices

Bridging across differences and recognizing the potential for change not only made these authors feminist, but positioned their feminism outside of heteronormative linearity. By speaking against silences each faced, both authors wrote to respond to their society’s injustices with a means for justice, and this justice itself illuminates a position in queer time

as it was a representation of potentiality. Beginning with Lorde, we can see building across differences *as* a queer conventional move and Sor Juana's own queered rhetorical form.

One of Lorde's main activist components in her writing is the declaration that we have to recognize our differences rather than blindly accept and encourage notions of equality which ignore them. She believed true equality could not be reached if we failed to understand the ways we are different—the ways women do not experience life the same way as men, the way Black women do not experience life the same way as white women. Earlier in this chapter, I detailed an instance where Lorde discusses how difference leads to invalidating forms of expression (poetry as “a less ‘rigorous’ or ‘serious’ art form”) In this section, I will show how Lorde emphasizes the way difference has been used against gendered bodies. She states: “It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (“Age, Race, Class, and Sex” 122). Recognizing patriarchal structures which cause women to believe differences are the cause for separation, Lorde states that these “distortions” advance toxic notions of difference. These toxic notions, if not prevented, then lead to continual subjugation based on a misunderstanding of difference.

Sor Juana's text also asks her addressee to recognize difference between genders, specifically the varying manners in which each is treated. Since her text asks the Bishop and the Catholic church to understand the ways they subjugate women, Sor Juana not only

centers women, but emphasizes the social influence women have. Detailing the story of Jesus' crown of thorns and Satan's banishment, she states:

...después de la maldición, *spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi*, no producía otra cosa que espinas; y así fue propísima corona de ellas en el valeroso y sabio vencedor con que le coronó su madre la Sinagoga... [For after the curse, '*Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee*,' this world produced nothing but thorns. And so it was meet and right that His Mother the Synagogue should crown the brave and wise conqueror with those very thorns]. (68 and 69)

As in other sections of her text, Sor Juana emphasizes the feminine gender<sup>12</sup> of particular words—indeed emphasizing the feminine roots and influences of culture (*The Answer/La Respuesta* 139). By centering the association of Church (power) with the female (“su madre la Sinagoga”), Sor Juana linguistically queers social structures of power. By bridging the linguistic with the cultural, Sor Juana emphasizes the foundation of culture (through the gendering of the Church) relying on women. She portrays the hypocrisy in the Church subjugating women’s access to education by likening herself to “the brave and wise conqueror” [“el valeroso y sabio vencedor”]—her bravery in confronting the Church and her hopeful conquering of its oppression against women’s bodies<sup>13</sup>. Using the already-

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<sup>12</sup> Spanish and other Latin-based romance languages gender their words. In this example, Sor Juana makes evident the feminine gender of the word “Synagogue” (“la Sinagoga”) even though the Church is associated with masculine power.

<sup>13</sup> A few sentences later, Sor Juana makes this comparison more evident: “...porque es el triunfo de sabio obtenido con dolor y celebrado con llanto, que es el modo de triunfar la sabiduría; siendo Cristo, como rey de ella, quien estrenó la corona, porque santificada en sus sienes, se quite el horror a los otros sabios y entienden que no han de aspirar a otro honor” [“...for the triumph of the wise is

familiar linguistic positioning of the Church as maternal (despite its operating as an oppressive patriarchal structure), that which generates growth through knowledge and creativity, she emphasizes the significance of recognizing women's bodies as also generating growth through knowledge and creativity. In this sense, Sor Juana reconsiders women as figurative mothers, much as the Church is considered a figurative mother—for both act as social foundations for knowledge and creativity. Rather than rely on the Church's dictation of gendered differences, Sor Juana encourages her readers to recognize the potential generative growth that can be obtained by bridging across them.

By recognizing gendered injustices by signifying figurative motherhood, Sor Juana critiques an essentialist notion of women's bodies as vehicles for childbirth. Within the context of legacy and lineage, Sor Juana views both the physical building, and culturally significant symbols, of churches as feminine entities which influence following generations. In the above quote, Sor Juana queers the notion of legacy and lineage as that which is beyond literal pregnancy and instead points to figurative lineage, such as her reason for entering the convent noted below. As noted by Halberstam in the previous chapter, those who occupy "alternative temporalities" are those who believe in futures outside of "paradigmatic markers" like marriage (2). Sor Juana tells her readers:

Entréme religiosa, porque aunque conocía que tenía el estado cosas (de las accesorias hablo, no de las formales), muchas repugnantes a mi genio, con todo, para la total

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won with sorrow and celebrated with tears. This is the way that wisdom triumphs. It was Christ the King of Wisdom who first wore that crown, so that seeing it sanctified upon His brow, all other men of learning might lose their horror of it, and know they need aspire to no other honor"] (68 and 69).

negación que tenía al matrimonio, era lo menos desproporcionado y lo más decente que podía elegir en materia de la seguridad que deseaba de mi salvación... [I took the veil because, although I knew I would find in religious life many things that would be quite opposed to my character (I speak of accessory rather than essential matters), it would, given my absolute unwillingness to enter into marriage, be the least unfitting and the most decent state I could choose, with regard to the assurance I desired of my salvation]. (50 and 51).

Here Sor Juana tells her readers why she refused a heteronormative expectation of her women's body. In this sense, Sor Juana recognized potential with her own body and actions, deliberately refusing marriage to instead use the convent as a space for education. Here too is an example of why some scholars have recuperated her as a queer figure: "Her rejection of what Adrienne Rich calls 'compulsory heterosexuality' meant that she would be nobody's mother, wife or mistress" (Alicia Gaspar de Alba, quoted in Esquibel 72). Not only was Sor Juana aware of heteronormative expectations of her gendered body, but she actively moved away from those to fulfill her own destiny, to bring her closer to that "fullness" that would enrich her life ("Uses of the Erotic" 55). Refusing Halberstam's "bourgeois reproduction," Sor Juana instead pursues figurative marriage and motherhood through knowledge and advocating for other women to learn (6).

Part of both authors' resistance to gendered injustices was the choices each made with her body and writing. As noted earlier, both the act of writing and the message within their writings subverted dominant structures of oppression. Emphasizing injustices each

faced not only queered their writing by recognizing future possibilities, but also showed their recognition of social construction (even though this term post-dates Sor Juana).

Understanding the socially constructed nature of women's bodies, and their social purposes, helped to place these authors outside of heteronormative trajectories of time and expectations. Again referencing Ahmed's work on orientations and temporality: "The very idea that bodies 'have' a natural orientation is exposed as fantasy in the necessity of the enforcement of that orientation, or its maintenance as a social requirement for intelligible subjectivity" (85). As emphasized in Sor Juana's declaration of her disdain for marriage, and in Lorde's refusal of accepting literal maternity as a means of recognition<sup>14</sup>, both authors acknowledge the falsehood in ideologies surrounding "natural" or "inherent" temporal trajectories. Understanding other possibilities for their bodies and their life paths, both authors resist gendered categorization. Recognizing this potential for change, however, only comes when one recognizes the structures that bind one.

Whereas Sor Juana had to rely on metaphor, false humility, and other rhetorical moves to show her recognition of oppressive structures, Lorde neither needed nor wanted to do so in her prose writing. In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," Lorde boldly makes her famous statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," that we must find other ways, outside of already-ingrained structures of oppression, to alter our conditions. She tells her readers: "For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of

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<sup>14</sup> "Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women" ("The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" 111).

expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (123). In this moment, Lorde asks her readers to recognize how we have all been systematically created and molded to behave in a particular way within society. These behaviors also (re)establish dominance and oppression in racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies. Understanding this reinscription of domination, Lorde and Sor Juana both queer their positions in society by using their own tools to dismantle their masters' houses and break free of the overwhelming silence that surrounds their identities.

Both authors interrupt continuing patriarchal domination through their writing. Both argue that instead of adapting to patriarchal structures of power, women should recognize the power inherent in themselves. Advocating for egalitarian access to the same resources allotted for the privileged allows them to be recognized as early feminist figures. Although each author's circumstance differed, their occupation of queer time operated as a socio-political move wherein each author became an outsider. However, occupying this outsider position influenced both their critical works and poetry to command action from their readers.

As stated by Sara Ahmed, "It is not simply the object that determines the 'direction' of one's desire: rather the direction one takes makes some others available as objects to be desired. Being directed toward the same sex or the other sex becomes seen as moving along

different lines” (70). In this case, Ahmed refuses the idea that sexuality, or orientation, determines one’s position in time. Rather, Ahmed argues that one’s position in time occurs before determining the object of one’s desire, or an orientation. Therefore, one’s position in time determines one’s sexual orientation and not the inverse. Connecting to Sor Juana and Lorde, then, it can be stated that since each already occupied a queer time outside of a heterosexual framework, their desires were “consequential” or determined by that occupation. These desires, as I have argued, are queer for their recognition of and belief in potentiality, and, as will be seen in the following chapters, in a sexual manner.

### Feminism and Queer Love: Sor Juana Surpassing the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

This chapter will discuss two of Sor Juana's poems which illuminate both early advocacy of feminism and her positioning in queer temporality. Although these two are not mutually exclusive, I argue that their pairing in her *redondilla* and her *romance* help readers understand how she used writing as a subversive tool to combat oppressive structures like the Catholic church and patriarchy. As mentioned in previous chapters, Sor Juana's writing foregrounds queer notions of potentiality, as that which is yet to come. Whereas her *redondilla*, "Hombres Necios," advocates for men's accountability and women's liberation, her *romance* portrays early notions of a queer identity. These themes surpass the 17th century and echo in our current political climate where we still fight for women's rights and advocate for LGBTQ+ visibility. Reading these texts alongside both queer theory and Audre Lorde's critical texts portray the importance of keeping texts like these alive for current readers; we see a lineage of feminism and queerness validated through her texts.

Since I defined queerness and, in more specific terms, queer temporality, as that which exudes notions of potentiality, we can recognize Sor Juana's desire to center<sup>15</sup> general ideas of toxic masculinity<sup>16</sup> as a temporally non-specific problem, we can therefore understand her desire to center these ideas as part of queer time. As will be elaborated later in this chapter with an analysis of her *romance* #19, Sor Juana has been recuperated by

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<sup>15</sup> Here and elsewhere, I use the term "center" instead of "emphasize" or the like to stay in accordance with current political language concerning literal and figurative recognition of marginalized bodies.

<sup>16</sup> Here, "toxic" refers to the way masculinity negatively affects women through patriarchal structures. Specifically, I use the term to describe the way contemporary readers can relate to the ways masculinity is used to oppress women both in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and today.

contemporary scholars and activists to be part of our current time. Analyzing this *redondilla* will foreground these analyses and argue for her position in queer time.

### “Hombres Necios”

“Arguye de inconsecuentes el gusto y la censura de los hombres que en las mujeres acusan lo que causan” [“The poet proves illogical both the whim and the censure of men who accuse, in women, that which they cause”] (164 and 165)<sup>17</sup>.

Sor Juana’s *redondilla* #92<sup>18</sup>, more famously known as “Hombres necios” [“Foolish Men”], most concretely illustrates Sor Juana’s early feminism. This poem, paired with *La Respuesta*, represents the many ways Sor Juana used writing as a way to hold men accountable for their actions against women and the double standards they create concerning their actions. Similar to *La Respuesta*, this poem also acknowledges gendered power structures and dynamics; her acknowledgment shows readers the damage these impossible standards create for women. As will be shown in the following pages, her message pairs well with Lorde’s own recognitions of gendered and racialized power dynamics.

Sor Juana’s poem begins with the above note to her readers, situating them in her motivation for writing. The following stanzas support her point, by showing men their hypocritical expectations of women. Her first stanza reads: “Hombres necios que acusáis / a la mujer sin razón, / sin ver sois la ocasión / de lo mismo que culpáis:” [“You foolish and

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<sup>17</sup> For all translations of this *redondilla*, the first page number refers to the Spanish while the second page number refers to the English translation.

<sup>18</sup> “The *redondilla* is a stanza of four octosyllabic lines, usually rhymed *abab*” (Grossman 25).

unreasoning men / who cast all blame on women, / not seeing you yourselves are cause / of the same faults you accuse:”] (164 and 165). Even though the translation here fails to accommodate Sor Juana’s poetic tone, she begins her *redondilla* by telling men to be accountable for their actions, to acknowledge the ways they blame women “sin razón” (literally translating to “without reason” but translated above to: “who cast all blame on women”) without regard for their own actions. Indeed, her entire *redondilla* simultaneously positions men as responsible and irresponsible for their actions.

This notion of centering accountability also beckons to Lorde’s own sentiments. Part of Lorde’s feminist and queer sentiments reside in emphasizing accountability for the goal of celebrating difference—celebrating differences, then, consequently resists systemic, oppressive structures. As mentioned in “The Master’s Tools will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” standing outside of these structures in solidarity leads to more egalitarian systems of opportunity. She states: “It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (112). Even though this *redondilla* addresses men, Sor Juana also inherently acknowledges women’s oppression by asking men to recognize their slights against women. By using writing as a subversive tool, Sor Juana illuminates Lorde’s vision of a world where everyone can successfully thrive. By using writing as a subversive tool, Sor Juana also—quite often—stood unpopular among her peers and readers. This recognition of potentiality executed through

writing demonstrates Sor Juana's ability to linguistically move through these structures to provide a better world for women.

