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The Erotics of Violence: Imagining Alternative Possibilities to/of Queerphobia

It was a typically sultry, swelteringly hot day in July 2016. I was in Sri Lanka conducting an ethnography on “queer”¹ erotics and was waiting in Borella for a tardy bus to shuttle me to an interview. Borella is a sprawling, teeming section of Colombo, most famous as a central node in the city’s chaotic public transportation system. As I absentmindedly watched the familiar urban milieu, a bus screeched to a halt at the stop and emptied out its denizens. Out of the throng of passengers, my eyes were immediately drawn to a figure who stood out like a sore thumb. They were clad in vibrantly purple harem pants that billowed around them with each step, and a tight, bright orange t-shirt. Their face bore the traces of glittering eye shadow and the glisten of sweat and oil that the sun coaxes out of our brown skin. Their hair was a marvel, black with dirty blonde highlights that reached the small of their back. This majestically femme figure wore broad shoulders and the stature that troubled any easy identification as a woman, and wore them with pride. The pride was evident in their loping gait, the sway of their hips, the bounce of their hair as they weaved through the crowd.

As this figure approached me, our eyes met. The shock of recognition was evident in our gaze, the mutual acknowledgment that we are of the same kind. For I was dressed in similarly loose pants in a dusky pink, a white blouse that was unmistakably feminine, and a cloth bag that most men would balk at toting. My recognition of this figure may have begun with the commonality of our sartorial aesthetics, but it immediately extended to much more – the experience of being femme on the bus, regarded with horror, curiosity, lust, or a combination

¹ I use the term “queer” with a great degree of ambivalence and many reservations, for I am aware of the ethnocentrism it smuggles in (Wilson 2006), and my interlocutors’ unfamiliarity with the term. My use of the term to refer to both subjects and affects is motivated by the need to contest totalizing representations that are posited by other sexual discourses in South Asia (e.g., LGBT, MSM). As Judith Butler argues, the term queer can be considered “a site of collective contestation...the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (1993, p. 228). The amorphous, nebulous desires and subjectivities my interlocutors perform converge with the semantics of this term, and so I use it with caution as a placeholder.

thereof; being hyper-visible on Colombo's streets; the desire for beauty, the spectacle, excess. There were other desires that hung heavy in the air as well. The moment felt infinitely cruise-y, evident in the bold lookover they offered my way, the flirtatious twirl to their head as they turned around to look at me again upon passing me by. I was aware of the desire for desire, the sense of erotic possibility anywhere and everywhere that is a hallmark of queerness. Our encounter was limited to knowing eyes and appraising looks, and soon they were lost in the crowd.

Despite finding myself fascinated by this encounter, which took perhaps twenty seconds at most, my attention was soon drawn to a different (but related, as I would discover) scene. A bus that followed that which my doppelgänger had disembarked from had spewed its passengers onto the sidewalk. Two men had alighted from this bus and followed several steps behind the femme figure. One of them had evidently noticed the femme figure as he stared in undisguised wonderment, as if his eyes had betrayed him in their apprehension of the queer spectacle before him, an act of unabashed gawking that lasted a few seconds. In a stroke of ethnographic luck, this duo happened to pass me right as this man turned to his companion to mutter in a low tone "*balapang ara ponnayāge hati*" (look at that *ponnaya*). *Ponnaya* is a violent queerphobic slur in Sinhala, the language spoken by the dominant racial group in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese. This is akin to "faggot" in both meaning and affective weight, and while used liberally to signify any queer figure, queer desire, or to discipline "straight" men into heteronormativity, it is most often deployed against flamboyant femme figures, given the (object) visibility of gender transgression (Nichols 2015). Thus, it was entirely unsurprising that the term was invoked in this context, by a man recognizing a threat to patriarchal social order.

What transpired was undoubtedly a scene of street harassment and queer/transphobic violence, which my interlocutors are no strangers to. Yet, I would be remiss to treat this scene as

only that. It would be to ignore the amazement in the man's eyes as he watched the femme figure sashay down the street, the tone of wonderment that colored the slur, the patent disbelief that such queer possibilities existed in t/his world. Be it the mutual recognition of queerness between the femme figure and I, the sexual overtones to the glances we exchanged, the weight of the stares the man directed at the femme figure, the sense of awe that seeped into his voice even as he attempted to deflect and excise, multiple affects and desires exist alongside the violence that punctuates this scene. My analysis aims to excavate the many layers of desire and attachment that sediment this encounter, underlying, belying, and circulating through the violence. My analysis explicates an ontology of violence beyond its own categorical limits. I do this by bringing the work of Black feminists and queer theorists of color to bear on this vignette. Using Afro-Caribbean American poet and scholar Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic" (2007 [1984]) as a central interpretive framework, I weave in the thought of adjacent feminist, queer, and disability studies scholars to perform the following archeology.

Over the following sections of this essay, I explicate what it means to bring Black feminist thought to bear on an ethnographic scene in Sri Lanka, the methodology this essay posits for sensing and feeling our way through erotics, the erotic ruptures queer beauty produces, and the implications my analysis bears for the self-other dyad.

Black Feminist Transnational Intimacies

One might wonder why I choose an Audre Lorde essay to think through erotics in Sri Lanka, considering how her work is marked specifically as Black feminist literature, which then mediates its circulation and uses. Indeed, I could have invoked alternative theoretical lineages, such as the scholarly tradition on the erotic in South Asia (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007; Mankekar 2012; Nandy 1989; Vanita 2002). This essay is not a repudiation of the South Asian

literature nor a disavowal of its relevance. Instead, the essay asks what happens if we begin our analysis elsewhere, with texts and citational politics that are not believed to cohere.

I turn to Lorde's thinking for several reasons. First, Lorde's essay is the first treatise on the erotic that I encountered, and it has since formed the contours for my conceptualization of the category. To dismiss the indelible effect this text has exercised on my thinking would be to do it a disservice. A recent re-reading of this essay in a Black Studies seminar² foregrounded for me the mode Lorde writes in, which renders the work curiously unlanguageable (despite her moving eloquence), precisely because it seeks to a/effect the reader on the register of embodied feeling, illustrating so beautifully how Lorde's form mirrors content. As I argue in the following section, this intimate relationship between structure and content mirrors how I seek to ethnographically approach erotics through the sensed and felt, which renders Lorde's essay an unparalleled guide for my analysis.

Second, this attempt to think about Sri Lanka through Black feminist literature and vice versa coheres with my overarching intellectual enterprise of placing area studies in conversation with ethnic studies. As Kamala Visweswaran notes in *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (2010), there exists a teeming archive of Afro-Asian encounters and desires for proximity, from the exchange of visions and tactics between the Indian independence movement and the U.S. Civil Rights struggle to schools of thought devoted to theorizing the parallels between race in the United States and caste in India. These encounters were deeply inflected by difference, which often led to the reproduction of dominant discourses that raised the specter of violence (Burton 2016), thus forestalling a reading of natural or

² I wish to thank Dr. Beth Richie, the instructor for this course, and all my peers at the University of Illinois at Chicago for staging this wonderfully generative conversation. This is my way of citing the diverse inspirations and sources of knowledge that suffuse this text, those that traditional citation practices fail to represent, and to signal the collective labor that knowledge production always is.

uncomplicated solidarity between the Black and brown figures. The conversation between Black studies and South Asian studies that this essay rehearses traces these historical circuits of knowledge and affective circulations, incongruities and tensions and all, to ask what happens to both field formations when they encounter one another.