This *redondilla* is often described as representing both Sor Juana's particular feminism and early notions of our contemporary ideas of feminism. Using writing as her main medium to communicate her ideologies to the general public, women's issues were centered as a means to fight for equality. Discussing Sor Juana's *Primero Sueno [First Dream]*, Georgina Sabat-Rivers states, "On only a few occasions did Sor Juana speak out directly against men. The most famous examples of this are her quatrains beginning 'Hombres necios' (Foolish Men) ... What really mattered to her was to give to the feminine sex a literary and intellectual status equal to that of men, as can be seen explicitly or implicitly throughout her works" (145). Sabat-Rivers describes Sor Juana's subtler textual intentions in her *redondilla*, that Sor Juana wanted to center women's value through literature. One way she did so was by combatting men's irrational behavior toward women and thoughts about them with her literary form.

Sor Juana's *redondilla*, form included, also effectively built a community of women against men's toxic behaviors. More than rallying against men, or building a community of women motivated to destroy men, her poetic intention in community building stems from showing women readers they are not alone in feeling alienated by men's behavior. In many ways, this *redondilla* elevates women as orientations of reason in opposition to men's erratic, foolish behavior. Stephanie Merrim's essay details this sentiment in the context of using writing as a tool:

In like manner, the third-person voice of the famed *redondilla* ‘Hombres necios’ (Foolish Men) through biting logical argumentation exposes the absurdities of the male’s double standard. As this last point suggests, both the content and the impeccably logical form of Sor Juana’s poetry argue for the female as a bastion of reason: the poet ‘cannibalizes’ the topic of love, using it as a pretext for philosophical debates and as a showcase for her own lucid reasoning. (25)

Sor Juana not only builds community based on those victimized by unfair standards, but uses this community to then elevate women to a standard above those set by men. This community of women, as Sor Juana shows in her *redondilla*, are *more* rational and logical than the standards set against them. The poet demonstrates this in her text by executing a well-organized defense of women by berating men for their misgivings and unfair treatment of women.

Her text shows men the way society has favored their opinions and power over women’s. In this way, she portrays the unfair way power has been structured—that men contribute to women’s acceptability. Her *redondilla* combats the toxic notions that men both perpetuate and create for women. Following her first stanza stating that men have no reason (“sin razón”) to blame women for their follies, she continues with her second and third stanzas which expand on the hypocritical and contradictory ways women are judged in society:

si con ansia sin igual / solicitáis su desdén, / ¿por qué queréis que obren bien / si las  
incitáis al mal? // Combatís su resistencia / y luego, con gravedad, decís que fue

liviandad / lo que hizo la diligencia [if, with eagerness unequalled, / you plead against  
 women's disdain, / why require them to do well / when you inspire them to fall? //  
 You combat their firm resistance, / and then solemnly pronounce / that what you've  
 won through diligence / is proof of women's flightiness.] (164 and 165)

Sor Juana refers to normative power structures wherein women are placed in positions, by men, to fail. In this sense, through men's eyes are women always already unacceptable. By stating that men "require [women] to do well" ("¿por qué queréis que obren bien") but simultaneously "inspire them to fall" ("si las incitáis al mal?"), Sor Juana laments on the way power is distributed in the favor of men. Ending these stanzas with the notion that women submitting to men's advances is *either* men's "diligence" ("la diligencia") or women's "flightiness" ("fue liviandad") portrays the way agency is systematically taken from women. In other words, women cannot exist for themselves: only as a result of men's aggression or by falling back into stereotypes set by men. If women were/are always in a position to fail, none can be considered acceptable lest they fall within these paradoxically strict and wavering ideals.

To combat these unstable ideals, Sor Juana shows men their own flightiness and immaturity by comparing them to children<sup>19</sup>. This likening to a child shows the irrationality of both men's behavior toward women and the way they frame women. Describing men's irrational and swift values of women shifts power dynamics by allowing women the

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, the adjective "necio" refers to childish behavior even though it has been translated as "foolish."

opportunity to overpower men. Her stanza reads: “Parecer quiere el denuedo / de vuestro parecer loco, / al niño que pone el coco / y luego le tiene miedo” [“What do we see, when we see you / madly determined to see us so, / but the child who makes a monster appear / and then goes trembling with fear?”] (164 and 165). Sor Juana frames women’s reflection as through men’s eyes but positions women as controlling how the reflection is perceived. She states that although men have the power to mold women in their image, women understand the faulty motivation behind it. Using visual imagery, readers can see the mirror(ed) maze Sor Juana positions her readers in and the unfair vantage point women have in it. Ending her stanza by infantilizing men linguistically brings women to a station of control within this maze; even though men have the power to invoke a certain image of women, they regress in fear when the creature they conjure exhibits behaviors they projected. In this situation, and many similar to it, women are at a constant disadvantage until they also see the child behind the man who does not fully understand the standards he creates.

By invoking images of children, monsters, and fear, Sor Juana not only presents men a counter-argument to their unfair stereotypes, but also gives women an opportunity to show men the harm they have done. Her sense of community-building through this text stems from her literary form: by simultaneously defending women and accusing men, she relies on her readers to determine who is most rational. Although the men reading her *redondilla* may not have responded positively to her criticism, her logical form is received by all readers. Fidel Chávez Pérez elaborates on the importance of the reader in interacting with Sor Juana’s *redondilla*:

La lectura es la ventana que nos permite acercarnos a la amplia gama de signos que le dan forma al universo que nos rodea, a la suma de lenguajes que constituyen al hombre, a la lengua y a la cultura en un eje espacio-temporal, donde la huella marca y hace la historia-- personal o colectiva--que nos identifica como individuos. [The reader is the window which allows us to approach the broad range of signs that give shape to the universe that surrounds us, the sum of languages that constitute the man, to the tongue and the culture of a space temporal axis, where the footprint marks and makes history--both personal and collective--that we identify with as individuals.]<sup>20</sup> (13)

Pérez illuminates the importance of the reader, described as the focal point through which language is dissolved into meaning. This meaning then creates the people Sor Juana describes and their characteristics. Moreover, he categorizes these descriptors as existing in a particular temporal “axis” (“eje”) wherein identification happens. In doing so, Sor Juana creates space through poetry to build community both through and against identifying characteristics.

Moreover, Sor Juana’s opposition to oppressive structures aligns her with Lorde’s own sentiments concerning resistance through writing. In Lorde’s piece, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” she details the ways poetry serves women of color as an outlet against particular structures of oppression. In many ways, Lorde argues that writing poetry builds communities through expression: “Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of

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<sup>20</sup> All translations of Pérez are mine.

our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (38). Again centering this notion of potentiality—as a component of queer time and queerness—Lorde views poetry as a way to concretize one’s life; she views writing as a means to solidify experience. She also mentions that poetry provides a base, or beginning, for future change, inherently recognizing potentiality as an outcome from writing. Akin to Merrim’s earlier assertion that this *redondilla* portrays women as “bastion[s] of reason,” so too does Lorde understand that marginalized people benefit from using poetry as a means to subvert oppressive structures. Her assertion that poetry acts as a bridge which intersects and covers fears describes Sor Juana’s message. Known for constantly challenging social norms, Sor Juana used poetry and writing to convert fears into change.

Sor Juana furthers this conversion of fear to change in her collective approach to addressing her readers. As previously stated, her *redondilla* asks men to ponder while portraying the unfair standards and conditions women are forced to live in under the domination of men. Her seventh and eighth stanzas show early recognition of what we today call the “Madonna/Whore” binary and show the longevity of these toxic, patriarchal notions. These stanzas read:

Con el favor y el desdén / tenéis condición igual, / quejándoos, si os tratan mal, /  
 burlándoos, si os quieren bien. // Opinión, ninguna gana; / pues la que más se  
 recata, / si no os admite, es ingrata, / y si os admite, es liviana [Women’s good favor,  
 women’s scorn/ you hold in equal disregard: / complaining, if they treat you badly; /  
 mocking, if they love you well. // Not one can gain your good opinion, / for she

who modestly withdraws / and fails to admit you is ungrateful; / yet if she admits  
you, too easily won.] (164 and 165)

These stanzas show the impossibility for women to reach an “acceptable” standard as set by men. By stating that men recognize both “good favor” and “scorn” (“el favor” and “el desdén”) as equally undesirable traits in a woman’s body, Sor Juana portrays the hypocrisy men exhibit when they consider women. Moreover, these stanzas also show the extent to which men recognize and consider women as objects, or bodies onto which to project certain ideologies. Declaring that “no one can gain your good opinion” (“Opinión, ninguna gana”) further portrays that men use women as sites of projection, for no one can exhibit all of these characteristics: the perfect amount of “modesty” paired with not “withdrawing” too easily from advances proves an impossible task. Indeed, the “Madonna/Whore” binary reinforces this notion that women are either pure because of their virginity or impure because of their sexual activity. Although this notion is still present in our society today, we can see that as early as the 17th century, Sor Juana attempted to dismantle this idea through her writing.

More than dismantling, Sor Juana used writing to subvert these patriarchal, toxic notions of women and women’s bodies. As mentioned in *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana entered the convent to both avoid marriage and to pursue a life of intellectualism, research, and writing; she used writing not only to showcase her intelligence and logical approach against the follies of others, but because she wanted to implement change through others. Poetry, then, becomes both a space and practice through which one can concretize experience through

writing. By melding these components together, both Sor Juana and Lorde used this particular medium to subvert normative expectations. Lorde states that poetry is a “revelatory distillation of experience,” thereby resisting historical practices instilled by the “white fathers” (37). She reclaims poetry as a subversive method to make visible the real experiences of marginalized people rather than the lofty, contrived poetry created by the “white fathers,” by european<sup>21</sup> structures of oppression. “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence”: Sor Juana’s *redondilla* portrays this ideology through community-making and a collective resistance to patriarchal structures imposed on women (37).

Part of Sor Juana concretizing her experience as a woman in a patriarchal society was taking risks against the powers in effect, by recognizing the power in poetry and not considering it a “luxury.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sor Juana had to navigate the boundaries of being a woman and a nun and that these boundaries did not always overlap. In contrast, Sor Juana’s *redondilla* portrays the ways these same boundaries do not exist for men. Her thirteenth and fourteenth stanzas read:

¿Cuál mayor culpa ha tenido / en una pasión errada: / la que cae de rogada, / o el  
que ruega de caído? // ¿O cuál es más de culpar, / aunque cualquiera mal haga: / la  
que peca por la paga, / o el que paga por pecar? [But who has carried greater blame /  
in a passion gone astray: / she who falls to constant pleading, / or he who pleads  
with her to fall? // Or which more greatly must be faulted, / though either may

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<sup>21</sup> In accordance with Lorde’s grammatical choices. I will also not capitalize “european” or “white.”

commit a wrong: / she who sins for need of payment, / or he who pays for his enjoyment?] (166 and 167)

These last stanzas further exemplify gendered double-standards that plagued both Sor Juana's time and our current time. As a nun, part of Sor Juana's community-building connected to all women, and as shown in these stanzas, connected to sex workers as well. Although Sor Juana does not explicitly defend sex work or sex workers, she does describe the hypocrisy attached to the stigma. Connected to Lorde's aforementioned assertion that poetry is a necessary part of marginalized women's lives, these stanzas demonstrate the ways women had to retaliate against unrealistic standards. Whereas men were able to "pay" ("paga") for sex without stigmatization, women who "sin[ned] for need of payment" ("la que peca por la paga") faced scrutiny. Nina Scott again discusses this *redondilla* and its feminist implications: "It irritated her supremely logical mind that men did their best to seduce a woman, then called her sinful and loose when they succeeded: '¿...cuál es mas de culpar?/...la que peca por la paga,/ o el que paga por pecar?'...[Who is more to blame...she who sins for pay, or he who pays to sin?]. One can see why verses such as these, not to mention the burlesque sonnets, would provoke her religious superiors" (28). Even though Sor Juana's position as a nun asked her to not push against the Church's expectations and, perhaps, not support sex workers, her position as a woman understood the hypocrisy behind men's allowed behavior. Rather than stand against some women for their occupations, she chose to stand with all women against patriarchal structures that tried to divide women.

Sor Juana ends her *redondilla* reiterating her previous points calling out men and their unfair treatment and expectations of women while simultaneously illuminating her own logic and power with words. The ultimate stanza reads: “Bien con muchas armas fundo / que lidia vuestra arrogancia, / pues en promesa e instancia / juntáis diablo, carne y mundo.” [“Thus I prove with all my forces / the ways your arrogance does battle: / for in your offers and your demands / we have devil, flesh, and world: a man”] (166 and 167). Much like in *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana displays her own intelligence to combat oppressive patriarchal structures. This last stanza not only portrays her own power against oppression (“Bien con muchas armas fundo” [“Thus I prove with all my forces”]), but also leaves her readers with her ultimate judgement of their behavior (“que lidia vuestra arrogancia” [“the ways your arrogance does battle”]). Her last line delivers all the ways men’s ideologies socially manifest themselves. Stephanie Merrim details the way Sor Juana uses language to her advantage both in this last stanza and in the entire *redondilla*: “In a direct counteroffensive to *querelle* misogyny, ‘Hombres necios’ turns the table on men and their ‘sin razón’ or lack of reason by attributing to them the negative qualities that misogyny imputes to women: men are, she concludes, ‘carne, diablo y mundo’ [the flesh, the devil and the world]” (66). In this sense, Sor Juana tells men that although they embody the “world” [“mundo”], their ideologies are also manifested in both “flesh, [and] the devil” [“carne, [y] diablo”]. Their omnipresence shows the pervading nature of their ideologies, that *because* they exist in vilest places, they literally poison the world. Showing their continual existence is not meant to reinforce power,

though. Rather, the last stanza shows the literal toxic nature of their ideologies and the inescapability of the impossible standards they are not asked to meet.

By ending her *redondilla* with this sentiment, Sor Juana not only portrays the figurative pervasiveness of patriarchal oppression, but also demonstrates a familiarity to her oppressed readers—women. The *redondilla*'s structure relies on its readers understanding men as always already foolish, as men are understood to understand women as always already in positions to fail. This text altered power structures by associating men with examples of their “foolish” behavior and “foolishness” more generally. As stated by Pérez:

Así, el signo conceptual *hombres*, de simple se transforma en complejo por la suma del adjetivo *nechos* que le precede: *Hombres nechos*, conceptos que se refuerzan por la continuidad discursiva lineal que se precisa y delimita por el referente Sor Juana. Al campo de la acción responsable de la lectura, nos acercamos con los términos signos-lectura [So, the conceptual sign *men*, transforms completely into the sum of the adjective *foolish* which it precedes: *Foolish men*, concepts that refuse the continual linear discourse that needs and delimits the referent Sor Juana. To field the reader's responsible action, we approach with the terms signs-reader.] (14)

In this manner, much of the discourse Sor Juana emphasizes in her *redondilla* depends on the reader's recognition of this refusal of linearity. The poet centers men *as* foolish: they are always already foolish because of the actions and reasons she lists. Pérez, like Sor Juana, centers reader's accountability in engaging with the text by recognizing the latter's signs: if men want to resist the sign or adjective of “foolishness,” they have to both be accountable

for their own actions while holding other men accountable as well. While describing the many ways men hold women back, Sor Juana's *redondilla* also reminds men of their own foolish and irresponsible behavior.

Although using the *redondilla* as a medium to communicate her ideas, Sor Juana and her readers understand that these slights also exist outside of literary creations. Elaborating on Pérez's above point concerning *hombres* as a sign more universal than what is contained in the *redondilla* is the forward, concrete nature of her message. One reason this text still resonates centuries after its publication is the way she presents these concepts as universal truths. She does not address a countable number of men, but all foolish men. Pérez elaborates on this point:

...los hombres necios no sólo están en las redondillas, son signos que también se advierten, con el disfraz que les confiere el valor del discurso de la autora y los contextos de la época, en otros espacios textuales de la obra de Sor Juana. [...foolish men do not only exist in redondillas, they are signs also that warn, with a disguise that gives them the value of the author's discourse and the contexts of the time, as seen in Sor Juana's other textual spaces.] (15)

Although Pérez mentions the temporal specificity of Sor Juana's *redondilla*, I argue more so for his point that the sign of *hombres necios* ("foolish men") exists outside of the text ("los hombres necios no sólo están en las redondillas"). These foolish men were textually created by Sor Juana but were inspired by those who existed, and continue to exist, outside of her *redondilla*. As stated by Pérez, they were created from her own discourse, thus giving the poet

the power of representation. This cutting representation of foolish men still resonates today in our own contemporary battle for feminism and holding men accountable for their actions against women.

Moreover, understanding *hombres necios* as a sign which exists both inside and outside of the text allows a queer reading of Sor Juana's work. Especially in our current socio-political climate, we understand that Sor Juana calling out men's behavior was not a time-specific instance. Rather, she understood that these issues encompassed more general behaviors and people. As Michael Cobb details in his essay "Queer Novelties," understanding a reading and text as queer signifies stepping outside of temporal expectations and constraints. He states: "The trick of queer reading is that one needs to suggest the large scale of the crisis of relation without falling prey to the lures of normative categories, discrete and sequential time periods, specific canons, and sentimental slogans" (23). In this case, "the large scale of the crisis" is uneven and unfair gendered expectations and this particular queer reading comes from resisting Cobb's "discrete and sequential time periods." By using this mode of queer reading, we can position Sor Juana in queer time as we understand her message as resisting particular temporal expectations, such as "specific canons." Her message exists beyond her own historic time and literary conventions and extends to our current time where contemporary readers also recognize her message, her frustration, and our own frustration.

### Romance #19

“Puro amor, que ausente y sin deseo de indecencias, puede sentir lo que el más profano” [“A pure love, however distant, eschewing all unseemliness, may feel whatever the most profane might feel”] (36 and 37)<sup>22</sup>

Sor Juana’s *romance #19*<sup>23</sup> details the love she felt for María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga. Often categorized in the Petrarchan tradition’s theme wherein love is expressed for a benefactor, I aim to analyze this *romance* as one that expresses a sexually queer love between two women. Illuminating contemporary scholarship which reclaims Sor Juana as a queer figure for our century, I will add to this scholarship by supporting a queer reading of this *romance*. The *romance* itself describes the deep love Sor Juana had for the virreina and, I argue, extends beyond that of the platonic.

I will extend my argument from the previous chapter to this *romance* by describing how Sor Juana queered the poetic form used. Although using a Petrarchan theme, I argue that Sor Juana filled her poem with subversive material to express a non-platonic<sup>24</sup> love for the virreina. Even though Sor Juana wrote extensively during her lifetime, including many poems dedicated to her benefactors, I chose this one for its detailed, beautiful, descriptions of “Filis” and the queer manner in which the poet describes the act of writing itself to ironically describe the impossibility of fully expressing her emotions.

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<sup>22</sup> See footnote 3 for an explanation of page numbers. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of this *romance* are from Trueblood.

<sup>23</sup> “Ballads, called *romances* in Spanish, are composed of an indefinite number of stanzas of generally octosyllabic lines, the odd lines unrhymed, the even lines using assonant rhyme” (Grossman 1).

<sup>24</sup> Here I define “platonic” as the non-romantic and/or sexual feelings between friends.

This *romance* in particular has garnered much attention concerning Sor Juana's sexuality. It has been written on extensively, especially by Amanda Powell, who argues that this *romance* and many like it illuminate the sexually queer nature of Sor Juana's love for other women. Moreover, Sor Juana's descriptions of femininity, especially in contrast to her scathing criticism of toxic masculinity in her *redondilla*, further show a sense of community building. This kind of community building further situates her in queer time wherein her poetic expressions create a contemporary queer community. As stated by Amanda Powell in "Sor Juana's Love Poems Addressed to Women": "These love poems to women invite, indeed require, queer readings; that is, the texts propose an alternative to the heterosexual-normative forms that they parody, creating an ironic instability that undermines seemingly immutable patriarchal values and icons" (209). In this statement, Powell recognizes the poetic form Sor Juana adhered to while simultaneously recognizing the *way* she used this poetic form to subvert heteronormative expectations. As she did in *La Respuesta* and her *redondilla*, Sor Juana again shows the instability of patriarchal structures many take as given truths, namely heteronormative love.

Even though Sor Juana expressed, I argue, queer love to the *virreina* in her *romance*, she still used canonical poetic expectations to do so. However, she subverted this expectation by queering representations of femininity since both addresser and addressee are women. Using canonical expectations to subvert them intertwine with Lorde's erotic to represent Sor Juana's awareness of expressing non-normative sexuality. As described by Lorde, Sor Juana's *romance* portrays not only an emotional bond, but an intellectual one

(Lorde 56). Combining these methods with Lorde's notions of the erotic position Sor Juana in queer time, shown through contemporary reclamation of Sor Juana's *romance* as evidence of queer identity.

Sor Juana used the Petrarchan theme to express queer love by queering representations of femininity. By positioning herself as the authorial voice in the poem, her readers interpret a woman's voice expressing love to another woman. Unlike her *redondilla* wherein readers infer Sor Juana as the authorial voice, her *romance* positions both addresser and addressee as women. Despite the commonplace of addresser and addressee both being women, the overall erotic tone of the *romance* further supports reclaiming Sor Juana as a queer figure. As stated by Powell, "If the love poems by Sor Juana considered here address 'friends,' then this 'friendship' evokes ardent and melting declarations using language figures found elsewhere in the period in avowals of passionate (heterosexual) love" (210). Although we should not validate non-heterosexual love by comparing it with heterosexual love, the structures set up in Sor Juana's time period allowed expressions only through certain means. In this case, however, a comparison between heterosexual and queer love benefits positioning Sor Juana's love expressed in this *romance* as queer.

The *romance* begins with disembodiment, with the speaker telling her addressee that her pen is dared, or "emboldened" to embark on a poetic journey to describe "Filis"/"Phyllis", the poetic name for the virreina. This text shows the poet's dedication and appreciation of the virreina, embarking on a lengthy, lofty description of the latter's physical and intellectual beauty. Displacing *how* boldness is felt, the *romance* begins: "Lo atrevido de un

pincel, / Filis, dió a mi pluma alientos: / que tan gloriosa desgracia, / más causa ánimo que miedo.” [“Phyllis, a brush’s boldness / emboldens my feather-pen: / that brush’s glorious failure / engender hope, not fear.”] (36 and 37). Elaine Drummond’s dissertation assesses Sor Juana’s self-and-other representation in her *romances* and describes the potentiality of a lesbian subject position. Discussing *romance #19*, Drummond states:

However, as already mentioned, the poem does not function on the same level as a gift of a straightforward portrait--plastic or literary--would. Sor Juana has entwined a portrait of the other (her version of María Luisa), a self-portrait (her version of herself), and a projection or mirroring of the other’s self-portrait (her version of María Luisa’s version of herself). What results is a multifaceted rendering of a text which allows Sor Juana to experiment with the lesbian subject position--the adoption or inhabiting of the other’s *I*--to which Gilmore refers. (122)

Although Drummond moves away from using the term “lesbian” in a literal way, mentioning its anachronistic nature, I move to use it in both a literal and figurative way (123). Leigh Gilmore’s analysis of this lesbian subject position, to which Drummond alludes, lies in the duality of the “I” --that in some cases (she discusses Gertrude Stein’s use in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*) this “I” can stand for both author and the author’s subject. The “I”, then, represents both people and can say as much about the author as the subject whom she writes about (121). Unlike Drummond, I argue that this duality of the “I” is a literal lesbian and queer move, portrayed through Sor Juana’s literary and linguistic intimacy in the *romance*. Therefore, in this first stanza, we see Sor Juana using the “I” through her pen wherein the

pen takes on the poet's own boldness to express her romantic feelings. Projecting her emotions through her writing mechanism, and through writing itself, Sor Juana displacing her boldness through her pen shows the virreina the literal steps she had to take to express herself.

In this case, Sor Juana as both poet and poetic subject, positions María Luisa as beloved poetic object in the realm of her devotional text. She collapses several versions of the "I," expressing multiple ways to view the virreina through a simultaneous subject-position. Even though the *romance* describes her portrait, the virreina exists in multiple ways in the text. Sor Juana uses the portrait as an orientation point from which she can describe the many ways the virreina can exist in a love poem and the poet's life. The virreina takes on another life in this way, existing as both one of God's creations and as an idol. An excerpt of the *romance* reads:

"en cuyas divinas aras, / ni sudor arde Sabeo, / ni sangre se efunde humana, / ni bruto se corta cuello, // pues del mismo corazón / los combatientes deseos / son holocaust poluto, / son materiales afectos, // y solamente del alma / en religiosos incendios, / arde sacrificio puro / de adoración y silencio" ["On your most hallowed altars / no Sheban gums are burnt, / no human blood is spilt, / no throat of beast is slit, // for even warring desires / within the human breast / are a sacrifice unclean, / a tie to things material, // and only when the soul / is afire with holiness / does sacrifice glow pure, / is adoration mute"]. (36 and 37)

Although Sor Juana superimposes the *virreina* as an altar, a calming presence that prevents violent traditions, the poet describes a different kind of sacrifice: one contingent on worship. In this case, when the *virreina* acts as an altar, violent sacrifice created by man halts (“glow[s] pure” (“*arde sacrificio puro*”). Instead, Sor Juana sacrificing herself to the *virreina*, through a queer romantic worship, is when she resists “material” sacrifices and dedications through a poetic recognition of the Church’s existence between the two women. Although her life as a nun contributed to Sor Juana’s reliance on the Petrarchan form, she also understood that her dedication to it prevented a similar dedication to the *virreina*. Connecting adoration and silence (“*de adoración y silencio*”) contributes to her dual “I”s, that Sor Juana is both a nun and a woman in love—one who adores but has to remain silent. Both adoration and silence exist in her multiple ways of worship: for Catholicism and for “*Filis*.”