As Visweswaran notes, this conversation challenges area studies' investment in an understanding of area geography as a bounded entity, which curiously reproduces the singularity of the nation-state even as "area" is meant to replace "nation" as a more capacious unit of analysis (Shohat 2006). Instead, we are called upon to recognize the long histories of translocal contact, reaching its apotheosis in our current epoch of globalization (Appadurai 1990) but predating the colonial encounter, as proponents of world system history have long maintained (Abu-Lughod 1989; Frank 1991). In turn, ethnic studies is called upon to think beyond the U.S. nation state in its theorizing of racialization, to situate the racialized figure within a complex matrix of transnational, transregional, and transhistorical processes that inflect localized discourses and materialities of race. One of the contributions this essay offers to this burgeoning conversation on the interstices of area and ethnic studies is to question what the proper objects of such an analysis are. The various corpora of literature that inflect this essay have been called upon to critically interrogate and reconstitute, at times even abandon altogether, their proper objects, chief among them transnational feminism (Desai, Bouchard and Detournay 2010; Fernandes 2013), anthropology (Fabian 2002; Povinelli 2011), and queer theory and sexuality studies (Butler 1994; Chen and Luciano 2015; Cohen 1997).³ Following suit, I wonder what proper object coalesces and calcifies in the conversation between ethnic studies and area studies.

³ Margot Weiss (2016) unites the critiques of anthropology's and queer theory's proper objects to pose this same question for queer anthropology, noting that desire as research object illuminates how *queerly* structures the anthropological endeavor to assay situated sexualities. I draw from this analysis in foregrounding desires, affects, and attachments as the object of analysis in the inter-textual conversation between area studies and ethnic studies.

In many an instance it has been race (Aoude 2006; J. E. Butler 2011; Visweswaran 2010). This project asks what other objects may come into view if given the chance. Can we think of desire, attachment, pleasure, cathexis as objects that the inter-textual conversation of ethnic and area studies may have unique analytical approaches to? This essay is an incipient attempt to respond to this question, in the hope that such explorations can widen the field of analysis in both field formations while retaining the generative epistemic labor both perform in assaying global-local significations of race, for categories such as desire are never untouched by racial, and other idioms of, difference.

The potential transformations area studies can produce within ethnic studies are certainly pertinent in a discussion of Black studies, especially Black feminist theory. Recent developments in the academic study of difference, the transnational turn in women's studies being but one example, has resulted in the accusation that U.S. American Black feminist theory reproduces the self-referential logics of U.S. centrism (Collins 2009; Soto 2005). While overstating U.S. Black feminist identification with the United States, this critique responds, in part, to the tendency for non-U.S. Black feminist thought to figure less prominently in this tradition (Caldwell 2016). In contrast, a conversation between Black (feminist) studies and area studies foregrounds a particular concern that the former has held for sites beyond the U.S. and the analytics of borders, migration, and empire (Collins 2009). Mylei Blackwell (2015) documents an important strand of this history in her historical analysis of how the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) emerged out of the Black Women's Liberation Committee that formed to address problems women were having within Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Featuring imperialism as one of the central tenets of its political analysis and organizing, the TWWA engaged in a critique of patriarchal nationalism and solidarity work with women's movements

across East Asia, West Asia, and Central and South America. Continuing this legacy, Black feminist abolitionists such as Angela Davis (2012) have long connected issues of police violence and incarceration in the United States to their cognates in other parts of the world under state violence and imperialism. This transnational politic circulates widely through Black feminist capillaries of scholarship and activism, as exemplified by the Movement 4 Black Lives' enduring solidarity with the Palestinian struggle against Occupation (Ransby 2018).

Indeed, one needs to look no further than Audre Lorde herself to glean this Black feminist preoccupation with non-U.S. liberation movements. *Sister Outsider* (2007 [1984]), the collection of essays in which Lorde's speech on erotics was ultimately published, is bookended by her musings on trips to Russia and Grenada. These reflections sprawl across topics of race, yes, but also imperialism, capitalism, labor, inter-subjective relations, and the texture of daily life. These two essays index an interest in the global-local political milieu in both countries as an entry point to meditations on what transnational solidarity may look like. However, they are not confined to a narrow reading of the political, which so often is marked by the perilous possibility of slippage into U.S. exceptionalism. Instead, these essays demonstrate an interest in lived experience, particularly the sensual life of the land and its human and non-human ecologies. That the essay "Uses of the Erotic," which seeks ways of expressing the sensuous and spiritual in inter-subjectivity and epistemology, is included in a collection that locates these questions transnationally speaks volumes for the capacity her thought bears for travel.

In invoking Lorde's work in this essay, I follow Amber Musser's (2018) provocation in suggesting that Black feminist theory, and Black studies more broadly, bear important insights for and readings of other cultural milieus, in U.S.-based diasporas and elsewhere. Through the following analysis, I suggest that Lorde's work offers unique analytical possibilities for the erotic

in Sri Lanka, while my juxtaposition of erotics and violence complicates her more sanguine exegesis. Rinaldo Walcott (2007) has argued that Lorde should be included among the ranks of queer theorists for the ways in which she expands our understanding of sex, desire, pleasure, and the non-normative modes through which such experiences can be expressed and understood.

Lyndon K. Gill (2018) extends the relevance of Lorde's work even further, framing her as an existential philosopher who asks questions of "what does it mean to exist? How is life meaningful? How do we know what we know?" The expansive nature of these questions leads Keguro Macharia (2019) to contend that Lorde speaks to universal in the same valence as, but to very different ends than, analytical philosophy. For instance, Lorde proffers the term "Black mother" to refer to a universal human capacity "whether we are Black or not" that is "the chaos which is Black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy which is...[s]inister, smelly, erotic, confused, upsetting..." (2007 [1984], 101). Macharia interprets this claim as a psychic one, working counter to Freud's theorizing of the universal Oedipal father to generate a psychic alterity grounded upon the chaotic rather than the disciplinary. This embrace of chaos, of terror becomes particularly relevant to my discussion of the self and other that risk being transformed through the erotics of difference, a transformation thwarted only by the desperate turn to violence. To my immediate point here, I wonder why Lorde's work should not travel as widely and be invoked as liberally as that of the Euro-American canon. While the aim is not to replace one canon with another, for indeed one can imagine Lorde bristling at the very thought of a canon, it is to ask what different questions and alternative epistemic and ontic possibilities come into the frame when she is considered to be theorizing human experience that is resonant with what unfolds at a bus stop in Colombo. While

her attunement to difference disallows any lazy equivalences from being drawn during such migrations, I join Walcott, Gill, and Macharia in articulating the promise of such portability.

Black feminist thought is always, already traveling, as attested to by the global circulations of intersectionality (Keucheni and Mügge 2021). Such travel is fraught and vexed, June Jordan (2003) notes in her ruminations on her traveling politics and body as she journeys from the United States to a resort in the Bahamas. Similarly, Black feminist thinkers such as Ann duCille (1996) and Jennifer Nash (2019) trace the various fantasies, projections, agendas, and instrumentalizations at work in the very invocation of Black feminist thought as portable. This essay is sensitive to the ethical problematics they raise, recognizing the potential to gentrify Black feminist theory in the very attempt to make it travel. As a body of thought and practices that finds its genesis in the lived realities of Black woman and femmehood, even in the general claims that it makes (Collins 2009), Black feminist theory articulates a determined exegetical move to return to the lived conditions of such subjects. While the figures that may come into the analytical focus of this essay may not be Black women and femmes, I intend to rehearse this move by contributing to an understanding of how the violent conditions Black women and femmes exist in around the world can be transformed.

Lorde's conceptualization of the erotic turns on the fact that it indexes a capacity for deep feeling, a recurring theme in her work. Towards the beginning of the essay, she posits that "the erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," continuing on to suggest that "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" (2007 [1984], 54). From our work to the various inter-subjective relationships we are entangled in, or our experience of ourselves, Lorde suggests that the ability to experience all dimensions of life through the deepest recesses

of one's bodymind and acute awareness of voluptuosity can transform our existence. This depth of feeling is one dimension to the erotic. She notes how the deepest sense of feeling can also produce a fullness of it, which suffuses every aspect of life once touched. It is from this wellspring, Lorde writes, that all creativity arises.

Another aspect of the erotic resides in "the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy, in the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, harkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience" (56). Here, Lorde notes that the erotic serves as the conditions of possibility for joy, and not the poor imitation that hegemony offers. Joy exists in inhabiting the body fully, in connecting with the body's intuitive and instinctual response, in the euphoric glow that suffuses the moment of surrender. It responds to our "deepest cravings" and produces "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (54). Lorde resorts to using examples to indicate that the erotic is that which must be experienced and cannot be taught through language. Yet, the examples she uses convey in a powerful, visceral sense what the erotic is and how close we each may have come in our lives to experiencing it, despite structural forces determining who is allowed joy and how.

She notes that the erotic is a capacity that is often "unexpressed and unrecognized" (2007 [1984], 53) as systems of oppressions operate to suppress and disconnect us from it. Patriarchy operates to vilify the erotic as hysterical and confused, to be dismissed and pathologized. Capitalism robs us of our connection to the erotic by privileging profit over human need, thus reducing work to "a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love" (55). The erotic is a "nonrational knowledge" (53), which speaks to how *logos* has been deployed by structural forces to discipline and neutralize our relationship to

the erotic. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde observes that structural forces have disciplined the erotic by recognizing that, instead of the use of brute force, the way to get people to “testify against themselves...is to build [police tactics and oppressive techniques] in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out” (103). While this understanding seems Foucauldian, Lorde crucially deviates from the Western post-structuralist tradition by locating her analysis on a spiritual register.

While debate has raged around the second sentence of Lorde’s essay – “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane” (53) – I choose to follow Lyndon K. Gill’s reading of the gender politics of the text to suggest that the erotic is not a capacity that is restricted to women.⁴ This reading is entirely in keeping with the universal quality of Lorde’s theorizing, of the characterization as the erotic as intrinsic, deeply interior expanse that is enlivened through the connectedness one experiences with others. The erotic indexes the capacity for a sensory attunement and felt experience of joy, pleasure, contentment, peace, and the sublime, and in the deepest and fullest sense. In the following section I discuss what methods are required for a task as delicate, subtle, and keen as that of tracing the erotic.

An Ethnography of Sensing and Feeling

Audre Lorde’s influence on this essay is not limited to the conceptual. It structures the methodology of my project, orienting me towards modes of knowledge production that deviate from traditional anthropological practice. In particular, the knowledge that is proffered in this

⁴ Gill (2018) carefully locates Lorde’s essay at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, a conference organized in 1978 in protest of the exclusion of women from the American Historical Association. He suggests that the audience of mostly white feminist women historians Lorde faced at a women’s liberal arts college, at an event held in honor of Simone de Beauvoir, may have shaped the language this essay deploys, requiring Lorde to speak specifically to the erotic capacities of women and not at the exclusion of other genders.

essay is made possible by ways of sensing, feeling, and speculating about the ethnographic scene I witnessed, its many layers of sensorial effect, affective experience, and various ethico-ontological possibilities that emerge as a result. If the erotics represent a nonrational knowledge, as Lorde purports, then its encounter and explication require methods that are not wholly subsumed by the *logocentrism* of positivist epistemologies. I bring to bear recent interdisciplinary innovations in anthropological and ethnographic practice, particularly of multisensory anthropology (Howes 2019), the affective turn in anthropology (Rutherford 2016; White 2017), and speculative anthropology (Anderson, et al. 2018; Pandian 2019) on Lorde's theorization to develop a methodological repertoire that brings us closer to recognizing the erotic. While I do not claim that these methods fully evade the disciplining effects of positivism, I argue that they attend to phenomena that have long been ignored or engaged with in limited ways by standard analytical practice.

Multisensory ethnography bears a long genealogy, with David Howes discerning a protean form of it in Margaret Mead's behavioral fieldnotes on the Balinese (Howes 2019). While the Geertzian turn to writing culture soon emerged as a dominant mode of doing anthropology, an attentiveness to the sensory persisted, significantly marked by Michael Herzfeld's (2001) writing on the senses. Bearing many names, such as anthropology of the senses (Howes, 1991), sensuous geographies (Rodaway 1994), sensuous scholarship (Stoller 1997), sensory studies (Bull, et al. 2006), fleshy perspectives (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007), sensory phenomenology (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009), emplaced knowing (Pink and Leder Mackley 2013), a sociology of the senses (Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk 2012) and ways of sensing (Howes and Classen 2014), ethnographers have long considered the role that the senses play in shaping social phenomena.

Ethnography has always been about the researcher making *sense* of cultural experience through our *sensing* bodyminds, of “sharing in the sensible [partage du sensible]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience” (Laplantine 2015 [2005], 2). The methods I use foreground this reality, centering the aural, haptic, olfactory, and visual, and the synesthesia between these sensory modes, as ways of engaging in a social scene. As will be evident in the analysis that follows, I attend to the auditory, not simply the spoken word, but also pause, tone, and inflection, to assay the various, at times contradictory valences that constitute the aural. Similarly, I trace the various visual phenomena that circulate in this scene, from the plainly visible spectacle of queer flamboyance to the more subtle signs of a flirtatious look, the sway of the hips, the widening of eyes that are laden with meaning. The boundaries between my sensory experience and that of my interlocutors blur in such an approach, indicating how attention to the sensory dimensions of the erotic render the boundaries between the self and other more permeable, a point I will return to later in my analysis.⁵ If the erotic is to be experienced through one’s inhabiting of the body and