Despite adhering to these literary and linguistic structures, Sor Juana was also able to push against them and use sensual tones in her dedication to the *virreina*. An example of her lofty dedication reads: “*de ti, peregrina Filis?, / cuyo divino sujeto / se dio por merced al mundo, / se dio por ventaja al cielo;*” [“You, O exquisite Phyllis, / such a heavenly creature, grace’s gift to the world, / heaven’s very perfection”] (36 and 37). Recalling the first stanza wherein both fear, and consequently, bravery, are mentioned, Sor Juana moves through her literary (re)creation of Phyllis’ portrait and portrays an intense recognition of Phyllis’ beauty. Drummond mentions the impossibility of ever truly describing Phyllis’ beauty both to her and the reader: “Sor Juana will attempt to portray her friend, but she realizes from the outset that the task is impossible: she cannot match in ink and paper the greatness of *Filis*’ beauty”

(138). Even though Sor Juana may have recognized the impossibility of ever *completely* describing Filis' beauty through writing, the poet's literary journey is one of finding ways to create a worthy description of her beloved.

Sor Juana's *romance*, then, illustrates the many ways she moved in between existing as a nun dedicated to the Church and as a woman dedicated to forbidden love. Writing *romances* like this one allowed her certain mediums of expression where she figuratively spoke up (as opposed to against, as was discussed in both the previous chapter and analyzing her *redondilla*) about her feelings for the virreina. By relying on acceptable and common literary themes, Sor Juana still adhered to certain expectations of her as a nun—by subverting these themes, Sor Juana subverted her holy expectations. Thomas Roche's book, *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequence*, details the position of love in the Petrarchan theme:

At that point when any created thing is loved for its own sake, the love becomes idolatry, replacing God with an object of His creation. There should in actuality be no conflict between the love of God and the love of His creatures, but in the fallen world conflict can occur when man, given a choice between a higher and lower form of love, upsets the hierarchy of love by choosing the lower, cupidinous love in the form of enjoyment. (6)

As a woman of the Church, Sor Juana understood the necessity to present the virreina as an “object of [God's] creation” wherein she resists the temptation to fall into idolatry. This *romance*, since it describes a portrait of the virreina, does, in a sense, worship an idol of sorts. Yet, by refracting this portrait's image and offering multiple perspectives throughout the

text, Sor Juana subverts this idea. She simultaneously adheres to, or chooses, both “higher and lower form[s] of love” by invoking celestial and godly images while very explicitly expressing superfluous love for the virreina. One way Sor Juana combatted silence through this *romance* was by invoking and exhibiting simultaneous subject-positions for herself and the virreina. This *romance* allowed Sor Juana to be both a nun and a woman, both of whom felt queer love for another woman.

Using these subject-positions within Petrarchan themes allowed Sor Juana to dominate language and structure while creating a love poem for her addressee. Frederick Luciani, although writing about Sor Juana’s *ovillejo*, states: “Igual que su coetáneo Velázquez, Sor Juana sabe que el retrato pintado ofrece infinitas posibilidades para los juegos de perspectiva, para enfrentar espejos, multiplicar reflejos, y desplazar al sujeto ostensible” [“Similar to her contemporary, Velázquez, Sor Juana knew the painted portrait offers infinite possibilities to play with perspective, to face mirrors, multiply reflections, and displace the ostensible subject”] (18).<sup>25</sup> We can see how Sor Juana adapted this method to this *romance*, especially in light of Drummond’s description of the duality of the “I” and Sor Juana’s “concentration on the burlesquing of the Petrarchan tradition of portraiture” (124). Sor Juana understood that, although this literary expectation contained particular conventions, she still had room to express possibility through queer love. She uses her simultaneous subject positions by reflecting and refracting the virreina into multiple images. The virreina was always changing and growing, much like how Sor Juana portrays her love for her.

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<sup>25</sup> All translations of Luciani’s quotes are my own.

Despite the ways the virreina grew and changed throughout the *romance*, Sor Juana always kept her a complete being. Her stance as both poet and speaker presents a dedication to the virreina while resisting transforming her beloved into an idol to be objectified through worship.<sup>26</sup> Sor Juana queered the form itself by making literal space for women in it. As stated by Powell:

Sor Juana recasts courtship to represent the subjectivity for women that Petrarchism excludes. The poems to the vicereines reconfigure the conventional gender hierarchy to establish a beloved ‘object’ who is admired but equal. While Sor Juana evokes her beloved’s beauty in conventionally superlative Petrarchan bits--hair, eyes, cheeks, mouth, hands—her addressees are unusually whole subjects. Friends’ bodies are cherished in relation to their minds and life circumstances. . . . (213)

Dominating language and convention by recognizing the potential for multiplicity allowed Sor Juana space to present a respectably complete version of her beloved. Unlike other Petrarchan conventions wherein the addressee is broken into pieces in an effort to portray adoration, Sor Juana also describes intellect and mind in an effort to provide a more well-rounded version of the virreina. Luciani too elaborates on Petrarchan expectations concerning poetic women and femininity:

En la sociedad virreinal en la que Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz disfrutaba de fama (su vocación religiosa no obstante), el modo petrarquista de describir la belleza femenina

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<sup>26</sup> Refer to previous stanza cited wherein Sor Juana is awed by the virreina instead of treating her as another representation of religion.

era de suma importancia. Era sobre todo un vehículo para el elogio cortesano, una convención formulística con que un pretendiente o un protegido podía rendir homenaje de una manera decorosa y aceptada. [In the viceregal society in which Sor Juana enjoyed her fame (her religious duties notwithstanding), the Petrarchan mode that describes the beauty in femininity was of utmost importance. It was completely a vehicle for courtly praise, a formulistic convention with which a suitor or protégé could pay homage in a decorated and accepted manner.] (14-15)

Even though describing “la belleza femenina” was a crucial part of her literary convention, Sor Juana moves beyond the exterior to describe interiority as well. She recognized “la belleza femenina” through both the physical and mental:

¿De qué sirve que, a la vista / hermosamente severo, / ni aun con la costa del llanto  
/ deje gozar sus reflejos, // si locamente la mano, / si atrevido el pensamiento, /  
copia la luciente forma, / cuenta los átomos bellos? [What is the use, at the view /  
beautifully severe, / not even with the weeping coast / to enjoy your reflexes, // if  
madly the hand, / if boldly the thought, / copies the lucid form, / counts the  
beautiful atoms?] (55)<sup>27</sup>

Rather than rely on a woman’s physical beauty, as was common in Petrarchan themes, Sor Juana appreciates all parts of the virreina, moving from form to atoms. Not even other poetically lofty tropes (such as nature: “la costa del llanto” [“the weeping coast”]) can aid the poet in relinquishing the intensity of love for the virreina, since no outlet (“la mano” and “el

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<sup>27</sup> This translation is mine; the original is from Sor Juana’s complete collection.

pensamiento” [“the hand” and “the thought”]) can ever properly fully describe her. In doing so, she showed the virreina the true extent of her passion and love for her. She offers her reader, and the virreina in particular, a more encompassing version of the latter by refusing objectification and providing a more intimate view of the virreina through DNA, through atoms—the very basic make-up of her form. The same way she describes her pen being emboldened, she also describes her thought of the virreina’s very being as emboldened. This parallelism shows the reader how the virreina influences Sor Juana, how her existence “emboldens” the poet to take risks and express her love.

A final way Sor Juana subverted literary expectations through content is at the end of her *romance*. The text concludes with a whole version of the virreina and not a refracted version found in many devotional poems. The last two stanzas read:

Vuelve a ti misma los ojos / y hallarás, en ti y en ellos, / no sólo el amor posible, /  
 mas preciso el rendimiento, // entre tanto que el cuidado, / en contemplarte  
 suspenso, / que vivo asegura sólo / en fe de que por ti muero [Turn your eyes  
 toward yourself / and you’ll find in yourself and in them / not only occasion for love  
 / but compulsion to surrender. // Meanwhile my tender care / bears witness I only  
 live / to gaze at you spellbound and sigh, / to prove that for you I die] (40 and 41).

This excerpt asks the virreina to look inward and recognize the characteristics Sor Juana and others admire most of her. Sor Juana paints another, figurative, picture for the virreina in showing the latter all her complexities and desirable attributes. This figurative picture not only contains both women in a textual space of love and desire, but portrays both addresser

and addressee as multifaceted and whole: “The combined effect of tribute and humor renders simultaneously a devoted poet and a beloved with her own autonomous life. Women are not reduced to screens for a male poet’s projections” (Powell 214). Sor Juana subverts poetic and gendered expectations of active and passive behavior. She moves to state that the *virreina*, in all her glory, causes others (including the poet herself) to “surrender” (“*rendimiento*”). Moreover, the poet is ironically left speechless at the end of her text where she can only “sigh” at the sight of the *virreina*. This last breath in dedication to the *virreina* shows the poet’s devotion to the former, ending her poem with the declaration of the extent to which she would go to prove her dedication. Ending the *romance* with the sign of death simultaneously leaves no question of the poet’s feelings for the *virreina* to the imagination and effectively portrays the *romance*’s end. Sor Juana closes off the textual space with a finality to both any question concerning her sentiments toward the *virreina* and the textual space she created for them.

This stanza shows, also described by Drummond, Sor Juana’s recognition of her “impossible desire” (141). Though seemingly counterintuitive, this “impossible desire” actually exhibits queer recognition of possibility. Even though her desire may not be completely attained, the act of writing demonstrates a possibility of some kind of accomplishment; the *romance* exists as proof that Sor Juana sought a possible outcome in writing to the *virreina*. By simultaneously recognizing and subverting Petrarchan expectations, both writer and recipient understood literary limitations and conventions. However, both also understood the poet’s message to her recipient: “Sor Juana’s humor--

especially her over-the-top flattery--encloses two women in an intimacy that allows commentary on a masculinist history and its icons" (Powell 214). Sor Juana's *romance*, then, situates both women in a shared space of knowing and familiarity. Despite class differences (the class differences necessary for a *romance* like this one in a Petrarchan tradition) and an "impossible desire," both Sor Juana and the virreina understood the ultimate message relayed in the *romance*.

This ultimate message indeed exists in the textual space Sor Juana created for the these two women, one that expresses intimate descriptions of love in a safe poetic form. This notion of subverting relies on potentiality—potentiality that one's message can be readily understood through writing. Understanding subversion as a means to both improve life and express the nearly inexpressible echo Lorde's notions of the erotic. Much of Lorde's essay focuses on the non-sexual aspects of the erotic, the many ways the erotic exists in an emotional and, as shown earlier, an intellectual capacity. Like Sor Juana, Lorde also de-centered men's importance in women's lives, especially sexually. In her essay on the erotic, Lorde states: "As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them" (55). Also focusing on a non-sexual description of beauty, Sor Juana uses her *romance* to connect to the virreina on an emotional and intellectual level through poetry. Writing this text demonstrates Sor Juana's understanding of how her world could be different, how her love for the virreina alters normative expectations of both their bodies. Recalling queer temporality's focus on

notions of potentiality, we can see Sor Juana validating this risk for the promise of betterment—bettering her relationship with the virreina, bettering the virreina’s understanding of herself and Sor Juana. She used her texts as a medium to work through, manipulating conventions to reframe what could be different in her life.

Notions of bettering one’s predicament through understanding the fullness of existing, and through writing, also beckons to Lorde’s text on the erotic. Much of understanding how the erotic does and can exist in women’s lives is based on mutuality and respectability. Sor Juana’s *romance* as creation out of the respect she had for the virreina also exists as relic of a way for her to share intellectual and emotional feelings about their love. Lorde states: “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56). In this way, Sor Juana used writing as a means to share both an emotional and intellectual bond with the virreina. As previously mentioned, Lorde also believed that writing, specifically poetry, was a means to express women’s truths and subvert heteronormative, patriarchal structures. Sor Juana also viewed writing as a means to express her own truth, particularly queer truths, which subverted aforementioned social structures. These queer truths, since the two women were apart, could only be expressed through writing. This *romance* exists as a way for Sor Juana to bridge the two together, since these kinds of texts were written when physical distance prevented two people from being together. Encompassing both addresser and addressee in a

textual space of the former's making, Sor Juana exhibits queer subjectivity through Lorde's sense of the erotic.

Though the *romance* concludes with a final declaration of love, the poet also centers declarations of what can not be said. Despite being a rather "talkative" poem, Sor Juana also centers that which cannot be said, even in a literary space of her own making (Powell 216). Ending her *romance* with a sigh, with a final exhale after declaring her love for the virreina, also expresses the extent of her feelings which exist beyond linguistics. Describing a place elsewhere in her *romance*, Powell states: "...'bien como todas las cosas / naturales, que el deseo / de conservarse, las une / amante en lazos estrechos...'. A provocative ellipsis ends (or resists ending) these lines, suggesting that this silence--what is left unsaid about loving unions within tight bonds--is on the one hand beyond speech, on the other, poetically trite" (217). Sor Juana acknowledges the tired and overused expressions in poetry and, although she uses them within a canonical Petrarchan tradition, queers their expectations by including physical ellipsis (in the above quote by Powell) and figurative ellipsis through her final exhale to close the *romance*. Although adhering to canonical traditions of literary communication, Sor Juana also centers her feelings, and recuperates gendered notions of emotional expression. As stated in the previous chapter, Lorde asks her readers to recognize the feminine power behind emotional expression, and Sor Juana uses this specifically feminine power in this declaration of love. In Lorde's same essay ("Poetry is Not a Luxury"), she emphasizes the marginalized reclaiming power: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us--the poet--whispers in our dreams: I feel,

therefore I can be free” (38). Indeed, the final sigh in Sor Juana’s *romance* can be read as an expression of liberation--a liberation resulting from the ability and conclusion of expressing her love for her addressee.