⁵ Theorists have noticed this curious propensity of multisensory anthropological research to disturb the elegant and rigid boundaries Western epistemologies have drawn. Yet another example of this is the blurring of the distinction between the “normal” (or real) and “not-normal” (paranormal). Anthropology has a long history of reifying the latter, as exemplified by the separation of religion from science (think Evans-Pritchard’s treatment of Azande witchcraft; van Ede 2009). In contrast, multisensory anthropology’s excavations of interior and social sensorial life do not treat such distinctions as a given. Take for instance Constance Classen’s (1990) ethnography on the significance of color in the world of the Desana of the Amazon, for whom every living being is surrounded by a personal field of colors. Her descriptions of such intimate colorful energetic fields may easily be dismissed as unempirical, lacking in rigor, not real. However, as van Ede notes: “in order to circumvent rather fruitless discussions on what is factual and what is belief, the main question should be directed towards how the world is known. This how asks for a methodology that is rooted in daily, bodily, sensory experience, not in abstract, ideational, mere theoretical reflections” (van Ede 2009, 70). Multisensory anthropology’s collapsing of the cosmological and epistemological dovetails with Lorde’s determinedly spiritual analysis of the erotic. From her characterization of the erotic as a non-rational knowledge to its inherent unlanguageability (instead that which must be felt and sensed) this capacity too is that which has material, psychic, and spiritual lives. This convergence between Lordean erotics and multisensory anthropology guides the methodological direction of my argument and intimates a crucial way forward in anthropology’s excavation of the unseen and unheard.

attending to the sensorial experience of self-embodiment and inter-subjective intimacy, then it is to the sensorium that we must turn to discern the working of the erotic.

Earlier critiques of phenomenology as individualizing sensory experience have led to more sophisticated understandings of the dialectic between the individual and social conditions in forming the senses and sensed (Pink and Howe 2010). These developments have contributed to a keener understanding of situatedness and the structuring of sensory experience. For instance, Alex Rhys-Taylor's (2020) exploration of taste and smell as placemaking and emplacing experiences in East London indicates how the city becomes a particularly dense space of sensory phenomena, all jostling for attention and both overwhelming and reifying dominant culture at once. This sensory analysis of the city dovetails with my own experience of Colombo, especially its roadscapes, as affecting the sensorium in a particular way.

Colombo is an assemblage of confused signs of colorful storefronts and billboards all cramped into limited space and competing for real estate, the motorways choked full of multi-colored buses and private vehicles, and motorcycles that pour into any free space. There's a jumble of loudly patterned clothes being sold here, LED signs advertising phones and electronic repairs there, multilingual road signs that demand multiple modes of reading everywhere. The city is a soundscape of blaring horns, calls by street vendors, the sounds of people talking on mobile phones or to those in the vicinity, the screeching of tires, and the cawing of crows. Colombo is suffused with the smell of street food like patties and koththu, exhaust fumes, sewage, and the odors of its many denizens rising to the air and mingling in the heat. It is against this miasma of sounds, smells, and sights that the sensorial excess of the queer figure plays out. One is already primed for the overwhelm of the sensorium in this urban milieu, less attentive to the chaos that is familiar (van Ede 2009). Queer spectacle startles in such a context, undoing

routine habits of attention and demanding a fuller sensory engagement with excess. I was startled out of reverie by the femme figure's flamboyance as much as the staring man, indicating how the sensory creates the conditions of possibility for its own, any analysis.

It is of vital importance to mark that the senses and sensations are gendered (Classen 1998), racialized (Stoeberl 2016), and structured by class (Bourdieu 1987). My analysis in this essay attends specifically to the ways the heteropatriarchy as well as gender-sexual difference inflect the sensory performance of queer aesthetics as well as its reception. While class features less prominently, I discuss the following dimension to the ethnographic scene as a way to mark the classed dynamic of the encounter of gender-sexual difference. It is noteworthy that, despite being attired in femme fashion myself, these men did not single me out for mockery. I suggest that this is due to the distinct class location my clothes index. I was told during my fieldwork that I looked like a foreigner or diasporic Sri Lankan, due to the muted colors, more conservative prints, and fabrics I favor. Thus, while I certainly draw looks whenever I navigate Colombo's cityscape, I have rarely been aware of receiving queerphobic vitriol, given the deference that is directed towards the elite and middle classes. This scene indicates how violence easily emerges as the default in the encounter of the most marginalized. My paper asks if the same is true for desire. Relatedly, elsewhere I have noted how queer aesthetics are marked by specific racialized markings (e.g., how bright, lurid colors are indexed as "Tamil" or "Muslim" aesthetics by the Sinhala-Buddhist middle class that privileges aesthetic austerity; Ellawala forthcoming). I signal these placeholders to suggest that future work must build upon the analysis of this paper to assay the racialized, classed, casted, and religious valences to the erotics of the encounter of gender-sexual difference.

The affective turn in anthropology offers yet another methodological strand to the thread of analysis I build here. Lorde's formulation of the erotic locates it, though irreducibly, on an affective register. Following Sarah Ahmed's (2004) intervention, theorists have recognized the necessity of thinking of emotion and affect as imbricated phenomena that work together in and through bodyminds and spaces to connect each to the other, producing a laden atmosphere, mood, vibe (Clement and Waitt 2018). This approach exists in contradistinction to the prevailing tendency to think of emotion as an expression of individual subjectivity or affect as a precognitive bodily capacity to act. Much like with the sensory, methods attuned to the affective allow for a recognition of the anthropologist as a social actor enmeshed in the ephemeral but often keenly felt social matrices of the ethnographic moment. In such situations, affect is experienced "as sensorial phenomena that emerge from and influence encounters of anthropologists with informants, spaces, environments, events, memories, images, and texts (other ethnographies, academic articles or theories, our field notes, scribbling, drafts, etc.)" (Stodulka, Selim and Mattes 2018, 521). This attunement to the effects upon the sensorium intimates the relationship between sense and affect, how embodied modes of experiencing – touching, feeling, smelling, and so forth – influence ways and abilities of acting and thinking (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). This paper importantly suggests that the erotic may be the circuit for these synaptic, psychic, spiritual connections between stimulus and reaction that operate in multidirectional ways, furthering our understanding of the ontology of sense and affect.

To affect and be affected by the events we witness is what it means to perform ethnography. While it can be challenging to trace the many instantiations and permutations of affect beyond observable social practices of affecting and affected persons (Wetherell 2015), Stodulka, Selim, and Mattes (2018) chart a methodological practice in discerning and analyzing

affect through long-term fieldwork engagement, which allows for the (re)appraisal of affects against the insight gleaned from other ethnographic practices (e.g., interviews, participant observation) and the lived sense of local cultural milieux. This is precisely what I attempt to achieve in this essay, in assaying a suspended moment through both the concrete lived experience interlocutors have shared with me as well as my emplaced understanding of intimacy, queerness, and Colombo through both research and two decades of life there.

While participant observation may be the most recognizable method of how I witnessed the scene in question, Gavin Brown's (2007) method of "observant participation" acknowledges the many effects of my presence as a social actor in the ethnographic scene. This form of immersion produced an affective response to the dense web of affects I found myself enmeshed in, indexing how I both penetrate and am penetrated by the field. Such an interpenetration invokes the erotic in another way, as my "embodied thrill" (Brown 2007, 2686) in being situated in the matrix of inter-subjective exchange, as my deep feeling that offers insight to that of others. What I am gesturing to here is how the erotic may serve as method as well as object of anthropological research.

The affective turn too is a storied tradition in the discipline. Anthropology has responded to Clough and Halley's (2007) argument for the centrality of affect in theorizing the social by way of a sustained discussion of the possibilities and limits of affective anthropological research. Often, this has led to a reformulating of earlier concepts, such as "tacit knowledge" (Hervik 1994), rerouting them through more nuanced understandings of affect. The burgeoning scholarship on affect also illustrates the relational nature of both its experience and study, with research attuned to affect being described as a relational methodology (Spencer 2010; White 2017). While this essay engages the relational nature of affectively charged encounter at the bus

stop in a certain way – by interpreting multiple relational possibilities, not simply that of violence – this discussion is also an opportunity to highlight a limitation to my research. Given the way in which the scene unfolded, I am unable to co-produce knowledge on this scene with the femme figure or the two men (or other witnesses of this scene). Ideally, this analysis would occur in conversation with the self-articulated thoughts, desires, and meaning making of other participants, as a way of centering the relational nature of affective knowledge production (Clerke and Hopwood 2014). While scholarship on affect helps me recognize that my interpretive inclinations are not entirely solipsistic given the significant affective exchange that occurred (the exchange of glances, the charge of desire that permeated the social field throughout), future directions of this research lie in the (re)reading of this scene as a collective interpretive exercise.

It may be abundantly clear by now that attunement to both the sensory and affective in ethnographic research requires a different mode of apprehension, thought, and analysis than dominant approaches in anthropology. For this reason, I turn to the speculative mode (Haraway 2016; Hartman 2019). The recent interest speculation has garnered in anthropology clears space for me to engage this mode in ethnographic analysis (Anderson, et al. 2018; Pandian 2019), while linking this incipient move in the discipline to the scholarship on sense and affect to suggest that speculation is most suitable for the study of these phenomena.

Taking my cue from my interlocutors who spent hours with me on rumination and conjecture during my fieldwork, I deploy a speculative mode of inquiry that imagines the many different interpretive possibilities of the ethnographic scene in question. As Jayna Brown and Alexis Lothian (2012) state in their introduction to a special issue on speculation, “to speculate, the act of speculation, is...to play, to invent, to engage in the practice of imagining.” The very

nonrationality of the erotic, the effervescence of the sensory and affective necessitate an anti-positivist mode that stays with the minute, the invisible, the quiet in ways that resist interpretive foreclosure. Speculation offers a different epistemic habitat. “Instead of universal truths and a stable universe, speculations inhabit a breach, a space of disobedience, of awe,” Brown and Lothian suggest. My commitment to explicating a breach in dominant culture, of *logos* in the encounter of gender-sexual difference converges with an epistemic mode that performs similar work. Form mirrors content. The erotic is a profound site of breach, of disobedience, of awe; it seems fitting that speculation be the mode of discovery to discern, trace, and imagine the erotic underpinnings of the social world. The excess that speculation indexes – of meaning, interpretation, possibilities – is particularly resonant with the queer excess of the specific social world I am preoccupied with. Form mirrors content. As Ernst Bloch (1995 [1954]) reminds us, it is through our imaginative capacities that we can glimpse a different world that lies beyond our current one, and my investment in insisting on ethical possibilities at the very site of violence requires just such an imagination. This essay is written in the subjunctive, various interpretations tentatively proffered all to render palpable – the taste, smell, touch, sound, and sight – of a different world. It is to this world-making I now turn.

The Erotics of Queer Beauty

Queer aesthetics constitute a significant dimension of the ethnographic scene I related, producing the queer spectacle that in turn produced the web of recognition and desire that I am so preoccupied with. Aesthetics, particularly its queer idioms, tap into one’s capacity for deep feeling, eliciting responses that dominant culture endeavors to repress. The beauty of the abject operates on a different register to that of normative aesthetics, yet it demands recognition. In wondering what is beautiful about Blackness, Saidiya Hartman says:

It is to recognize the obvious, but that which is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free, the beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise... beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of *too much* (2019, 33).

To the likes of the femme figure and my interlocutors, beauty makes the world inhabitable, life livable. They wield queer aesthetics – their saris and dresses, wigs and blowouts, dewy makeup and glittering jewelry – against the strictures of dominant ideology, and this attempt to live outside of hegemony imbues such sartorial displays with a unique kind of beauty. In the femme figure's loping gait and upturned chin, I recognized a defiance that challenged the stares and ridicule that surrounded them. Theirs was a grace and majesty born from rebellion, a beauty that swirled about them as palpably as fabric and streaked hair. Upon seeing me, the speech of their body shifted. In recognizing our shared femininity and queerness, the coyness that seeped into their swaying hips and knowing eyes transformed them. They were now playful child and seductress all at once, embodying a freedom that proclaimed that they were not alone at this crowded bus stop. To desire is to be altered. From stubborn defiance to teasing coquetry, they were a study in the beauty of living otherwise across the twenty seconds that our paths crossed.

As Hartman notes, beauty for this figure and my interlocutors is an embodiment of what is deemed abject, perverse, defiled, unlovely – broad shoulders in too-tight dresses, foundation over stubble, necklaces hungrily clasping Adam's apples – and finding their allure. These aesthetic practices transform the bodies and categories that they are bequeathed at birth, transfiguring what is given into vast, slippery, fractal selves that inspire a cascade of category confusions (Ellawala 2021). My interlocutors agree with Hartman (as did the femme figure, given their attire) that the beauty of abject aesthetics stem in part from their insistence on the ostentatious, the *too much*. Queer aesthetics demand more – of the sensorium, of the world. An

excess of colors, patterns, textures, desire, pleasure, and life. Queer beauty begs for and claims more, more, more in the face of the austerity of bourgeois heteronormative⁶ society. These attachments, sensations, and affects conjure the erotic. Queer aesthetics are often a fulfillment of the deepest cravings one experiences, irrepressible despite the disciplinary violence such sartorial performances are subjected to. These aesthetics are produced out of a desire for voluptuousness that Lorde theorizes the erotic to index, a yearning for sensory extravagance and excess, and they achieve just that. Articulated in the queer attire of the femme figure is an embrace of chaos, of a disordering of the norms of purity, simplicity, respectability, of matching colors and complementary patterns. Queer excess signals a flirting with the messiness that Lorde suggests lies in the reservoir of the erotic, a wild unruliness that defies logic and reason. It signals a creativity that works against a lifetime of received wisdom, histories of bullying, an archive of looks and menacing stares, a corpus of beatings and remonstrations. Lorde notes that the erotic can be most acutely felt when one fully and feelingly inhabits the body, and the femme figure and my interlocutors do just that. Theirs is a practice of exploring the secret recesses of the body to turn their head this way, to move their hand artfully in a new movement, to shape their waist just so that more, new beauty is possible. They stretch the body beyond the limits dictated by heteropatriarchy, exploring all that the adorned body can do for them.