### Reclaiming Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz for the Future

“Queerness is not yet here...We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz 1).

I would like to conclude this chapter by revisiting the above quote mentioned in the previous chapter. As previously mentioned, both Lorde and Sor Juana’s position in queer time is inherently related to their recognition of potentiality in their writing. However, extending Sor Juana beyond queer time and into both present and future time are authors who recognize Sor Juana’s efforts as potential for a collective queer(ed) future. Indeed, Sor Juana’s influences have not only helped shape Mexico’s culture and society, but are also present in the American conscience of feminism, Chicana identity, and womanhood.

As has been argued previously in this chapter, the two texts I focused on still have implications today. We read “Hombres Necios” as an early example of feminism, laden with contemporary feminist ideologies such as valuing women’s opinions, supporting sex workers, and asking men to be accountable for their actions against women. We read *Romance 19* as an early example of romantic love and intimacy between women, a predecessor for contemporary queer/lesbian identity. Without providing an exhaustive list of all the ways Sor Juana’s memory is recuperated for a contemporary audience, I will focus on

two texts wherein Sor Juana's work echoes today and their significance for a queer(ed) future.

Although Sor Juana has been recuperated as a feminist figure, and a model for Chicana identity, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on the texts which recuperate Sor Juana as a queer or lesbian figure. Much has been written on Sor Juana as a model for feminism, much of which has been pulled from "Hombres Necios" and *La Respuesta*. Sara Poot-Herrera describes the lasting impact of both texts in her essay "Traces of Sor Juana in Contemporary Mexican and Chicana/Latina Writers." Herrera states of "Hombres Necios": "Her name is nationally and internationally known and is quoted, at least in her homeland, in a myriad of social and cultural circles. From the erudite to the illiterate, it is common to hear her famous lines, 'You foolish and unreasoning men / who cast all blame on women'" (257). Sor Juana's early ability to recognize the unfair treatment of women at the hands of men and patriarchal structures offers contemporary scholars and readers an example of feminist ideology. Yet, her influence extends beyond "Hombres Necios" and exists as a state of influence for her readers and scholars. Herrera continues:

Continued interest in her work is expressed not only in scholarship but also in the work of the many women writers who have converted the Mexican nun-intellectual into a literary character and in the productions of artists who have represented and interpreted her in music, painting, cinema, theater, collage, and performances of varied types. All of these women are, first and foremost, her readers. Their recognition of Sor Juana's genius and wit makes her come alive for us and

transforms her into a potential contemporary of her successors. Through the sympathetic act of reading, narrators, poets, and playwrights, as well as essayists, philosophers, and other women artists, revisit, rewrite, and reinvent her. (257)

These authors Herrera mentions also recognize a potentiality in “reinvent[ing]” her for contemporary means. This potentiality signifies a recognition of Sor Juana’s significance for the future, as a means for us to learn and appreciate the work from the past for a better future.

I argue that this move on the part of contemporary scholars to recuperate Sor Juana for the future is also a move to resist heteronormative temporal extensions. Interrupting temporal linearity by reintroducing a figure such as Sor Juana into time’s progression not only portrays her own potential to provide for the future, but portrays a queer recognition of the future. As stated by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, “Queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time’s ‘presentness’ needs to be phenomenologically questioned, and this is the fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics. Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world” (Muñoz 25). Those who have reintroduced Sor Juana into present time hope to familiarize a contemporary audience with an historic figure while simultaneously offering a better future by recognizing her accomplishments.<sup>28</sup> These scholars do question our present and offer a beneficial disruption

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<sup>28</sup> At the time this thesis was being written, a Netflix series entitled *Juana Inés* was released (2016) which also centers her queerness.

through Sor Juana. The two texts I will briefly analyze are María Luisa Bemberg's film (*Yo, la peor de todas*) and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's text, "Excerpts from the Sapphic Diary of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz."

Both texts center Sor Juana's queer sexuality as part of their narratives. In doing so, they remove Sor Juana from her concretized position in the past and situate her in a new light for the present. As Herrera mentioned, Sor Juana becomes a literary character in these texts, and anachronistic labels aside, they recuperate her as a lesbian/queer contemporary. Projecting current ideologies and identities onto a past figure, and presenting her as a literary figure, shows the queer work these writers do in the name of validating queer history. By foregrounding the possibility of Sor Juana as a queer/lesbian figure, these scholars also use writing (whether in a physical text or in a screenplay) as a subversive tool as Sor Juana did. *Yo, la peor de todas* centers Sor Juana as an explicitly lesbian character while Gaspar de Alba's text describes Sor Juana's desires as explicitly lesbian. As Adrienne Rich describes in her canonical essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience":

...we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. It allows us to connect aspects of women-identification as diverse as the impudent, intimate, girl-friendships of eight- or nine-year olds and the banding together of those women of the twelfth [sic] and fifteenth centuries known as Beguines who "shared houses, rented to one another, bequeathed houses to their room-mates...in cheap subdivided houses in the artisans' area of town," who "practiced Christian virtue on their own, dressing and living simply and not

associating with men,” who earned their livings as spinners, bakers, nurses, or ran schools for young girls, and who managed--until the Church forced them to disperse--to live independent both of marriage and of conventional restrictions. (651)

Indeed do these texts illuminate Rich’s notion of lesbian bodies moving “in and out of [temporal] continuum[s].” The texts Sor Juana left behind for contemporary readers provided enough evidence for this speculation to flourish. Sor Juana’s rallying points for women’s rights and access to education, as well as her queer love letters to women in the form of poetry, support Rich’s description of the long history of women loving women.

Bemberg’s film not only makes visible Sor Juana’s sexuality, but does so to also disavow Octavio Paz’s insistence on her heterosexuality<sup>29</sup> The film’s content, aside from Sor Juana’s explicitly lesbian relationship with the virreina María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, is taken from Paz’s extensive biography, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe*. Ursula Jung expands on the film’s content by stating:

Bemberg pone en escena a la virreina como una mujer que quiere averiguar el ‘secreto’ de la monja, el cual supone más allá de la imagen pública de la poeta y de la monja, es decir, se interesa por la subjetividad de Sor Juana. Así, en una escena clave dice la condesa a Sor Juana: ‘Jamás he conocido a una mujer como tú: más poeta que monja, más monja que mujer. Hace años que me pregunto: ¿cómo es Juana cuando

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<sup>29</sup> “An excess of libido could not be directed toward an object of the opposite sex. A different object—a female friend—had to take its place. Transposition and sublimation: the loving friendship between Sor Juana and the Countess was the transposition; the sublimation was realized by means of the Neoplatonic concept of love—friendship between persons of the same sex” (Paz quoted in Esquibel 68).

está sola, cuando nadie la mira?’ Por orden suya, Sor Juana se quita el velo y la condesa la besa después de haberle dicho: ‘Esta Juana es mía. Solamente mía.’

[Bemberg puts on scene the virreina as a woman who wants to find out the nun’s “secret,” that which supposes far beyond the public’s image of the poet and the nun; that is to say, she is interested in Sor Juana’s subjectivity. So, in a critical scene, the countess says to Sor Juana: “Never have I known a woman like you: more poet than nun, more nun than woman. For years I wondered: who is Juana when she’s alone, when no one sees her?” By her order, Sor Juana removes her veil and the countess kisses her after having told her: This Juana is mine. Only mine.<sup>30</sup> (237)

In this moment, the virreina takes possession of Sor Juana, whose identity and characteristics exist beyond categorizations and limitations. María Luisa’s love for Sor Juana allows the former to recognize the latter’s potential as ever growing and constantly pushing against the boundaries of what identity can be. Much like what Sor Juana’s *romance* did for this same virreina, we see Bemberg imagining their relationship as one of constant recognition of the other’s potential. Ultimately, though, the Sor Juana that matters the most to the virreina is the woman she loves--“Solamente mía.”

Although Alicia Gaspar de Alba wrote her own novel, *Sor Juana’s Second Dream*, which interweaves her own fictional take on Sor Juana’s life with some of the latter’s own texts, I chose to analyze her “Excerpts from the Sapphic Diary...” because, while doing similar textual work (interweaving fictional with non-fictional), this text takes the form of a letter.

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<sup>30</sup> Translation mine.

The personalized and intimate way Gaspar de Alba laments the death of Leonor Carreto (or, poetically, Laura) as Sor Juana is emotionally moving. The letter is written to the deceased and describes how the poet loved her, and the guilt she feels of beginning to love another, the new virreina, María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga. Using imagery and folklore of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, the diary entry describes Sor Juana and Leonor as forever entwined, even in the latter's death. In Leonor's death, Sor Juana tells her "...I *married* you in my mourning, Laura. *That* has been the vow I have lived for these seven years, not obedience, not poverty, not enclosure, certainly not chastity (forgive my boldness; as one grows older, one is less ashamed to speak of the passions of one's body)" (Gaspar de Alba 172). Despite a declaration of love for her deceased beloved, Sor Juana tells her of a new love that she "did not seek" (Gaspar de Alba 172). This first entry not only emphasizes a lesbian identity, but points to the complications of moving on and the guilt Sor Juana may have felt in doing so.

Yet, this particular text has faced some criticism, namely from Catrióna Rueda Esquibel in her book, *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians*. Esquibel, not unjustly, states that because Sor Juana glorifies María Luisa immediately after lamenting Leonor's death, that Sor Juana's love for the latter is not as eternal as the tale of the lovers living on in the volcanos (Esquibel 83). However, I would argue that this text's importance lies in the way Gaspar de Alba frames Sor Juana's lesbian desire and recognition of those desires as eternal. Earlier in her chapter about Sor Juana, Esquibel states: "Sor Juana imagines herself as Popocatepetl, mourning her dead love. Sor Juana's choice of symbolism

demonstrates that she is one with the land, not passively but actively, embodying an active volcano linked to sexuality” (81). In this case, regardless of who Sor Juana centers as the love of her life in this text, Gaspar de Alba as author emphasizes the continuous nature of the poet’s sexuality. The reader is meant to recognize Sor Juana’s understanding of her sexuality’s cyclical existence.

Moreover, Gaspar de Alba’s fictional text also highlights lesbian attributes familiar to contemporary readers. Although lamenting her lost love, Sor Juana also uses this diary entry to disclose her excitement about her newfound love. While describing María Luisa, Sor Juana details her attitude and their intimacy, the latter of which shows contemporary queer or lesbian readers certain clues concerning lesbian actions. One excerpt from early in the entry states: “...I know that she is a woman of passion (and a choleric temper, too!), a woman who is not afraid or embarrassed to take what she wants. (How silly, to be jealous of a plate of dates, to long for the fate of an orange and to be peeled by those strong white fingers)” (Gaspar de Alba 173). The mentioning of “passion” and assertive nature paired with the image of María Luisa’s mouth and fingers paints an image meant for lesbian readers. Whereas readers can recognize a phallic object through symbolism, both the mouth and hands (specifically fingers and touch) symbolize lesbian sex. Awaiting “the fate of an orange” describes a sexual anticipation recognized by many readers, particularly lesbian and queer readers who understand the allusion of the mouth to lesbian sex. Despite the aforementioned criticism, this diary excerpt bridges temporal distance between Sor Juana and the contemporary readers who find inspiration in her life and work.

These texts, along with the many others that recuperate Sor Juana for a contemporary audience, validate a historical lineage of queer identity. Although we may solidify Sor Juana as a particular historical figure--as a scholar, an academic, a nun, a writer--we can also understand that her significance is ever changing based on how her life is interpreted. In many ways, then, Sor Juana exists as a text in her own right wherein new readers will understand her impact in different ways. If we consider her a canonical literary figure, we can also bridge her recuperation to how we value texts *as* expanding and unstable. Borrowing Jack Halberstam's notion of the queer archive, we can also consider Sor Juana similarly: "It [(archive)] is also a necessarily incomplete and evey expanding record of how we select our heroes as well as how we commemorate our dead" (Halberstam 45). In this sense, Sor Juana's own archive of historical positioning, when queered, expands and is never complete or finished. To benefit contemporary readers who may see parts of themselves in Sor Juana's work, this recuperation becomes necessary to not only allow the possibility for Sor Juana a queer or lesbian identity, but to validate current speculation about her identity. The 17th century and the current one become bridged by standing outside of linearity and in an "other" space, one of a queer making.