Beauty was not a luxury for the femme figure of my scene. Beauty was dearly bought, given the harassment I witnessed. My interlocutors testify to how just how omnipresent such

⁶ I use this term cautiously, as I do not want to reify the notion that the homosexual-heterosexual binary obtains as a coherent cultural logic in Sri Lanka. In fact, much of my work is devoted to excavating how queer desires are braided with those more socially sanctioned, in ways that defy an easy sundering of the two. Nonetheless, I recognize the lip service that is paid to ideas of “tradition” and “culture” that reify heteronormativity, and the anxious attempts of dominant culture to jettison the queer. This essay traces the distinction between formal discourses (e.g., heteronormativity) and lived reality, and how erotics may inhabit the space in between.

queerphobic violence is. Sachini,⁷ one of my interlocutors who loved dressing in saris, makeup, and wigs, spent a significant part of our first conversation recounting experiences of street harassment and other forms of violence she had been forced to endure. Despite the ubiquity of such violence, Sachini never fails to adorn her body in her queer sartorial sensibility. When I asked her why she replied: “I like to feel like a supermodel...If no one can tell that I’m not a woman, that’s when I feel maximum satisfaction in my life.” Here Sachini confesses what I gleaned from the femme figure of the ethnographic scene, and what I experience through my own femme fashion, the rapture that queer aesthetics inspires. Sachini’s aspiration (“no one can tell I’m not a woman”) is one she knows is futile, for as someone who does not intend to undergo gender confirmation surgery and toggles between masculine and feminine presentation, she knows that she will always fail to “pass.” Yet, this does not preclude ecstasy, gesturing to how Sachini is able to claim “maximum satisfaction,” a surfeit of deep feeling, the erotic, even amidst violence. Hartman’s explication of Black beauty reminds us that daring to dream of an otherwise within the enclosure of dominant culture is what imbues such aesthetics with a particular kind of wounded loveliness. The erotic persists within and through and after violence.

Queer beauty is not felt only by the queer figure. The scene I narrate indicates how this beauty obtains even in the eye of the beholder. As Saidiya Hartman notes, this beauty is acknowledged grudgingly, provisionally. In the scene in question the reception of beauty went unmentioned, and would have gone unnoticed if one missed the rounding of the eyes, the lift of eyebrows, the suspended stare, the incredulity that poured into the voice. The recognition of beauty betrays the self, no matter how disciplined, leaking through the seams of internalized hegemony to suggest a counterpoint to the dismissive slur. Thus begins a contrapuntal movement

⁷ I use pseudonyms to refer to my interlocutors, to safeguard their privacy.

of desire and horror. To overwhelm the efforts of dominant culture to see queer aesthetics exclusively as abjection and perversity, a pervasive imperative that is taught lifelong, this alternative response must be of significant intensity, magnitude, and depth. It is precisely the excessive quality of queer beauty, judged so by a phobic world, that produced the sensory overwhelm I beheld. Resonant here is Lorde's invocation of the erotic as a measure of deep feeling, suggesting that the sight of queer spectacle evoked an erotic response. The man in this scene was deeply moved, despite his attempts to school his reaction and dismiss it through queerphobic language.

I choose to interpret the deep feeling he unwittingly confessed through the notion that queer spectacle disrupts the normative present that dominant ideology anxiously and violently clambers to produce. I do not posit this interpretation as an exclusive one, for this deep feeling may be polyvalent and complex. For the sake of brevity, I limit myself to a line of inquiry that extends the claims of several theorists I have invoked thus far. Hartman's understanding of abject beauty as that which indexes "an experiment in living otherwise" dovetails with Jose Esteban Muñoz's argument in *Cruising Utopia* that queer aesthetic practices "chip away at reality" (2009, 125). Through an assessment of visual artist Ray Johnson's work as well as his contemporary Jill Johnston's critique of it, Muñoz asserts that queer aesthetics negate the fabric of objective reality. His analysis turns on the art of the New York Correspondence School (NYCS), which Johnson founded, which coordinated a mail art project that spun expansive webs of entanglement across the 90s cultural scenes. Muñoz reads this project as a utopian transformation, which negates the standard temporality of a letter (from the sender's present to the recipient's future) to continually defer reception as the same piece of mail moves along circuits of lovers and acquaintances. Meanwhile, Jill Johnston's commentary of "[t]he everything

as everything. The organism as totally illegal. The legality of nothing but pleasure. In an orgy of self-reproduction (the paramecium). The end of importance. The end of politics. The end of hierarchies. The end of families. The end of groups” speaks to the negation of the present social order, to be replaced by new systems of knowledge, organization, belonging.

The normative reality that Muñoz speaks of is that which Lorde recognizes as suppressing the erotic in men and disfiguring it in women. Thus, a negation of this reality creates the possibility of those most unfamiliar with their erotic capacity connecting with this resource and experiencing deep feeling. Thinking between Hartman, Muñoz, and Lorde illuminates some of the phenomenological and psychic dynamics that may have been at play in the ethnographic scene in question. The possibility of an otherwise that queer beauty indexes ruptures normative reality, of order and reason, daily habit and ritual, that dominant culture strives to produce as total. Normality splits, allowing in alternative ontic possibilities in a dizzying rush that disorients the onlooker. Indeed, the embodiment of deep feeling that I witnessed in this man spoke of a disbelief that someone so femme, so queer, so ostentatious, so audacious could exist in his world. He was disarmed, dazed, confused. The response of deep feeling queer excess elicits prompts a deluge of questions. How could this figure not have been jettisoned, crushed? How can they sashay down the street with such confidence? How dare they be adorned so vividly, alluringly, garishly? How can such a profusion of color, pattern, texture exist? How does one register such sensory overload? Queer spectacle attests to the failure of dominant culture as a total phenomenon and holds open the glimmers of a different way of being. The desires and fantasies that heteropatriarchy disciplines and represses strain to reach fulfillment in the witnessing of such aesthetics. The fissures in the barriers that imprison the erotic widen, allowing the onlooker

to feel a deep sense of wonderment and possibility. The erotic revels in the freedom that queer spectacle enables, reaching towards a world in which deep feeling saturates lived experience.

And all too briefly it ends. Dominant ideology comes rushing back to restore order, return normality, buttress the guards against the erotic, and negate the queer figure as obscene and inconsequential. A slur falls from the lips and hangs suspended in the air. Life goes on as usual.

The Self and Other in Erotic Entanglement

If in the previous section I endeavored to illustrate how erotics offer alternative possibilities of *being*, for both the femme figure and the onlooker, in this section I explore what modes of *being with* exist at the encounter of (queer) difference and the experience of deep feeling. Taking a classical turn, Lorde traces the etymology of the term erotic from its Greek roots: “the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony” (55). That eros is born to Chaos indicates the unruly, wayward nature of the erotic. Agreeing with this pronouncement, Anne Carson’s interrogation of the erotic across the work of Sappho, Sophocles, and other Classical Greek thinkers in *Eros: The Bittersweet* (1998) demonstrates the inchoate nature of this category. Carson notes that eros illustrates how the object of desire is simultaneously both friend and enemy, thus causing one to experience both love and hate towards it at once,⁸ in keeping with the paradoxical nature of the erotic that Carson labors to explicate throughout her text.