### Activism and Lesbianism: Audre Lorde's Poetic Resistance

This chapter will analyze two of Audre Lorde's poems, "A Litany for Survival" (1978) and "Love Poem" (1992) which address social activism and lesbianism, respectively. Despite the different story each poem tells, I argue that both texts advocate for visibility and inclusivity. "A Litany for Survival" argues for the visibility of marginalized struggles often pushed away from dominant social narratives, and inclusion of these same struggles in narratives of social protection. The narrative of lesbian love and love-making in "Love Poem" advocates for visibility and validation of lesbian identity--the poem's theme pushes for an inclusive recognition of ways to love another.

This chapter will discuss Lorde's position in queer time as an activist and a lesbian. I argue that Lorde's identities allowed her to view many notions of time simultaneously and recognize the cyclical formation of past, present, and future. In other words, her identities as a Black lesbian, a mother, and a woman showed her the historical progression of both trauma and love, as discussed in each poem respectively. Her poems position her in non-heteronormative time through her refusal to accept the present state as the determinant of the future. Much as I argued at the beginning of the previous chapter, reading these poems alongside queer theory and Sor Juana's excerpts from *La Respuesta* portrays a lineage of social activism and lesbian visibility that still echo today.

“A Litany for Survival”

“We were never meant to survive.”

Audre Lorde’s “A Litany for Survival,” published in her collection *The Black Unicorn*, details struggles faced by those who were “never meant to survive.” Those not meant to survive move through the world differently and encounter oppositions unknown to privileged bodies. This particular poem has been written on extensively as one that simultaneously emphasizes solidarity and awareness. Lorde’s narrative voice speaks to particular communities who identify with overwhelming sentiments of hopelessness and understand their struggles as part of larger, systemic social structures. Lorde’s narrative voice also speaks to those who do not belong to those communities whom the poem describes, to raise awareness and incite readers to action.

This poem, like many of Lorde’s texts, emphasizes trauma through lineage to show readers the deadly effects of systemic oppression. This text in particular portrays the way the disenfranchised inherited these forms of oppression and how these forms of oppression are on the brink of being passed down. Using first-person plural narration, Lorde includes herself in this group not only to portray solidarity but to encourage readers to respond appropriately. Like trauma through oppression being passed onto future generations, Lorde also passes on her anger to her readers for hope of future change.

Part of this passing on through literature is showing readers parts of others’ lives they may not be familiar with. As noted in previous chapters, Lorde wanted her readers to recognize and celebrate difference instead of viewing difference as something to judge or

fear. As she did in her essays from *Sister Outsider*, this particular poem (in addition to many others) describes divides between experiences to refuse silence surrounding marginalized experiences. In *Of Women, Poetry, and Power*, Zofia Burr addresses Lorde's reader's role as responsible participant: "By embracing division as the steady state, Lorde's poetry would become a vehicle to address multiplicity and division, to engage her audiences in the hard work of coalition building across differences" (153). I also view "A Litany for Survival" as evidence of her emphasizing division, or differences, as a constant. I would add that Lorde used writing to exist inside of that space of division. She also encouraged her readers to exist within that space to build across *and* within difference. This particular text represents Lorde existing within difference and asks her readers to both witness these kinds of differences and use them to incite change.

Lorde's poem begins by centering those who live on peripheries, including herself. She does not focus on those who oppress her and those like her, but instead focuses on the real-life effects of that oppression. The poem begins: "For those of us who live at the shoreline / standing upon the constant edges of decision / crucial and alone / for those of us who cannot indulge / the passing dreams of choice" (31). From the beginning, those who were not meant to survive are those who cannot live in safe, solid spaces. Rather, they live in in-between spaces ("at the shoreline") where security and safety are not givens ("standing upon the constant edges of decision") –the latter of which describing how social structures have failed them, that no frames of security are available for themselves or their families, that

they have been roundly excluded from dominant narratives and spaces of inclusion allotted for the greater society.

Her poem acts as a site of seeing and understanding trauma. Part of making visible and understanding *this* trauma is also recognizing its particularity. Lorde centers her own identity as a Black woman in this poem by describing oppression experienced by communities of color. Steele discusses this poem in her chapters on Audre Lorde and of this text she states: “In Lorde’s poem, we see the effects of trauma (which is here not only personal but also collective as in the history of African Americans): living both inward and outward, before and after, as the trauma shifts the inside and the outside, both spatially and temporally, so that the event becomes the ever-present now within the survivor” (28-29). Steele details how Lorde presents trauma in this poem: as multi-faceted structures that exist in all parts of the survivor’s life. By showing readers how trauma moves, both literally and figuratively, with the survivor, Lorde provides the difficult and haunting reality trauma survivors live with. The mobility of trauma always exists in the present (“the ever-present now”) for the survivor. Understanding disenfranchisement as a steady reality affects “those who were not meant to survive” –such as communities of color who have been systematically removed from social structures of protection.

Since these communities lack social protection, they exist on peripheries and can move only in liminal spaces. Lorde’s recognition of these bodies existing in in-between spaces shows how mobility and visibility are restricted freedoms and not easily exercised by everyone. Expanding on the previous passage of not having luxury to “indulge...choice,”

Lorde continues: “who love in doorways coming and going / in the hours between dawns / looking inward and outward / at once before and after / seeking a now that can breed / futures / like bread in our children’s mouths / so their dreams will not reflect / the death of ours;” (31). The completion of the first stanza completely describes the way people live on peripheries, using doorways as an example of thresholds. This particular threshold also symbolizes a literal space between times; doorways become resting places where lovers take solace in between moving (“coming and going” and “in the hours between dawns”) while the rest of the first stanza portrays the way temporality operates in trauma survivors. Their restricted movements mirror the restricted way they view time: having to look “before and after” simultaneously to change their children’s futures. In this sense, temporality as Lorde describes it is not linear. Rather, Lorde ponders a way to simultaneously live for one’s self in the present while also living for a child’s future. In addition to these considerations, she also reflects on the past as an example of both present and future, that future “...dreams will not reflect / the death of ours.” The end of the first stanza contemplates a way to build for the future without deteriorating the present.

Confronting oppressive structures “at once before and after” while negotiating a “now” for the future further illuminates Lorde’s initial description of those who live on peripheries--communities of color often left behind by dominant society. Facing oppressive structures “before and after” this poem’s lifetime describes the impossibility of taking literal time to negotiate decisions, or “indulge...choice.” The following stanza directly describes this: that the “we” and “us” are those who “were never meant to survive.” This second

stanza more directly describes the temporal and familial thread of trauma in communities of color as Lorde states: “For those of us / who were imprinted with fear / like a faint line in the center of our foreheads / learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk” (31). Lorde shows her readers the way trauma has been passed down both physically and figuratively. The figurative “imprint” of fear is shown through the physical line in “the center of our foreheads” while that same fear is figuratively passed down through breastfeeding. These representations of fear through familial lineage show Lorde’s sentiments of frustration and defeat because this fear is inherited.

Part of this frustration and defeat lies in the odds against them: systemic racism and other types of oppression, both of which Lorde describes as part of inheritance (“...imprinted with fear” and “learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk”). Completing the second stanza, following the image of fear being passed down through breastfeeding, Lorde describes the “weapon” against them as: “this illusion of some safety to be found / the heavy-footed hoped to silence us / For all of us / this instant and this triumph / We were never meant to survive” (31). Lorde states that “our mother’s milk” acts as a weapon by simultaneously providing fear and comfort (“this illusion of some safety”). Reinforcing family as a structure wherein both fear and comfort live, Lorde points to dangerous outside forces constantly working against their health and survival. The “heavy-footed” are oppressors who disrupt any semblance of comfort. Understanding that “We were never meant to survive” means understanding that triumph over the “heavy-footed” is a difficult

path to take instead of compliance. Lorde asks her readers to bear witness to the suffering these communities face.

This poem's focus is to provide readers an insight to realities unknown by those not included in the communities Lorde describes. In addition to forcing readers to bear witness, this text also explicitly disavows ignorance of injustice as Lorde refuses to leave this kind of trauma unspoken. Steele also discusses this notion by stating: "We can read this poem as a call to witnessing to trauma, the experience of knowing 'we were never meant to survive,' which is repeated twice in the poem. Until the event is told, the silence becomes a fear which invades all aspects of the survivor's life, as in Lorde's poem" (28). Lorde knew that not everyone, indeed many people, did not have the reality of not being "meant to survive" as an "experience." To confront this ignorance, Lorde centers the reality of many lives in her poem—bearing witness to this reality not only informs inexperienced readers, but alleviates pain from the speaker as survivor of trauma.

Lorde understood her responsibility to show her readers the experiences of others. This poem, like other texts of an activist nature, was written in response to social injustices. Much as *Sister Outsider* and *La Respuesta* respond, so too does this poem respond to unfair treatment of marginalized bodies. As Sor Juana states in *La Respuesta*, her letter to the Bishop did not stem from her own desire:

Demás, que yo nunca he escrito cosa alguna por mi voluntad, sino por ruegos y preceptos ajenos; de tal manera, que no me acuerdo haber escrito por mi gusto sino es un papelillo que llaman *El Sueño* [What is more, I have never written a single thing

of my own volition, but rather only in response to the pleadings and commands of others; so much so that I recall having written nothing at my own pleasure save a trifling thing they call the *Dream*]. (96 and 97)

Although here Sor Juana writes in a sardonic tone, she states that this particular text was generated to respond “to the pleadings and commands of others” (“sino por ruegos y preceptos ajenos”), or, the Bishop’s initial letter. In this case, Sor Juana tells her readers that her text responds to unfair treatment of her in particular, and women in general. *La Respuesta* and “A Litany for Survival” are literal retaliations against oppressive structures; neither author wrote solely for herself, but for the greater good of her community.

However, writing for a greater community also required readers validating visibility of oppressed communities. Lorde’s language incites an emotional response by painting a portrait of those who live in spite of systemic oppression. She wrote extensively about resisting the desire to gaze at the problems of others without mobilizing to action, stating, for example: “Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one’s own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge” (“Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” 130). Rather than gaze at injustice, Lorde wanted her readers to actively respond to frustration. Feeling guilty, paired with inaction, resisted the action that should spring from knowledge. Her poem paints a paradoxical portrait of reader sympathy and both experienced and inexperienced frustration.

These conflated emotions are meant to elicit a desire to mobilize, to change the circumstances presented in the poem. Writing for a greater community outside of herself, Lorde wanted her readers to respond with action. Adding to this sentiment of resisting merely feeling guilty in the face of injustice is Adrienne Rich's personal account of how Lorde felt about her readers responding to her poems. Rich and Lorde were not only peers, but close friends during the latter's lifetime. Rich says of her late friend:

She wanted people to keep their energy and keep their power, touch it through her poetry, but then go out and use it, seriously. We used to talk about this a lot--there was this phrase, I don't know if I found it or if she found it, but it was "assent without credence," where people are applauding you but they don't make what you're saying part of their life, their living. She was very, very aware of it and concerned. And she was resisting like hell being made into some token black goddess in some largely white women's gathering, as so often would be the case. (Rich qtd. in Steele 155)

Indeed, much of Lorde's oeuvre calls out perpetrators of injustice, whether systems or individuals. Yet, as Rich states, Lorde did not want her texts to merely raise awareness through her words alone, but to be used to create change. This notion of "assent without credence" exists in "A Litany for Survival" wherein Lorde shows her readers difficult circumstances unlike what privileged bodies experience--but emphasizes survival, the titular theme of the text. This poem thematizes not only suffering, but resilience and survival. This notion of resilience and survival persuades readers to not gaze at the experiences described

as tokenized experiences, but to push for survival of all experiences for a more inclusive future.

Following Lorde declaring the first time “we were never meant to survive,” her next stanza details the manifestations of trauma in the survivors. Living through trauma as something passed through community, through family, causes survivors to skeptically view life’s ordinary circumstances. Whereas some may understand the positive events listed in this stanza as givens, Lorde’s “we” do not. Parts of this stanza read: “And when the sun rises we are afraid / it might not remain...when our stomachs are full we are afraid / of indigestion / when our stomachs are empty we are afraid / we may never eat again...when we are alone we are afraid / love will never return” (31-32). Those who experience life through this lens fear life itself and understand that nothing can be taken for granted. Yet, using first-person allows Lorde to show her readers that they are never alone. While her poem shows privileged bodies the systemic oppressions many others face, it also provides a sense of solidarity for those who experience it.

The poem’s undertone of solidarity allows a paradoxically hopeful and skeptical ending. Lorde’s notion of “assent without credence” also applies to her own accountability in addition to that of her readers. This poem confronts silences surrounding these experiences and her powerful last stanza verbalizes this confrontation. Ending the previous stanza with the reality of living in constant fear (“and when we speak we are afraid / our words will not be heard / nor welcomed / but when we are silent / we are still afraid”), Lorde reminds her readers whom the poem advocates for (32). She urges her community to

combat silence with voice and other forms of action as the poem ends with: “So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (32). Understanding her responsibility to her readers and community, Lorde provides resilience and survival by encouraging action in the face of oppression and figurative and physical deaths (the former through silence and the latter through oppressive structures working against life thriving). In this way, Lorde understands the malleability of the future by recognizing change through action.