⁸ Carson (1998) draws from a range of textual examples to demonstrate how love and hate come to be coterminous in the erotic moment, such as one of Catullus’ epigrams (“I hate and I love. Why? you might ask. I don’t know. But I feel it happening and I hurt”) to Sappho’s physiological explanation of the erotic (“the moment when the soul parts on itself in desire is conceived as a dilemma of body and senses”; 1998, 7). The last example indexes the debilitating effects of eros, how desire produces a failure of action and moral evaluation, an estrangement of the self that inspires acrimony.

What Carson's reading of Greek texts offers is an understanding of how an inchoate erotic bears the capacity for a multitude of affects and relationalities. To extend this insight to my ethnographic vignette, I suggest that the erotic enables the man to view the femme figure as both "friend" and "enemy," an object of erotic cathexis who can be approached with both love and hatred. This formulation departs from Lorde's understanding of the erotic in insisting on the simultaneity of antipathy and attraction. There is an important clarification on the ontology of violence and erotics articulated here. According to Carson, the erotic is not that which exists alongside violence, it encompasses the sense of hatred and enmity that could potentially inspire violence, judging by the threats that enraged lovers of the Greek tradition make. Violence may arise out of, rather than simply exist beside the erotic. The argument I have staged thus far about the erotic is not incongruent with Carson's claim, for I have discussed how the queerphobic slur is brandished as a weapon against the erotic, suturing the seams of dominant ideology shut from where the erotic ripped its way through for a moment. Dominant culture's imperative for violence grows clearer in the face of this breach, the threat the erotic poses to hegemony must be contained through the deployment of violence. Queerphobic violence can emerge out of the very unfolding of the erotic, but erotics may still persist within the violence that is unleashed reactively. The complex relationship I aim to narrate between violence and erotics recognizes the possibility of each emerging through and constituting the other.

In contrast to Carson's account, Lorde's conceptualization of the erotic as a relational force narrates a more harmonious scene between the desiring dyad. In describing one of the fundamental dynamics of this capacity, she says:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. 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).

Hers is an understanding of the erotic as a generative binding force between the self and other, bringing bodyminds together in desire and maintaining this proximity through the ties of shared joy. Lorde posits the many registers on which joy can be felt, expanding the possibilities of the erotic beyond the sexual and romantic that Carson limits herself to, a significant distinction between their theorizations. As Keguro Macharia notes, Lordean erotics “lubricate...interactions, not by eradicating difference, but by creating a shared feeling and practice through which difference can be approached” (2019, 56). Differences do not dissolve in the encounter, but shared joy and the depth of its feeling offers a way to be with through difference.

How does one reconcile Lorde’s optimistic view of erotic relations with the more fraught account that Carson posits? How do we treat the tension between a Lordean erotic that offers an ethical relationality through difference and the tumultuous, mercurial erotic that Carson discerns, a love that can at any point transform into hatred and violence? Perhaps an answer lies in a question Fred Moten (2020) posed as part of a meditation on freedom and free jazz: “what if violence is just this continual refusal to leave anyone alone?” Both elegantly succinct and world-bearing all at once, this question, nay invitation disavows a binary reading of love-hate and friend-enemy that Carson offers. Instead, Moten’s formulation insists on a complex interchange between love and hate, with the performance of hatred always, already invoking an enthralled attachment. Each marks the shadow of the other. Moten gestures towards an understanding of violence as an impoverished expression of yearning, a reaching toward the other that has been denied any affective form other than the cruel. This is a yearning Lorde explicates as central to the erotic, the yearning to be with and share. Unable to make sense of the queer spectacle that

permeated the sensorium, the man in my scene reverted to a mode of relations that dominant culture had instilled in him – violence – as a way of making contact across difference.

To take this violence at face value and not excavate the many motivations – some undoubtedly pernicious, but others perhaps a longing to be with rerouted through harm – that animate it is to abandon hope that a different outcome is possible. Moten’s question suggests that hatred can be a misdirected, often frustrated expression of love,⁹ which offers an exit from the impasse that Carson’s binary of love and hate may suppose. For, even the Lordean erotic is not an instinct that naturally unfolds at the site of difference. It declares a choice. One must recognize the possibility of shared joy across difference, acknowledge the reservoir of deep feeling that slumbers deep within oneself, and accede to the play of the erotic across bodyminds. As the earlier quote from Lorde’s essay indicates, to choose to swim in the reservoir of deep feeling and the yearning to share joy is to allow the erotic to (partially) demystify the difference that may interrupt or circumscribe the sharing. What Carson’s love-hate dialectic and Moten’s reformulation suggests is that violence leaves a trail of frustrated (often unexpressed) love behind it, and the possibility of retracing these steps to make different, more ethical choices. What would it have been like for the man in my scene to recognize the deep feeling that queer spectacle and the femme figure aroused in him, to acknowledge the perhaps foreign yearning for closeness and shared joy that stirred in his breast, and to choose to be with in ecstasy rather than through violence? Perhaps this scene would have ended in rapture – sexual, spiritual, emotional – and not distance. Indeed, such an outcome is not impossible to imagine in the Sri Lankan theatre, where the homo-hetero binary finds only partial purchase and those fulfilling normative prescriptions of reproductive heterosexuality find themselves in all forms of ambiguous queer

⁹ Carson (1998) too notes that hatred often manifests in the erotic moment in the face of a vexed desire, such as when a lover turns away or love cannot be expressed as one wishes.

entanglements (Ellawala 2021). The erotic charge that suffused the moment between the queer figure and I shifted with the entrance of the two men but did not wholly disappear. Perhaps the femme figure and the staring man met at a public bathroom at a train station or down a dark alley at night. Perhaps they did not. Lorde's explication of the erotic allows us to critically appraise the sexual conjoining that occurs despite, or because of, difference to demand more than the status quo. She says that dominant culture allows us to find ways to be with that do not challenge its blunt force, instead producing proximities of "looking away" and using "each other as objects of satisfaction rather than [in sharing] our joy in the satisfying, rather than [in making] connection with our similarities and differences" (59). It is only through the choice to surrender to the erotic, the terror of intimacy with the unknown, the hunger for an otherwise that a more ethical and mutually joyful enmeshment can be imagined.

A refusal to leave anyone alone. Alone. A-lone. What if violence is a doomed attempt to refuse the loneliness of the self as much as it is about being with the other? Carson notes that the Greek tradition narrates eros as a recognition of lack. Yearning for the love object induces an awareness of the self as having lacked this object all this time, a lack that was not legible until the amorous encounter. "When I desire you a part of me is gone: my want of you partakes of me. So reasons the lover at the edge of eros. The presence of want awakens in him nostalgia for wholeness" (30-31) Carson notes, recounting Aristophanes' account of the duality of the primordial human – two people rapturously united as one organism – cleaved asunder by a jealous Zeus, dooming each person to roam the earth in search of their other half. Wholeness is achieved through the merger with the other. She challenges the conventional wisdom that the self dissolves in the erotic encounter (Bataille 1993), by illustrating how the very attempt to transcend the lacking self through eros is the search for a (different) complete self.