This notion of potentiality, understanding that in the present lies inklings of change for the future, illustrates the ways Lorde’s advocacy positioned her in queer time. By invoking the past, or the lineage of trauma communities of color often feel, Lorde imagines a better future in her narrative. As stated by Muñoz, this temporal move is fueled by desire: “This maneuver, a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity. Queer futurity does not underplay desire. In fact it is all about desire, desire for both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure” (30). Although this particular poem does not focus on sexual desire, it does focus on a desire for “a better world or freedom.” In this case, Lorde’s desire for more egalitarian access to privileges allows her to use the past to understand the present and shows desire for a better future. As a poet, she advocates for this future through her words, by resisting silence and ignorance.

As mentioned in the second chapter, one of Lorde's purposes in writing was to confront silence and figuratively speak for marginalized communities. In texts like this poem, Lorde's those who "were never meant to survive" provide textual space to bear witness.

Steele analyzes Lorde's poems through silence:

This silence, this aloneness, is ended by speaking to a listener, one who cares enough to, together with the witness, participate in the reliving of the event. In her poems, then, Lorde invites readers to witness to the truth of the destruction that has been survived. For Audre Lorde, ending silence is the first and most important step in ending both the political oppression as well as the psychological oppression of black women. Lorde provides a model for coming to speech--even in the face of fear, even in the face of fatigue, even in the absence of memory, even in the absence of feeling.

(29)

The notions of resilience and survival lie in the existence of this poem and others like it. Despite physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion, Lorde uses her poem to show readers they do not suffer alone--and if they do not suffer, she shows them the destruction others suffer from the "heavy-footed." All readers are listeners and have to bear witness to her poem's story.

Speaking through the medium of a plural voice, this text emphasizes greater collectivity. Lorde tells readers who experience the oppressions she describes that they do not experience injustice alone. The notion of solidarity exists in many of Lorde's texts, and this poem in particular portrays the power that words and knowledge contain. Sor Juana's

texts also combat silence with knowledge through writing. One can apply to Lorde's poem an excerpt of *La Respuesta*: "...de manera que aquellas cosas que no se pueden decir, es menester decir siquiera que no se pueden decir, para que se entienda que el callar no es no haber qué decir, sino no caber en las voces lo mucho que hay que decir" ["In this way, of those things that cannot be spoken, it must be said that they cannot be spoken, so that it may be known that silence is kept not for lack of things to say, but because the many things there are to say cannot be contained in mere words"] (42 and 43). Here Sor Juana tells readers that, although one may not be able to speak about certain things, one must also say that it cannot be spoken of to take the power away from silence. She says silence can stem from something so powerful, we cannot fathom the words to describe its enormity--Lorde uses this notion to then confront these enormities such as fears of lack: having food to eat, waking up to a new day, enjoying love. Silence does not signify absence, but presence; Lorde defies this presence with her own manifestation of solidarity and witness.

Part of this presence, and more specifically presence defying absence, is the collective voice through which Lorde speaks to her readers. Her narrative choices show readers in her community not only that they do not suffer alone, but that they can collectively advocate for a better future. This notion of collectivity and viewing inklings of change in the present also echoes Muñoz's potentiality. He describes the 1971 issue of *Gay Flames*, a manifesto specifically written from the gay community with a list of demands. Describing the use of "we" to indicate a better future for LGBT people, Muñoz states: "The 'we' is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the larger

social order could be, what it should be” (20). Much like Muñoz’s description concerning potential, “what the collective...could be, what it should be,” so too does Lorde describe what her collective “could be, what it should be.” In the face of adversity, Lorde encourages those who suffer from oppressive structures to speak *because* “we” were not meant to speak at all. She looks forward to a future where no one will hesitate to speak against oppression.

Understanding the future as undetermined, Lorde’s poem offers other ways to consider the future instead of an idealized temporal space vastly different from the present. Instead of concluding her poem with the idea that, one day, her community will be meant to survive, she considers the idea that one day, her community will be able to fearlessly speak up and out. Much like Sor Juana’s aforementioned description of silence, so too does Lorde’s text portray the enormity of her community’s plight. Her poem acts as textual witness to these plights as well as the beginning of speaking against oppressive structures. In his essay, “In the Name of the Father: The Poetry of Audre Lorde,” Jerome Brooks says:

Equally, in ‘A Litany for Survival,’ those adults who live on the margins of life, ‘on the constant edges of decision,’ are filled with another kind of daily fear...The system, ‘the heavy-footed,’ did not wish them to survive. And thus they are afraid of life itself...For such as these the poet offers the comfort that their plight is understood. The real comfort, however, comes from the courage to give a name to the enemy’s weapons and purpose: “So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive.” (275)

Brooks' assessment of naming the enemy's tactics echoes throughout Lorde's poem, especially the last stanza. Her sentiment quoted in Brooks' excerpt immediately follows the observation that "but when we are silent / we are still afraid" (32). The poem's last stanza acts as a point of resistance--it simultaneously speaks for survivors and against oppressors. While telling "the heavy footed" that there will no longer be silence, Lorde encourages her readers, the survivors, to *always* speak. Acknowledging that they remember they were never meant to survive also shows oppressors that there is no fear behind speaking--that they have nothing else to lose "[s]o it is better to speak."

Moreover, the call to speak as an action against oppression reinforces the reader's responsibility as a reaction to this text. This text ends with a call to bridge the gap between reader and text. Emphasizing reader reaction is Burr's assessment that: "The oppositional writer in the United States will only have the power to effect change if we change our notions of responsibility and readership. Lorde's work helps us see that a political poetry translates itself through its readers or auditors into a provocation that relocates itself and is dispersed, beyond a full reckoning, in ongoing actions" (170-71). In this case, we understand "A Litany for Survival" as a medium through which "translation" occurs. While this text is a poem, Lorde also encourages her readers to understand that its story is not entirely fictional, but an actuality for the oppressed. By speaking for those she writes about, she asks readers to recognize their forms of participation in this story, whether they exist within or outside of systems of oppression.

This poem showcases solidarity and resilience by connecting readers of different backgrounds. Those who were “never meant to survive” experience both solidarity and resilience while those who want to help are moved to action through visibility of oppression. Lorde’s language describes oppressed experiences and incites readers to action. Moving through temporal spaces, “A Litany for Survival” uses textual space to ask her readers to view all aspects of time through the lens of trauma and speak through and against oppressive silences.

#### “Love Poem”

“Greedy as herring-gulls / or a child / I swing out over the earth / over and over again” (141).

Audre Lorde’s “Love Poem” is a shorter poem published in her collection *Undersong*. This text subverts poetic tropes of likening women to nature by doing so for lesbian<sup>31</sup> representation and for a lesbian audience. Compared to Sor Juana’s *romance #19*, this poem does not shroud any sexually queer meanings through temporally-specific themes or genres. Rather, it explicitly foregrounds and describes lesbian sex through metaphors and descriptions of both of their bodies as part of the same universe, rather than elevating femininity to an indescribable realm. I argue that this poem subverts traditionally male-centered tropes of describing women as like nature while men, as narrators, gaze at

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<sup>31</sup> Through this section, I use the term “lesbian” to refer to women who love other women. I do want to mention that this term also encompasses all women who love other women, such as bisexual and queer women.

disembodied parts of their beloved in nature. Lorde's text portrays both bodies as women, as equals, as part of nature.

Although Lorde never shied away from her identity as a lesbian, and certain excerpts from *Zami* describe sexual encounters with other women, this poem's elegant descriptions include an additional element, a sense of community-building similar to that in "A Litany for Survival." Lorde's poems rarely ask her readers to imagine a narrator vastly different from herself, and "Love Poem" invites lesbian readers to identify with the signs provided in her text. From the outset, those unfamiliar with the author will still understand this text as one that describes love and the act of love (the poem's title also chosen unironically), but centering lesbian sex as the poem's main message is significant for validating identities and building visibility. Marilyn Farwell describes this notion of disrupting heteronormative narrative expectations through Margaret Atwood and Anne Sexton:

What both Atwood and Sexton know, then, is that narrative is a system of power relationships not easily challenged. It is a story that has as part of its system an alignment of gender into opposite and hierarchical categories. At the same time and in a more subtle way, it guarantees male power through male bonding, either homosocial or homosexual. The only way a woman can enter this system is in relationship to a man. If change is possible, these writers seem to say, structural as well as thematic elements must be challenged. (28)

"Love Poem" subverts these power relations: only two women exist in this textual space, and the descriptions of lesbian sex surely show a man's presence is neither needed nor

wanted. Lorde changes the way love poems are written by centering this love poem on two women, challenging *both* structure and theme. Lorde's descriptions of lesbian love portray women existing on their own in a textual space without a "relationship to a man."

Moreover, understanding this poem through the lens of community-building and validating lesbian identity extends my ongoing argument that these authors should be positioned in queer time. With this poem in particular, queerness as a sexual identity becomes a figurative bridge over which queer bodies meet throughout temporal spaces. Much like accepting the possibility of Sor Juana's queerness, this poem exists as a relic in time for present queer bodies to look back on and understand our own temporal lineage. Ahmed discusses lesbian positionality in time by stating: "I hope to show how the contingent lesbian is one who is shaped by the pull of her desire, which puts her in contact with others and with objects that are off the vertical line. We become lesbians in the proximity of what pulls" (94). This poem shows the persona of Lorde both pulled by and met with desire. Both women in this poem delineate from heteronormative expectations of poetic form, both embodying nature's characteristics as a result of the "pull of [their] desires." Being "in contact with other and with objects...off the vertical line" situates both poetic women outside of heteronormative temporality. The "vertical line" becomes *something else* as a result of being "pull[ed] [by] desire". Meeting "off the vertical line," both poetic lovers exist outside of heteronormative sexual norms *and* consequential temporal positioning.

The poem's beginning invites readers to understand these women as meeting through Ahmed's "contingency," a situation in which both gravitate toward one another. The narrator in this instance, as described by Ahmed above, is "shaped" by her experience with her lover, one where she likens their sexual encounter to nature. The first stanza reads: "Speak earth and bless me / with what is richest / make sky flow honey out of my hips / rigid as mountains / spread over a valley / carved out by the mouth of rain" (141). Immediately, the narrator asks to be "blessed" by both the experience of sex, and also her lover--the latter acting as the sky through which "honey" will "flow" from the narrator's body. The narrator elevates lesbian sex above all other experiences, humbled and already understanding it as the "richest." This stanza metaphorically describes the act of sex: the contrast between being "rigid" and "spread" portrays the oscillating physical responses to pleasure. Just as Gaspar de Alba includes lesbian imagery in her "Excerpts from the Sapphic Diary of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," so too does Lorde include the image of the "mouth" that "carves" for a lesbian audience. Lesbian women understand the mouth as the part of the body that elicits sexual reactions from their partners while making love.

Including these moments in her poem, Lorde understood her writing as a means through which she could both invite and build a community of readers. As shown in the interview with Adrienne Rich mentioned above, Lorde wanted her readers to take action after reading her texts instead of sitting with their emotions. This poem shows her lesbian readers that she too understands the complexities and beauty in two women loving one another. She encourages love without restrictions through calming descriptions of lesbian

love. Her second stanza begins: “And I knew when I entered her I was / high wind in her forest’s hollow / fingers whispering sound / honey flowed from the split cup...” (141). Here, unlike in her first stanza and in “A Litany for Survival,” Lorde plays with the way space is used in her text. Adding space in between words on the same line allows for potential to be unearthed by her readers. Alexis Gumbs writes of Lorde’s use of space as a political move, especially in her poem “On My Way Out I Passed over You and the Verrazano Bridge” (171). Gumbs says of Lorde using additional space: “One move involves a strategy that became more frequent in her later poems and in her *Undersong* revisions: she adds spaces within the lines of the poem. Readers are charged with either passing over these spaces or making a bridge” (171-172). Gumbs goes on to state that readers ask themselves what the connection is between the words with extra spacing, but I argue that these spaces also disrupt the act of reading itself (172). Within this disrupted space lies literal and figurative space for possibility.

Indeed, Lorde knew many readers understood the classic literary trope of likening women to nature to describe a beauty as something both familiar and incredible. Yet, including extra space between “her” and “I was” implies a continuity between two women situated in nature on an equal level. Both women exist in this universe where each embodies part of nature so that when the narrator “enter[s] her,” the reader’s pause is similar to the narrator’s, one that demonstrates a feeling of peace before prolonged ecstasy (“I was / high wind in her forest’s hollow”). The narrator’s delay after “enter[ing] her” also asks the reader to reflect on the beauty described *as* the lover’s body before describing the narrator’s own

excitement. Considering Farwell's above description of subversion, we can consider Lorde's inclusion of extra space as a way to alter the love poem's structure as one from a man to a woman. This woman's body is not used for praise of feminine beauty, but as a partner in a sexual and sensual experience. Her structural choices of adding these spaces describes sex as imbued with possibility--that a woman's sexual pleasure can come at the literal hands of another woman instead of from a man. In this sense, not only is the act of sex full of possibility, but the poetic space Lorde created is also full of possibility. These extra spaces leave more to the reader's imagination and cause her to follow these lovers during their most intimate moments and to delay her comprehension, if just for a moment.

Following a second image of honey flowing, the second stanza finishes: "impaled on a lance of tongues / on the tip of her breasts on her navel / and my breath howling into her entrances / through lungs of pain" (141). This section of the second stanza, although more explicitly describing sex through the image of body parts, still employs extra spaces. As they did in the first part of the stanza, these spaces invite the reader to pause *with* the narrator in the space from her lover's breasts to her navel, to pause *with* the speaker as she holds her breath moving from her lover's navel to her "entrances." In both the first and second stanzas, we see Lorde resist naming her lover's vulva and vagina, but instead rely on these nature metaphors ("a valley," "forest's hollow," "her entrances") to describe them. Here we also see Lorde subverting images of (figurative) space: whereas these descriptions offer the reader a visual image of absence ("forest's hollow"), these spaces also figuratively portray a fullness through possibility. The narrator's embodying "high wind" and then

“howling” describes the ways both women are figuratively full(filled). Both women are fulfilled through the act of love, loving, and being loved; the narrator’s lover is never actually “hollow” as “the mouth of rain” and “a lance of tongues” enter her. In this poem, women are not sites that men project their desires onto; rather both women engage their desires together.

Lorde textually celebrating lesbian love encourages a community outside of patriarchal and heteronormative means. As was shown in Sor Juana’s *romance*, women poetically addressing women subverts notions of conventionally appreciating femininity. Whereas Sor Juana’s text does not explicitly describe lesbian sexuality, Lorde’s poem centers an intimacy only a lover could understand. This kind of appreciation for another’s body subverts poetic expectations of sex by resisting heteronormative assumptions of love and love-making. Part of this resistance is validating lesbian existence through these descriptions of intimacy. Her text ends with a final use of extra spacing, asking her readers to contemplate her own wisdom and experience as an unapologetic lesbian: “Greedy as herring-gulls / or a child / I swing out over the earth / over and over again” (141). Like a herring-gull, or a child, so too will Lorde return to her lover for more--more of a sense of herself through another, more moments of pleasure through “the earth.” Since readers understand the “earth” as her lover’s body, and her own body by proxy, her greed is more like an instinctual or natural need than a malicious one. Moreover, this sentiment is echoed by Erin Carlston’s analysis of identity in Lorde’s “biomythography”, *Zami*: “It is crucial to our understanding of Lorde’s concept of subjectivity to realize that Audre’s identity as a

poet, while rooted in her given identities, as West Indian and child of her mother, and closely tied to her lesbianism, is, finally, chosen, an act of control and (self) creation” (229). We can understand, then, Lorde’s identities as poet and lesbian as simultaneous and both born from the same necessities: to define (“an act of control”) and to create. This text offers readers an understanding of this simultaneous existence--that her desire to write and love are insatiable and rooted in the same need.

These textual moments of resistance also position Lorde outside of heteronormative linearity, outside of what Ahmed describes as the line through which orientation is built: “The naturalization of heterosexuality as a line that directs bodies depends on the construction of women’s bodies as being ‘made’ for men, such that women’s sexuality is seen as directed toward men. In other words, the signs of women’s desire, such as becoming wet, are read as ‘pointing’ toward men and even toward ‘occupation’ by men” (Ahmed 71). In “Love Poem,” readers see Lorde figuratively bending this “line” of heterosexuality. Perhaps sitting outside of this line, or in a different shape entirely, Lorde understands women’s bodies as made for themselves, and for other women. These poetic women’s bodies are “directed toward” each other; the “signs of [their] desire” are also shared and do not imply any direction toward men. The sexual secretions of *both* are described as “honey,” implying a literal and figurative sweetness as a result of sex. This mutual enjoyment elevates lesbian sex above a heteronormative line since both bodies and body parts are shared.

Not only does this sharing support Lorde’s own notions of the erotic, but this notion of sharing a body and body parts beckons to a greater community of lesbian readers. Just as

Lorde creates a textual space for her and her lover, so too does she create a lesbian identity other readers can identify with. As Maureen Heacock discusses in her analysis of Lorde's writing and community, part of Lorde's community-building was to operate in opposition to that which excluded her. Heacock states:

All of the imagery that Lorde uses throughout her work to denote positive or healthy qualities is mustered here [in the poem "Woman"] to convey the satisfaction inherent in a strong love for another: the specific mapping of the body; the sense of house as safety; the organicism of building, growth, crops, harvest; nourishment to meet hunger (and through the ultimate satisfaction of breastfeeding or 'milk'); and the comforting elemental qualities of night and rain. All of these qualities recur in Lorde's love poetry in her efforts to depict the places in her life where she feels centered and at home, and which in turn *provide her with the strength to oppose the devaluing, dehumanizing forces that seek to confine and define her.* (181, emphasis added)

Although this passage discusses a different poem, we can see similar literary choices in "Love Poem" wherein Lorde's love for another woman is evident in intimate, poetic details. Here, Heacock describes the way Lorde uses "Woman" to liken security to a home and its surroundings, and we can see a similar poetic move in the way Lorde uses nature in "Love Poem" as a sense of security. The "comforting elemental qualities of night and rain" are also expressed through representations of nature in this text wherein the similar expressions of sexual satisfaction ("honey") exist in the same atmospheric space. In other words, Lorde and her lover both exist in, and are part of, nature. The comfort the author feels both with and *in*

her lover's body stem from their equal participation in sex. This text portrays a woman's body, and lesbianism by extension, as the space "where [Lorde] feels centered and at home." More importantly, these kinds of texts reinforce lesbianism as an identity through which Lorde can move against toxic forces that exclude her.

Validating lesbianism as an identity with which Lorde can move through society reinforces lesbian communities; her texts show these readers that their feelings are valued in the face of oppression. Even though this poem may express an individual's lesbian love, it also operates on a grander scale. Burr supports this notion by stating:

And because her speakers in her poems are often assimilable to an autobiographical "I," of all the twentieth-century women poets this study considers Lorde comes closest to fulfilling the expectations that a woman's poetry provide an image of the woman herself...In response to Lorde's black and lesbian identities in particular, her artistic performance was too often read by reviewers and critics as symptomatic self-expression rather than as strategic speech directed at a reader. (156)

In this sense, we can understand "Love Poem" as both an expression of Lorde's lesbian identity and "strategic speech" directed at her community (including those on the brink of coming out). By "provid[ing] an image of...herself," Lorde foregrounds her own subjectivity to validate lesbian identities through the act of love. She uses writing as her main medium to not only center her own identity in a narrative that often neglected queer people as valid, but to display a sense of control (as shown through Carlston above) over the hatred she experienced beyond her control.

This need to center and validate, then, is evident in both her prose and poetry, and this poem in particular. Whereas her critical texts from *Sister Outsider* offer explanations, examples, and criticisms, her poems ask readers to pause, to contemplate. We can see this through her use of extra spaces in this text where readers delay their own reading tempo at the hands of the author. I end this chapter by turning back to Lorde's definition of the erotic, as the multifaceted ways through which she encourages women to live their lives in the face of patriarchal oppression. She asks her readers to also embrace confrontation and not view it as an attack, but instead as a way to gain understanding:

Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange.

Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. (59)

Resisting "the same weary drama" also meant resisting heteronormative expectations, and, to use others' terms, meant resisting heteronormative linearity and instead standing in a queer space of her own making. From social activism to validating lesbian existence and love, Lorde both added to and helped create Rich's notion of a "lesbian continuum" where "...we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself, as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has

described it, omnipresent in ‘the sharing of joy...’ (650). Lorde understood the power women could have if they helped one another and embraced their differences. And, today, we can understand the power all marginalized bodies have when we help one another by embracing our differences.

### Looking Back, Looking Forward: Queer Time is Now

At the start of this thesis, I wanted to discover what it means to be queer and what queerness can mean for authors, readers, lovers, scholars, everyday people. I was drawn to these particular authors, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Audre Lorde, because they exemplify what I think being queer means: living life outside of ascribed boundaries of heteronormativity. I find strength and definition in their powerful lives, in the ways they helped others, in their writings. By analyzing different mediums of their writings, I wanted to illustrate the chances they took with *how* they conveyed their messages, *how* they advocated for the marginalized. Importantly as well, I want my own readers to understand the work both authors did for our current sociopolitical climate. My hope is that those who read my thesis continue keeping these authors alive and continue the fight for a queer, intersectional future.

By understanding Sor Juana's *La Respuesta* and Lorde's essays from *Sister Outsider* ("Age, Race, Sex, and Class: Women Redefining Difference", "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", "Poetry is Not a Luxury", and "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House") in tandem, we can recognize the way each author sought a better future for marginalized people. I argued that both critical texts tackle feminist issues of inclusivity and respectability; Sor Juana and Lorde refused silence and instead wrote to foreground exclusion for the hope of a queer future. Potentiality runs through these texts as these women understood their current conditions could be changed with their words.

Pairing these critical texts with their poetry gives a more intimate understanding of the notions presented in their critical texts.

Although *La Respuesta* and the selected essays from *Sister Outsider* focus on feminist issues, the poems I selected from both authors focus more concretely on social justice issues and sexual queerness. Both “Hombres necios” and “A Litany for Survival” directly address problematic people who perpetuate different forms of oppression and supremacy. Whereas “Hombres necios” addresses toxic masculinity, “A Litany for Survival” addresses the “heavy footed”—a more encompassing group of people who perpetuate supremacy through racism, sexism, and homophobia. Although the narrators of these poems vary, contemporary and current readers can see parts of these authors in their unapologetic portraits of their oppressors. Interweaving parts of their personal voices in a fictional piece is also present in their more sexual poems, *romance #19* and “Love Poem.” I argued that these poems’ importance lies in making queer and lesbian sexuality visible. This notion is especially important when we trace our queer history and see a lineage of women loving women validated and celebrated. In both their critical texts and poetry, Sor Juana and Lorde took risks for the betterment of lives both current and future.

Moreover, by understanding the chances these authors took with their writings, I want readers to understand the power behind identifying as queer, as outside of. If it were not for these women, and others like them, we also could not fearlessly look at oppression head on and resist from the outside. Sor Juana did not fear the Church; Audre Lorde did not fear supremacy in its many forms. Instead, they, I, and our contemporaries understand that

change does not occur from inaction or fear; rather, change occurs from risk and bravery. Validating both of these women as queer figures in literature, in feminism, in many discourses also validates us as queer people today.

In addition to understanding queerness as understanding the power behind existing outside of, I also want my readers to understand that understanding queerness also means understanding instability: for queerness instantiates change and recognizes that the social constructions that have bound us for so long are not fixed. Both of these women understood that a heteronormative, linear temporal life path was not fixed but could be manipulated to live life to the absolute fullest. For Sor Juana, this fullness (to borrow from Lorde's notion of the erotic) existed in advocating for women, holding men accountable for their toxic behaviors toward women, and expressing a non-platonic love for other women. For Lorde, this fullness existed in advocating for Black people, other people of color, lesbians, and other women in the face of patriarchy and other forms of supremacy; this fullness also existed in writing poetry and openly loving other women. Each author understood the instability of oppressive structures; both instantiated change and refused to be bound to anything other than her own decisions.

One last way I want queerness to be understood is through the notion of potentiality, as described by Muñoz. Understanding that something can be "eminent" and "present" encourages action and inclusivity (9). Queerness, then, moves away from its past negative associations and instead moves toward respectability, toward inherent need for change. Muñoz encourages us to understand time as cyclical, to understand that we need to

analyze the past, present, and future simultaneously. With this in mind, social structures of identity for the sake of continuing marginalization must continually be dismantled to break oppressive bindings. Discussing Andy Warhol and Frank O'Hara, Muñoz says: "...I see the past and the potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening" (9). This explanation of potentiality is how I read Sor Juana and Lorde's writings: seeing the past, understanding the sentiments expressed through their writing, and valuing them as a beginning.

Because, indeed, this is only the beginning. Sor Juana and Lorde are not the only authors who I believe existed in queer time outside of heteronormative linearity. This kind of analysis and research should be extended to other authors who resisted heteronormativity such as James Baldwin. This kind of analysis and research should also be extended to authors whose sexuality is disputed, such as Shakespeare, to validate a queer history that is so often nullified for the sake of simplicity and complicity. Extending notions of queer temporality to literature can open up many discursive potentialities.

A large part of this thesis was my own motivation to give voice to parts of lives often silenced. Describing Sor Juana as a queer figure validates our own history as queer people and shows Rich's "lesbian continuum" as defined in the previous chapter (650). Furthering discussion of Lorde's activism and lesbianism can help our current political fights. Marching against injustices today, I see Lorde's face and words painted on protest signs, proving that looking behind means looking to our present for our tomorrow.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Adrienne Rich: “Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women...The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain” (649). Validating our lives as queer people by valuing a lineage is the most important part of this thesis. Understanding and appreciating the fights of those who came before us can give us strength to love freely and boldly; this turn to the past also aids us in understanding what we have yet to accomplish. Keeping heteronormativity and its implications *as* compulsory helps us understand that orientation points of normativity exist to disenfranchise others. Like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Audre Lorde, we should live our lives for ourselves, for others, and refuse to stay silent.

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