Carson's account of a desiring self that is aware of its limits and lack converges with Margrit Shildrick's (2009) theorization of the ableist anxieties concerning "material or psychic intercorporeality" of the self and the disabled other (8). The anxiety about disabled sexuality, she posits, is that the breach of the self by the other produces a recognition of "the other as an interior attribute of the embodied self" (11). Yet, Shildrick notes, it is precisely through such a recognition, no matter how vehemently opposed by ableist culture, that we can embrace the imbrications of the self and the other and rearticulate ontic possibilities outside of the ambit of ableism and heteronormativity. To relate both Carson's account of the desiring self and Shildrick's understanding of what that desire is results in an understanding of the erotic as that which enfolds but is not limited to love and sex, as inspiring a particularly acute yearning for another that the self wishes to be with and psychically incorporate. Reminiscent here is the messiness and chaos Lorde theorizes the erotic to revel in, that which craves the disarray of the bounded self, a self that is whole only through chaos. However, as Shildrick notes, dominant culture mediates and frustrates this desire, proscribing certain forms of physical and psychic contact in order to preserve the atomized self. In the scene I witnessed, the man's longing to achieve a psychic and spiritual completion through intimacy with the femme figure is disrupted, though not wholly extinguished, by heteronormative ideology that disallows such a union. What Lorde contributes to this analysis is an understanding of what deep pleasures and sweet joys await in the making of different choices, of repudiating the directives of dominant culture and exploring the possibilities of being with across gender-sexual difference. A recognition of the erotic, of the rapture that awaits in its embrace, offers the first step in spurning the strictures hegemony has placed on us. Commenting on this very transformation, Lorde says:

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs...we conform to the needs of a structure that

is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves...then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society (58).

Erotic Implications

Through this brief foray into a single ethnographic scene and the commentary that various interlocutors offer, I illustrate the possibility that violence is more than self-evident, that it is a fractal phenomenon that is animated and belied by quite paradoxical motivations. Hegemony endeavors to be total, and overdetermine difference and social relations. It aims to fix violence as inevitable in the encounter of difference. To insist on the possibility of violence holding even a kernel of love and desire is to resist the totalizing imperative of dominant culture and insist that a different, more ethical and hospitable world for the subaltern is possible. This is not my attempt to sanitize the very real harm that occurred at the bus stop, or the grievous physical, psychic, emotional, and symbolic violence my interlocutors have endured. Indeed, there exists a legitimate reason for the immense archive of (Black, Third World, and other strands of) feminist, anti-racist, and disability justice theorizing of violence as self-evident and abhorrent. My essay does not seek to undercut these efforts, but to signal a deepening of this analysis. For I am loathed to abandon the encounter of difference to the overdeterminations of dominant culture. Centering erotics allows us to stride into the heart of the most extreme form of disciplining dominant culture performs and insist on its failure, its elimination. To seize violence and to suggest the possibility of its transformation is to deprive dominant culture of its greatest weapon, its crown jewel.

I offer such a reading as relevant to the conversations on, and practice of, transformative justice. The mass uprisings in the summer of 2020 that spread across the United States and the

world, steered by long-existing ecosystems of abolitionist and racial justice movements yet bearing the quality of spontaneous revolt, brought to the fore a political concern that communities and organizations, people and institutions have long performed. In the call for abolition, declared with hoarse conviction by some and more tentatively by others, the call for restorative and transformative models of justice were posited as alternatives. Such a call could be made because social movements, led by survivors and victims of violence, have spent decades building the infrastructure to present restorative and transformative justice as keenly theorized sets of principles and practices (Abolitionist Futures 2011; Critical Resistance 2012; Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020; INCITE! 2003; Sered 2021). These two models seek strategies and practices that account for harm in more nuanced ways and seek the possibility of atonement and repair, while transformative justice looks to the broader structural and changes that must occur for such accountability, healing, and repair to occur. I ask what the understanding of violence that emerges out of this essay can offer to the alternative worldmaking that is already underway.

Does thinking of violence as always holding the possibility of its opposite transform the way we view it? Does the possibility of love and desire within violence, even a flash or a whisper of it, offer a way to reconceptualize the encounter of difference, to negate future violence? Perhaps this thinking offers points of entry to the scene of violence, for conversations about the layers of psychic, sensorial, and spiritual entanglements that inflect the act of violence. Can the erotic offer the conditions of possibility for truth-telling, testifying, remorse that is keenly felt, the fear of the unknown banished? How can such an understanding of violence sustain the hope for transformative justice amidst the bleakest circumstances? I ask these questions not presuming to have the answers, but in the hope that they, and the thinking of this essay more broadly, offer generative (re)conceptualizations for the communities and movements

that have long committed to the labor of building a more just, and as Lorde reminds us pleasurable and joyful, world.

To locate the possibilities of transformative justice at a crowded bus stop in Sri Lanka also serves to challenge the Euro-American insularities that can percolate in conversations about more ethical forms of accountability and healing, and to highlight already emergent practices elsewhere. The end of a nearly three-decade civil war between the majoritarian Sri Lankan state and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorist group, which maps (though not perfectly) on to ethnic divides between the majority ethno-religious group and a beleaguered ethno-religious minority, posited an opportunity for various experiments in accountability and redress to be performed. From the rehabilitation of former combatants to offering reparations to survivors of militarized sexual violence and other harms of the war to changes to the carceral apparatus of the state, civil society entities led the way in practicing forms of restorative justice in a country that desperately required reconciliation (Dharmawardhane 2013; Jayathilaka 2020; Niriella 2013). As Jayathilaka (2020) notes, such efforts ultimately failed to be fully realized due to state disinvestment. This essay seeks to contribute to the popular and scholarly understandings of the blood-stained history of post-colonial Sri Lanka, one riven asunder by multiple social cleavages. I ask if it is possible to trace the desires and yearnings that shadow the horrific violence that saturates this history, if we can discern the alternative possibilities that inhere to the antipathies of ethnic, religious, gendered, classed, and casted difference that persist to this day. This essay is in part a hope for transformation and healing in Sri Lanka.

Lastly, a discussion of erotics and violence may necessarily bring us to sexual violence, and I would be remiss not to address this resonance. This essay makes a horizontal move to question the orthodoxy that sexual violence is animated by power and not desire (Brownmiller

1986). Instead of retreating from desire – and ceding territory to dominant culture’s fantasy that a good, licit, symmetrical form of sexual relations exist – a recognition of the simultaneity of power and desire implicates desire in the operations of power *and* illuminates a way out. We come to recognize that desire is always, already enmeshed in and constituted by power relations *and* discern the possibility of a desire that seeks to circumvent violence. Perhaps it is possible to acknowledge that sexual violence may be animated by desire, among other affects and attachments, without inviting in a neutralizing of accountability or victim blaming. Perhaps it is in the very acknowledgement of this desire that the transformative possibilities that anti-violence work seeks exist.

I do not proffer the erotic as a utopic condition that fully neutralizes power asymmetries, for Anne Carson’s dialectic of love and hate indicates just how easily the erotic may produce violence. Yet, Lorde reminds us that to return to the erotic is to see a choice more clearly, and to yearn to be and be with in a form of ethical relationality that magnifies pleasure, augments joy. The erotic is crucial in our struggle for a more just, more ethical, and more joyful world, for as Lorde reminds us “we cannot fight old power in old power terms only. The only way we can do it is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence, at the same time as we are resisting” (2007 [1984], 103-104).

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